

# SEPARATION ANXIETY



Separation anxiety is something that almost all children experience at one time or another. Stated simply, separation anxiety is the distress that children feel when they are separated from a primary caregiver, in most cases the mother.

Separation anxiety usually becomes evident in children beginning when they are around six months of age. This is because by six months of age most infants have developed a very strong attachment to their primary caregivers and this strong attachment leads to feeling of great distress when the primary caregiver and the child must be separated.

Separation anxiety can continue off and on, though usually in milder forms, throughout childhood. It can be quite intense during infancy, with this intensity gradually decreasing as children get older and become more and more accustomed to being separated from their primary caregivers. It is normal for children

to feel some sort of distress or upset when separated from parents, especially separations for long periods of time.

Separation anxiety can take many forms; many young infants will protest when their mothers simply leave the room for a minute or two - they have difficulty with even the shortest of separations. Older children may be just fine playing by themselves, but then experience difficulty, for example, when their parents go out for an evening, leaving them at home with a sitter. At first, separations are often very difficult for both children and their primary caregivers, but as parents and their children become accustomed to being apart, the process usually becomes easier.

Since it is impossible for parents to spend every waking moment with their children, separations are inevitable. While separations are often difficult for both parents and their children, children who are raised in families in which both parents work outside of the home tend to have less difficulty with separations because they begin experiencing them at a very young age. Therefore, children who are older when they face their first separations from their primary caregivers often have a more difficult time making the adjustment.

## **Coping with Separation Anxiety**

While it is true that separations are an unavoidable part of children's lives, and many children will feel distress when they occur, there are many things that parents can do to ease the turmoil that their children experience.

**\*Don't go out of your way to avoid separations.** It is part of life for children to learn to accept and deal with separation from their primary caregivers. Therefore, it is not a good idea for parents to try to avoid the pain of separation and stay with their children at all times. Instead, parents should go about their normal lives and separate when necessary, but at the same time they should make sure their children have consistent, quality care when they are not there.

**\*Introduce new caretakers (e.g., babysitters) gradually.** It is a good idea to allow your children to get to know their caretakers before being left alone with them. Parents should invite new caretakers over to play with their babies while they are still present - at first until the two get used to each other. Of course, parents should carefully screen anyone they plan to hire to care for

their children. When parents introduce their children to a childcare center, they should visit the center with their children and perhaps stay and play a few times before their children are left there. Whatever arrangements parents make for their children's care, consistency is an important element. For example, instead of hiring a different babysitter every time they go out, parents should try to enlist the services of perhaps one or two sitters, so their children have the opportunity to get used to and develop friendships with the people who are hired to care for them.

**\*Provide transitional objects.** Transitional objects are things that children often use to cope with separation. Such objects, for example a teddy bear, a doll, or a favorite blanket, provide comfort to children when they are separated from their primary caregivers. They can even be considered "a little piece" of their primary caretakers that they can have with them at all times (e.g., a parent's article of clothing or other possession). Many children become attached to such objects, especially at times of separation, for example bedtime. Transitional objects can be quite a comfort to children experiencing some form of separation.

**\*Don't ignore your child's distress.** The upset that children feel when they must be separated from their parents is real. Therefore, this distress should not be shrugged off or ignored by parents. Ignoring this distress can provoke more anxiety and will probably increase clinginess and distress. Instead, parents should, without making too big a deal out of it, address the upset. Certain separations are unavoidable, for example, when a mother must go to work and leave her child with a sitter. However, while at home, parents can try to accommodate a child who protests at being left alone by taking their child with him/her when they must leave the room that their child is in. Parents can use baby backpack carriers or side carriers to keep their infants with them when they must, for example, get things done around the house.

**\*Encourage your child to do things for himself/herself.** Parents should begin teaching their children responsibility and independence while they are young. Of course, parents should be careful to give their children only responsibilities that they are developmentally capable of undertaking. Children who are able to do some things for themselves are likely to see themselves as self sufficient, and as a result will be less

dependent upon their parents and less clingy.

**\*Prepare children for your departures in advance.** When parents must leave their children, they should prepare them for this event beforehand so that they have time to get used to the idea. For example, parents can mention to their children a couple of days in advance "Daddy and I will be going out on Friday night and Janie will be coming over to stay with you." Parents should repeat this information periodically until they are sure that their children understand.

**\*Let your child know when you leave.** Parents should never try to sneak out when they must leave their children. This can break down trust and increase clinginess. Children who are left in this way will be less apt to become absorbed in activities in the future because they will never know when they'll look up to find their parents gone. Instead, parents should always let their children know when they are about to leave.

**\*Use "key phrases."** A key phrase is something that a parent can say that will let their children know that they are getting ready to leave, such as "Good bye. I'll see you soon." Parents should use the same key phrase every

time they leave so that this phrase will come to prepare their children for their leave-taking.

**\*Let your child know when you plan to return.** Parents should make sure that their children know when they will return. If children are too young to tell time, parents can mention time markers, for example, "I'll be back after your nap," or "I'll be back after Sesame Street is over." Parents should then make every effort to stick to the time frame they have given their children. If parents can not be sure of what time they will return, they should tell their children this. It is important that parents not make promises that they can't keep. If there's a possibility that parents won't return when they say, it's best not to make the promise.

**\*Provide reassurance.** Many children need reassurance from their parents before and after separations. Parents should provide lots of love and affection through both words and gestures (hugs, kisses) to their children. Many children, when they must be separated from their parents, may erroneously believe that they are being left in someone else's care because they are bad, or because their parents just don't want to be with them. Parents should make sure that their children know that they are

not being left with a sitter or in a daycare because of anything they did or said. Parents should reassure their children that they love them and that they will return. When parents do return after a separation, they should try to set aside some special time to spend with their children.

**\*Practice.** Parents should try to help their children get used to separations at an early age. For example, parents can try leaving the room for a couple of seconds at a time, and then reappearing. This will help young children learn that you will indeed return after you go away. Older children, who do not need to be constantly monitored for their own safety, can be left alone for a couple of minutes at a time. As children get used to being separated from their parents for short periods their protests should decrease.

**\*Try distraction.** Many children can be distracted from their distress by a favorite toy or activity. Before leaving, parents can let their baby-sitter know what their children's favorite games and toys are. Then, when the parents leave, the baby-sitter can try to engage the child with his/her favorite toy or with a favorite game. Distraction should not be used to the point that the child is not aware that his/her parents are

leaving. Parents should avoid "sneaking out."

**\*Play peek-a-boo.** Playing peek-a-boo is an excellent way to practice separation in a fun, enjoyable way. Small children enjoy this game precisely because it allows them to have control over the separation.

**\*Don't punish.** Parents should avoid punishing or teasing their children for expressing their natural, normal distress. Parents should avoid labeling their children as "sissies," "babies," etc. Nor should parents punish their children for expressing their distress. This may result in children feeling that they can't come to their parents when they are upset, which can get in the way of the development of a trusting, loving relationship. Parents should always remember that the distress children feel when they are separated from their parents is a normal part of development. Instead of punishing or teasing, parents should make an effort to be dependable, and to show their children that they will return when they say they are going to.

**\*Handle leaving matter-of-factly.** When parents must leave their children, they should simply say their goodbyes and leave without turning back. Parents should avoid turning

their goodbyes into long, drawn out emotional times. Parents should simply say goodbye and leave. If parents make a big deal about going away, their children will likely see it as a big deal, too and get unduly upset.



*Center for Effective Parenting  
Little Rock Center: (501) 364-7580  
NW Arkansas Center: (479) 751-6166*

**[www.parenting-ed.org](http://www.parenting-ed.org)**