

Separation Anxiety

This normal life stage first develops when a baby is around 7 months, according to psychologist Dr. Chrystal Evans. It begins when the baby understands that his parents/caregivers do not disappear when out of sight -- object permanence. Dr. Evans says that this leads to the infant forming a genuine attachment to those adults. "Normal separation anxiety is at its strongest at 10 to 18 months and gradually subsides, usually by the age of 3 years. Normal separation anxiety may result in parents having trouble with their babies at bedtime or other times of separation, in that the child becomes anxious, cries, or clings to the caretaker," says Dr. Evans.

Top 4 Factors Contributing to How Successfully a Child Conquers Separation Anxiety by Preschool, from Dr. Chrystal Evans

1. The child's temperament
2. How well the parent and child reunite after a separation
3. Skills possessed by both the child and the parent in terms of coping with separation
4. How well the parent responds to the baby's separation issues; children of anxious parents tend to be anxious children

In relation to separation anxiety, during the time a child is between 8 months and 2 years old, it is normal for him to experience stranger anxiety, according to Dr. Evans. The baby is learning to distinguish his parents from other people such as sitters and strangers. The child shows his anxiety by crying when an unknown person approaches.

What Moms Can Do about Separation Anxiety

Possible causes of separation anxiety include maternal stress during pregnancy, the child's genetic predisposition, and environmental factors which lead to separation anxiety, according to psychologist Dr. Chrystal Evans.

About 5% of children and adolescents suffer from separation anxiety disorder. Separation anxiety disorder is a mental health disorder starting in childhood characterized by a level of worrying that is out of proportion to the situation of temporarily leaving home or other separation from loved ones.

Dr. Evans says symptoms of separation anxiety disorder may include the following, and occur for at least one month:

- Fear that something bad will happen to a parent or caretaker, or fear of being lost from them or being kidnapped
- Refusal to go to daycare or school
- Refusal to go to sleep at nighttime without being physically close to adult loved ones
- Nightmares about being separated from parents/caretakers
- Recurrent physical complaints, such as headaches or stomach aches, when separation either occurs or is expected

Medication is not usually prescribed initially to treat separation anxiety, unless psychotherapy is unsuccessful or if the children's symptoms are so severe that they are nearly incapacitating, according to Dr. Evans.

Cognitive therapy is used to help children understand how their thoughts affect their feelings, helping them to redirect fears into controllable, manageable feelings.

Dr. Evans shares these tips to help moms deal with a child's separation anxiety:

- Talk to your toddler in an age-appropriate way about what to expect.
- Practice what will happen, and have him/her role-play with you so that he/she also has the opportunity to play the parent and to see that you understand what he feels like as the child.
- Introduce him to babysitters/care providers in advance.
- Always say goodbye. Never sneak out, thinking that he/she won't notice. He/she will only learn not to trust you.
- Allow him/her a transitional object -- a teddy bear, favorite blanket, or a family picture that is familiar and safe to him/her.
- Have a countdown for when you will return: After you eat dinner, you will have a bath and then I will be home.
- Stay in touch during the initial separations.
- Plan future events that will happen when you return to give your child something to look forward to.

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Additional Resources for Separation Anxiety

- [American Academy of Pediatrics](#)
- [Mayo Clinic](#)
- [Kids Health.org](#)