



# SEPARATION ANXIETY IN CHILDREN

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## WHAT IS SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Separation anxiety is normal in very young children (those between 8 and 24 months old). Kids often go through a phase when they are "clingy" and afraid of unfamiliar people and places. When this fear occurs in a child over age 6 years, is excessive, and lasts longer than four weeks, the child may have separation anxiety disorder.

## WHAT CAUSES SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Separation anxiety often develops after a significant stressful or traumatic event in the child's life, such as a stay in the hospital, divorce, the death of a loved one or pet, or a change in environment (such as moving to another house or a change of schools). Children whose parents are over-protective may be more prone to separation anxiety. In fact, it may not necessarily be a disorder of the child but a manifestation of parental separation anxiety as well -- parent and child can feed the other's anxiety. In addition, the fact that children with separation anxiety often have family members with anxiety or other mental disorders suggests that a vulnerability to the disorder may be inherited.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE MOST COMMON SYMPTOMS OF SEPARATION ANXIETY DISORDER:

- An unrealistic and lasting worry that something bad will happen to the parent or caregiver if the child leaves
- Sometimes the child will also fear that something bad might happen to them if they are separated, such as get sick or get lost
- Refusal to go to school in order to stay with the caregiver
- Refusal to go to sleep without the caregiver being nearby or to sleep away from home
- Fear of being alone
- Nightmares about being separated
- Complaints of physical symptoms, such as headaches and stomachaches, on school days
- Repeated temper tantrums or pleading

## PREVENTION

- **Practice separation.** Leave your child with a caregiver for brief periods and short distances from a young age.
- **Develop a “goodbye” ritual.** Rituals are reassuring and can be as simple as a special wave through the window or a goodbye kiss.
- **Leave without the fanfare.** Tell your child you are leaving and that you will return, then go, don’t stall!
- **Try not to give in.** Reassure your child that he or she will be just fine—setting limits will help the adjustment to separation.

## TREATING SEPARATION ANXIETY

### Teach your child about separation anxiety

First, tell your child that it is normal to sometimes feel anxious when alone or away from mom or dad. Tell your child that you will give him or her some tools to help cope with anxiety and gradually face his or her fears. Help your child identify some of the feelings, thoughts, and behaviours related to her anxiety. The book *The Invisible String* by Patrice Karst is a wonderful resource for kids with separation anxiety.

### Encourage your child to stop seeking reassurance

Children with separation anxiety often seek excessive reassurance from their parents. They ask questions like: “Are you sure you won’t go further than the neighbour’s backyard?” and “Are you sure I won’t get sick if I go to school?” They do this to try to be 100% sure everything is all right. When your child is excessively and repeatedly asking for reassurance: Tell your child that this is just anxiety talking. Make a plan with your child about beating back anxiety by not giving reassurance. Tell your child that he or she can only ask you something **once**.

### Realistic Thinking

Often, children separation anxiety have worries that are unrealistic or very unlikely, but when they are anxious it is difficult for them to recognize this. For example, your child may worry excessively about mom and dad being in a car accident if they are late coming home. Coach your child to notice their irrational thoughts and challenge their negative thinking.

### Facing Fears Using Step Ladders

**Step 1:** Create a list of feared behaviours. **Step 2:** Rate your child’s fear (0 no fear, 10 = high level of fear).

**Step 3:** Start working through your child’s feared behaviour starting with the lowest level of fear. Pair these challenges with lots of praise and/or rewards (incentives) to help motivate your child.

#### Example Steps

*Stay home with Dad while Mom goes outside to the back yard ( Fear Rating of 1)*

*Stay home with Dad while Mom goes shopping (Fear Rating of 5)*

*Stay at Grandma’s house for 30 minutes without Mom (Fear Rating of 6).*

Although separation anxiety can be treated, it is a stubborn disorder. Unfortunately, relapse is very common. Often a child will do well for a period of time and then suddenly regress. This may occur when schedules and expected routines change. Knowing this is normal will help in reestablishing prior gains. If things do not improve, consider getting help from a registered psychologist.

**SOURCE: HELPING YOUR ANXIOUS CHILD: A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR PARENTS BY RONALD RAPEE, PHD.**