

STRANGER ANXIETY



Stranger anxiety is the distress that young children experience when they are exposed to people who are unfamiliar to them. Infants can begin to experience stranger anxiety as young as six months of age, but it usually begins somewhere between eight and nine months of age. Before this age, most infants accept unfamiliar people without much fuss. But as infants approach eight and nine months of age, they begin to show strong preferences for the people who care for them the most - usually their parents. At this time infants are beginning to realize that all people are not the same, and that the relationship they have with their primary caregivers is special. They become much more selective about who they will let hold them, play with them, etc. These special activities are usually reserved for close family members.

Stranger anxiety is thought to peak between 12-15 months, and then begin to decrease in severity after that.

Different infants react differently to unfamiliar people. While some may not be upset at all by an approaching stranger, others may protest very loudly when someone they do not know approaches them. The symptoms of stranger anxiety can take many forms; some infants will become very quiet and will stare warily at a stranger, others will cry intensely, and a toddler may try to hide behind a parent standing nearby.

What Parents Can Do

Stranger anxiety is a normal part of development and will occur in some form or another in most children. While in most cases stranger anxiety can not be avoided, there are steps that parents can take to minimize the upset that children feel during this developmental period.

***Don't pressure.** Parents should try not to pressure their children to "be sociable." Instead, parents should allow children to become accustomed to new faces and new situations at

their own pace. Forcing children to go to people they don't yet feel comfortable with will likely increase anxiety.

***Don't ignore your child's distress.**

The upset that children feel when they are exposed to unfamiliar people 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.

***Warn friends and relatives.**

Parents should let people who might have their feelings hurt by their infant's rejection know that they shouldn't take it personally. Grandparents, for example, might feel bad if their beloved grandchildren won't have anything to do with them. In such instances, parents should explain that this wariness of strangers is a normal part of development and it is not the result of anything they have done or not done.

***Teach friends and relatives appropriate approach techniques.**

Parents should make sure that friends and relatives are aware of things they can do to make

themselves seem less threatening to their children. For example, friends and relatives should be told that young children need time to warm up to unfamiliar people. Instead of rushing in and picking children up, friends and relatives should be told to give children time and space to warm up to them. They can try offering a favorite, familiar toy and waiting for the child to accept it. Friends and relatives can also be told to use soft, calm voices, not to force eye contact, and to take things very slowly.

***Introduce new caretakers (e.g., babysitters) gradually.**

It is a good idea for parents to allow their children to get to know their caretakers before being left alone with them. Parents should invite new caretakers over to play with their children 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 new 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 to develop friendships with the people who are hired to care for them.

***Provide reassurance.** Children often need comfort and reassurance from their parents as they go through this developmental phase. Therefore, parents should try to be available to reassure their children when they face new people. Parents should also provide lots of love and affection through both words and gestures (e.g., hugs and kisses).

***Introduce your children to new people (both children and adults) starting when they are very young.** One of the best ways for parents to avoid the development of extreme stranger anxiety is to get their children accustomed to meeting new people at an early age. Parents should take every opportunity to introduce their children to new people.



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