

SEPARATION ANXIETY

Parenting can be extremely anxiety provoking. There. I said it.

As parents, we are constantly worried about whether we are doing the “right thing” or are we a “good parent”? The very fact that you might be worried about that proves that you ARE in fact a good parent! But what about our kiddos? What are they worried about?

Your little one may be experiencing another type of anxiety:
Separation Anxiety.

SEPARATION ANXIETY

- Feelings of distress that children, usually infants and toddlers, experience when they are separated or expect to be separated, from individuals to whom they are attached.
- Begins to increase around 8 months of age.
- Baby's thought process may begin to look like this:
 - Mom is not in the room
 - Mom is somewhere else
 - I would prefer to be there with her
 - I am going to let you know how I feel about that through the following means of communication:
 - Protest
 - Fussiness
 - Clinginess



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This can be a big challenge when your child begins to show distress whenever Mom or Dad isn't around. Separation Anxiety begins to develop around 6-8 months of age and is associated with the emergence of the concept of Object Permanence.

OBJECT PERMANENCE

- Thought to be one of baby's most important accomplishments.
- The understanding that objects and events continue to exist even when they cannot be directly seen, heard or touched.
- Begins around 6-8 months of age.
- In other words, out of sight no longer means out of mind.

HERE'S THE DEAL WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY:

It is completely normal and to be expected. It is a sign of healthy attachment and bond between caregiver and child.

So as your baby begins to grasp this concept, he or she realizes that if you (#1 favorite person in the whole world) is not there, you must be elsewhere. It's kind of fascinating when you think about it-- but it's also a little heartbreaking. This realization can obviously be cause for a bit of panic for your baby-- and understandably so.



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So now that we understand a little bit more about Separation Anxiety, we can explore some options to help us manage the big emotions that may come with it. There may come a time when you need to leave your little one with Grandma for a bit or they are heading off to daycare soon— and as always, a plan ahead of time can be instrumental to a smooth transition to this new phase of life!

Lead by Example

Your little ones follow your cues, so if you're not willing to let them out of your sight, they may feel unsafe if you're not in the room. Designate a room where they can explore a little and play without your direct supervision. It's a small adjustment but it has a tremendous effect.

Don't Avoid It

Learning about separation and reunion is an important milestone, so don't just take the path of least resistance and never leave them in someone else's care. Let them know that it's okay for them to get upset when you leave and reassure them that you'll always come back. If there are some tears around it, we can certainly understand why. This is an important concept that they are learning to feel comfortable with.



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Start Slow

Once your little ones have started to demonstrate the understanding that they'll be spending some time with someone besides a parent, make it a short outing. Don't plan on dinner and a movie for the first few attempts. A quick trip to the grocery or a half-day at daycare can be good start. Shoot for an hour away for the first few goes at it. Build up to that overnighter over time.

Start With Someone and Some Place Familiar

Kids typically do a little better being left with a grandparent or family friend who they've already spent some time with. Seeing that this is someone you're familiar with will go a long way in reassuring your child that they are "good people" and worthy of their trust.

Stick Around for a While

After your sitter, parent, friend or whoever is watching your little one arrives, plan to hang around for a half hour or so. Allow your child to unhurriedly explore the distance between the two of you. Allow them the time they need to feel comfortable enough to create that distance on their own terms.



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Face the Music

Many of us have, at least once, attempted to distract our toddlers and then sneak out the door without saying goodbye. After all, it's the goodbye that provokes the reaction, right? But even if it provokes some tears, it's important for your child to understand that you're going to leave sometimes and that you'll be back when you say you will.

Establish a Routine

Much like bedtime, a solid, predictable goodbye routine helps your little one recognize and accept the situation. A set number of kisses and hugs, a memorable key phrase and a clear indication of when you'll be back should be just the right balance of short and reassuring.

Speak in Terms They Understand

Instead of telling your child how long you'll be gone, tell them when you'll be back in regards to their schedule: after nap time, before bed, after dinner, before bath time and so on.



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Upon your Return

- Go directly to your child and love on them!
- Eye contact, physical contact and quality time can help you reaffirm your connection after being away from each other.
- Make sure to offer additional times to reconnect during other parts of the day and not just when you have had some time apart. Knowing that they may be experiencing some separation anxiety, shower them with love to help keep the balance!

You may not be able to totally prevent your child from getting a little bit upset when you leave but you can definitely keep the fuss to a minimum. Be consistent, supportive, assertive and calm. Before long, your child will understand the concept of you leaving and coming back, and this is something to be celebrated! Your child is growing into an amazing person and they are so glad to have you there to guide them!

A SPECIAL NOTE:

Now, I should add here that these techniques are suggested for kids who are dealing with separation anxiety. There is also a condition called Separation Anxiety Disorder which is obviously more serious and warrants a trip to your pediatrician if you suspect a larger issue is at play.



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