



Separation Anxiety for Children

Separation anxiety is a normal developmental phase that comes and goes throughout childhood and can continue into older years. In times of stress, anxiety can increase and become more noticeable through emotional or behavioral expression or inexpression.

When we experience stress, we regress and the pandemic has had everyone on edge at varying times and in varying degrees. Children feel the 'emotional air' of the household/environment just like adults can.

When adults are stressed and anxious, our brains function and react in the same way as our children's brains. Our prefrontal cortex (rational thinking, impulse control, self-regulation) gets compromised and the amygdala (emotional center of the brain) takes over and we may become irritable, uncomfortable, emotional, less tolerant, and at times self negative. We have to calm emotionally in order to calm the brain and return to healthy problem-solving solutions.

Children need an adult to help them calm through verbal cueing, setting up their environment for support, healthy behavior modeling, and most of all love and reassurance.

Below outlines information about separation anxiety and helpful tools to support a child that experiences separation anxiety.

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 them 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 key.



How to Survive Separation Anxiety

- **Create quick good-bye rituals.** Even if you have to do major-league- baseball–style hand movements, give triple kisses at the cubby, or provide a special blanket or toy 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 their 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 I ever made in this regard was returning to class to "visit" my son about an hour after a terrible transition. I was missing him, and although the return was well intended, I not only extended the separation anxiety, we started all over again in the process. When I left the second time (and subsequent days) it was near nuclear.
- **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 their terms; for example, say, "*I'll be back after nap time and before afternoon snack.*" Define time they can understand. Talk about your return from a business trip in terms of "*sleeps.*" Instead of saying, "*I'll be home in 3 days,*" say, "*I'll be home after 3 sleeps.*"
- **Practice being apart.** Send them to spend time with a relative, 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

Modeling healthy self-care/sleep, nutritional diet, healthy expression of emotions, and calm problem-solving skills is an important part of helping children deal with and gain their own self-regulation in times of stress. Betty Poffenbarger often says: *You are the pitcher of water filling each cup.* The cup represents who you care for and who relies on you. The cups will always need filling, but you can only fill the cups if you refill your pitcher.

Additional Suggested Reading:

- Invisible String by Patrice Krast (separation)
- The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn (separation)
- The Angry Octopus by Lori Lite (emotional regulation)
- Parenting from the Inside out by Daniel J. Siegel (parental self-awareness)