

Separation Anxiety

A resource for parents

What is Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a normal stage of development for infants and toddlers with most children outgrowing separation anxiety by about 3 years of age. In some children, separation anxiety may be intense or prolonged and may be a sign of a more serious condition known as Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD).

Separation Anxiety Disorder is the most frequently diagnosed childhood anxiety disorder with 4% of children exhibiting a clinical level of separation anxiety. Symptoms of SAD include:



- Recurrent and excessive distress about being away from home or loved ones
- Constant, excessive worry about losing a parent or loved one
- Constant worry that something bad will happen
- Refusing to be away from home
- Frequent complaints of headaches, stomachaches or other symptoms when separated from a parent
- Repeated nightmares about separation
- Trouble Sleeping or refusing to sleep away from home without parent/loved one
- Emotional dysregulation
- “fight”, “flight”, or “freeze” responses

How to Help Your Child:

- **Talk about feelings:** When your child is worried, ask them to “draw it out”. Help your child name their feeling (worried, afraid, anxious, sad, frustrated etc.)
- **Teach your child how to deal with their worries:** Say to your child, “Here are 4 steps to help you deal with you worry, be stronger, and handle anything that comes your way!” Then go over these steps with them...
 - First, ask yourself, “What am I worried about?”. Then name your feeling.
 - Then, think, “Can I do something about this problem?”

Adapted From: Mayo Clinic (2021), UNICEF (2022) & BehaviorChecker.org (2021)

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- Next say, “If I cannot do something, let go of the worry and focus on something different that is important to you right now. What could that be?” Then brainstorm things.
- Finally say, “If you can do something, let's make a plan about what we can control and what we can do about the situation. I am excited to help if you want me to!”
- **Praise:** Say “You were so brave the way you handled going to your friend's house for the day without me. You stayed calm and talked with me about your feelings. I know you worried about something bad happening to me, but we were only separated for a few hours and everyone was safe.”
 - Talking about what happened will build a sense of capability in your child, so they know themselves, without you even saying so, that they can be resilient and cope when they are worried.
- **Talk about what you will do together later:** discussing plans for later helps ease the fears of them “not seeing you again”.
- **Practice short separations and work towards longer ones:** start with small separation goals (e.g. separated from each other in the house) and move towards longer ones (e.g. leaving them with a friend/family member while running an errand)
 - Ask your counselor for examples of fear hierarchies to work on these goals
- **Make goodbyes quick and positive:** try as best as you can to remain calm and positive when saying goodbye.

Coping tools to teach your child:

It is important to equip your child with the tools necessary to cope with the anxiety they experience when they are separated to help make this process easier. These may include:

- Quick coping tools to teach them:
 - Imagine their favorite place- they can learn to take a mini vacation in their head
 - 5,4,3,2,1 grounding (see image)
 - Remember the words to a song you love
 - Name animals alphabetically
- Teach them how breathing can help & make it fun!:
 - Hand breathing- have them trace their hand with their index finger while breathing in and out
 - Ocean breathing- have them breathe in through their nose and out through their mouth while puckering their lips like they are drinking through a straw to make a “wave noise”
 - Shape breathing (see image) – you can do this with many different shapes!



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Remember: practice these with your children when they are not feeling anxious so they know how to use them when they are!

Recommended Reading

For Children:

- “Benny Learns to Say Goodbye: Kids and Parents Beating Fear of Separation” By Dr. Jonathan Kushnir (2022)
- “What to Do When You Don’t Want to Be Apart: A Kid’s Guide to Overcoming Separation Anxiety” By Silvia Schneider PhD (2017)
- “The Worry Workbook for Kids :Helping Children to Overcome Anxiety and the Fear of Uncertainty” By Muniya S. Khanna PhD & Deborah Roth Ledley PhD (2018)
- “See You Soon: A Children’s Book for Mothers and Toddlers dealing with Separation Anxiety” By Dilraz Kunnummal (2020)

For Parents:

- “Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-By-Step Guide for Parents” By R. Rapee PhD, A. Wignall D Psych, S. Spence PhD, H. Lyneham PhD, & V. Cobham PhD (2008)
- “The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind” By Daniel J. Siegel M. D. & Tina Payne Bryson PhD. (2012)
- “Helping Your Child Overcome Separation Anxiety or School Refusal: A step-by-step guide” By Andrew R. Eisen PhD (2006)