

How to Ease Your Child's Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety varies WIDELY between children. Some children become hysterical when mom is out of sight for a very short time, while other children seem to demonstrate ongoing anxiety at separations during infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool.

The trick for surviving separation anxiety demands preparation, brisk transitions, and the evolution of time. I would suggest we parents suffer as much as our children do when we leave. Even though we are often reminded that our children stop crying within minutes of our leave-taking, how many of you have felt like you're "*doing it all wrong*" when your child clings to your legs, sobs for you to stay, and mourns the parting?

Although it is an entirely normal behavior and a beautiful sign of a meaningful attachment, separation anxiety can be exquisitely unsettling for us all.

Here are facts about separation anxiety and tips to improve the transitions :

Facts about Separation Anxiety

- **Infants:** Separation anxiety develops after a child gains an understanding of object permanence. Once your infant realizes you're really gone (when you are), it may leave him unsettled. Although some babies display object permanence and separation anxiety as early as 4 to 5 months of age, most develop more robust separation anxiety at around 9 months. The leave-taking can be worse if your infant is hungry, tired, or not feeling well. Keep transitions short and routine if it's a tough day.
- **Toddlers:** Many toddlers skip separation anxiety in infancy and start demonstrating challenges at 15 or 18 months of age. Separations are more difficult when children are hungry, tired, or sick—which is most of toddlerhood! As children develop independence during toddlerhood, they may become even more aware of separations. Their behaviors at separations will be loud, tearful, and difficult to stop.
- **Preschoolers:** By the time children are 3 years of age, most clearly understand the effect their anxiety or pleas at separation have on us. It doesn't mean they aren't stressed, but they certainly are vying for a change. Be consistent; don't return to the room based on a child's plea, and certainly don't cancel plans based on separation anxiety. Your ongoing consistency, explanations, and diligence to return when you say you will are tantamount.

How to Survive Separation Anxiety

- **Create quick good-bye rituals.** Even if you have to do major-league- baseball-style hand movements, or give triple kisses at the cubby as you leave, keep the good-bye short and sweet. If you linger, the transition time does too. So will the anxiety.
- **Be consistent.** Try to do the same drop-off with the same ritual at the same time each day you separate to avoid unexpected factors whenever you can. A routine can diminish the heartache and will allow your child to simultaneously build trust in her independence and in you.
- **Attention:** When separating, give your child full attention, be loving, and provide affection. Then say good-bye quickly despite her antics or cries for you to stay.
- **Keep your promise.** You'll build trust and independence as your child becomes confident in her ability to be without you when you stick to your promise of return. The biggest mistake ever made in this regard is returning to class to "visit" after a terrible transition. Although well intended, this will extend the separation anxiety, starting the process all over again.
- **Be specific, child style.** When you discuss your return, provide specifics that your child understands. If you know you'll be back by 3:00 pm, tell it to your child on his terms; for example, say, "*I'll be back after Dance Class.*"
- **Practice being apart.** Ship the children off to grandma's home, schedule playdates, allow friends and family to provide child care for you (even for an hour) on the weekend. Before starting child care or preschool, practice going to school and your good-bye ritual before you even have to part ways. Give your child a chance to prepare, experience, and thrive in your absence!

It's rare that separation anxiety persists on a daily basis after the preschool years. If you're concerned that your child isn't adapting to being without you, chat with the pediatrician. Your pediatrician has certainly helped support families in the same situation and can help calm your unease and determine a plan to support both of you!

Adapted from an article by Wendy Sue Swanson, MD, MBE, FAAP

