



Coping with Separation Anxiety

What is Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety is basically a baby getting upset when a mother tries to leave them with someone else- when the infant perceives itself as separated from the mother and unable to do anything that will bring the mother back into proximity. It is a perfectly normal stage of development and one that virtually all babies will go through at some point. If you think about separation anxiety in evolutionary terms, it makes sense: A defenceless baby would naturally get upset at being separated from the person who protects and cares for him.

But despite how 'normal' a stage it is, it can still be a frustrating and upsetting one-for both you and baby. The good news is that separation anxiety will pass and there are ways to make it more manageable. Understanding what your child is going through and why, plus having a few coping strategies, will help you all get through it relatively unscathed and in the meantime, enjoy the sweetness of knowing that to your child, you're number one.

N.B.-Separation Anxiety occurs when the child is separated from its main care giver-while this is usually the mother it can also happen with anyone who may be the main carer such as the father

When does Separation Anxiety occur?

As with any area of their development, this will vary from baby to baby. Some babies can show signs of separation anxiety as early as 6 or 7 months, but the crisis age for most babies is between 12 to 18 months. Most commonly, separation anxiety strikes when you or your spouse leaves your child to go to work or run an errand. Babies can also experience separation anxiety at night, safely tucked in their cribs with Mom and Dad in the next room. It can occur again around age two when the child becomes aware that it is free to determine its own action and that it is somewhat independent of the parent.

How long will Separation Anxiety last?

Again this will vary from child to child. It may be anything from a few weeks to several months depending on the individual child and how it is handled.

Why does Separation Anxiety happen?

As long as their needs are met, most babies under about 6 mths will adapt well to other caregivers and often it is the parents who may feel more anxious about separation than their baby does. Then sometime from about 5/6 months onwards babies develop a sense of 'object permanence' and begin to realise that things and people do still exist even if they are out of

sight and this includes a parent. However, most will not yet understand the concept of time, so will not know if or even when you will come back. Whether you have gone out of the building or just to the next room it is all the same to your baby—you have disappeared and your baby will do what ever he can to try to make sure this does not happen.

What you may be feeling

During this stage, you might experience different emotions yourself. It can be gratifying to feel that your child is finally as attached to you as you are to him or her. But you're also likely to feel guilty about taking time out for yourself, leaving your child with a caregiver, or going to work. And you may start to feel overwhelmed by the amount of attention your child seems to need from you. Keep in mind that your little one's unwillingness to leave you is a good sign that healthy attachments have developed between the two of you. Eventually, your child will be able to remember that you always return after you leave, and that will be enough comfort while you're gone. This also gives kids a chance to develop coping skills and a little independence. As Separation Anxiety occurs when the main care giver goes away it means that it can sometimes happen with a parent—such as if mom is the main caregiver then goes out and leaves baby with dad. This can lead to dad feeling upset and feeling that his own baby does not like him—keep in mind this is only a stage and it will pass, it is nothing personal.

What can I do to help?

Timing is everything. Try not to start day care or child care with an unfamiliar person when your little one is between the ages of 8 months and 1 year, when separation anxiety is first likely to appear. Also, try not to leave when your child is likely to be tired, hungry, or restless. If at all possible, schedule your departures for after naps and mealtimes.

Practice. Practice being apart from each other, and introduce new people and places gradually. If you're planning to leave your child with a relative or a new babysitter, then invite that person over in advance so they can spend time together while you're in the room. If your child is starting at a new nursery or preschool, make a few visits there together before a full-time schedule begins. Practice leaving your child with a caregiver for short periods of time so that he or she can get used to being away from you.

Be calm and consistent. Create an exit ritual during which you say a pleasant, loving, and firm goodbye. Stay calm and show confidence in your child. Reassure him or her that you'll be back — and explain how long it will be until you return using concepts kids will understand (such as after lunch) because your child can't yet understand time. Give him your full attention when you say goodbye, and when you say you're leaving, mean it; coming back will only make things worse. As hard as it may be to leave a child who's screaming and crying for you, it's important to have confidence that the caregiver can handle it. It may help both of you to set up a time that you will call to check in, maybe 15 to 20 minutes after you leave. By that time, most kids have calmed down and are playing with other things. Don't give in early and call sooner!

Have a routine. Try to organise it so that your baby can detect patterns in everyday life and so learn what to expect various situations when separation is necessary. The very young are

surprisingly adept at picking up on patterns of events, especially where there are regular clues as to what is going to happen next. The more predictable activities, and particularly patterns of separation, become, the more a child has some sort of basis for knowing that separation is temporary and manageable.

Let your baby get comfortable. Ask a new sitter to visit and play with your baby several times before leaving them alone for the first time. For your first real outing, ask the sitter to arrive about 30 minutes before you depart so that she and the baby can be well engaged before you step out the door.

Always say goodbye. Kiss and hug your baby when you leave and tell him where you're going and when you'll be back, but don't prolong your goodbyes and once you leave, then *leave!* If you run back into the room every time your child cries and then stay there longer or cancel your plans, your child will continue to use this tactic to avoid separation. Resist the urge to sneak out the back door. Your baby will only become more upset if he thinks you've disappeared into thin air.

Keep it light. Your baby is quite tuned in to how you feel, so show your warmth and enthusiasm for the caregiver you've chosen. And don't cry or act upset if your baby starts crying — at least not while he can see you. You'll both get through this. The caregiver will probably tell you later that your baby's tears stopped before you were even out of the driveway.

Try a trial at first. Limit the first night (or afternoon) out to no more than an hour. As you and baby become more familiar with the sitter or the surroundings of a childcare setting, you can extend your outings. Once at the place of separation a parent might stay for a while until the child has become used to the environment and then may leave a favourite toy or soft blanket, if the child has developed that attachment.

Play games. Games can help to create understanding of a world outside of babies' vision

- **Peek a boo.** A timeless favourite that gently and playfully introduces the idea that people can disappear and be there again. Lay the baby on your lap facing you. With a soft cloth cover your face or the baby's and then let it slide off - big smiles and the right noises are of course essential You can also do this by taking their legs and blocking their view of your face then opening them again so that they can see you.
- **Hide and seek.** Lay your baby in the middle of a room where he can see you moving around. Then play Hide and seek behind sofas etc after you have hidden, talk to him or her, then show your face again. You can also put favourite toys out of sight and then find them together.
- **Practice what bye bye means.** Say bye bye and wave then go out of sight and quickly come back

What if nothing seems to work?

Babies have different personalities, so some will experience more severe bouts of separation anxiety than others. If your child can't be comforted using simple measures, it's time to re-evaluate. Take a second look at your sitter or nursery. They may be a mismatch for your baby if he continues to become anxious and weepy when you leave-trust your instincts on this one.

Re-evaluate your goodbye pattern. Do you sneak out when your baby isn't looking? Do you make it seem like you're going off to war? Do you slowly back down the walk waving and crying until your baby's out of sight? A simple "see you later, alligator" followed by a quick hug and a kiss

can do wonders for an anxious child. Your actions show your baby that leaving isn't big deal, and that you'll be home again soon.

Leave your baby with a relative or someone he knows well for 15-minute periods, working your way up to one hour. Your baby can then learn that when you leave you'll return, without having the added stress of being with someone unfamiliar.

How do I handle night-time separation anxiety?

Your baby's fear of being separated from you at night is very real for him, so you'll want to do your best to keep the hours preceding bedtime as nurturing and peaceful (and fun) as possible. In addition spend some extra cuddle time with your baby before bed by reading, snuggling, and softly singing together.

If your baby cries for you after you've put him to bed, it's fine to go to him — both to reassure him and to reassure yourself that he's okay. But make your visits "brief and boring," and he'll learn to fall back to sleep without a lot of help from you. Eventually, he'll be able to fall asleep on his own.