

Child Separation Anxiety

It's natural for your young child to feel anxious when you say goodbye. Although it can be difficult, separation anxiety is a normal stage of development. With understanding and these coping strategies, separation anxiety can be relieved—and should fade as your child gets older.

In early childhood, crying, tantrums, or clinginess are healthy reactions to separation. Separation anxiety can begin before a child's first birthday, and may pop up again or last until a child is four years old, but both the intensity level and timing of separation anxiety vary tremendously from child to child. A little worry over leaving mom or dad is normal, even when your child is older. You can ease your child's separation anxiety by staying patient and consistent, and by gently but firmly setting limits.

Easing separation anxiety in children

For children with mild separation anxiety, there are steps you can take to make the process of separation anxiety easier.

- **Practice separation.** Leave your child with a caregiver for brief periods and short distances at first.
- **Schedule separations after naps or feedings.** Babies are more susceptible to separation anxiety when they're tired or hungry.
- **Develop a "goodbye" ritual.** Rituals are reassuring and can be as simple as a special wave through the window or a goodbye kiss.
- **Keep familiar surroundings when possible and make new surroundings familiar.** Have the sitter come to your house. When your child is away from home, let him or her bring a familiar object.
- **Have a consistent primary caregiver.** If you hire a caregiver, try to keep him or her on the job.
- **Leave without fanfare.** Tell your child you are leaving and that you will return, then *go*—don't stall.
- **Minimize scary television.** Your child is less likely to be fearful if the shows you watch are not frightening.
- **Try not to give in.** Reassure your child that he or she will be just fine—setting limits will help the adjustment to separation.

Tips for helping children with separation anxiety feel safe and secure

- **Provide a consistent pattern for the day.** Don't underestimate the importance of predictability for children with separation anxiety problems. If your family's schedule is going to change, discuss it ahead of time with your child.
- **Set limits.** Let your child know that although you understand his or her feelings, there are rules in your household that need to be followed.
- **Offer choices.** If your child is given a choice or some element of control in an activity or interaction with an adult, he or she may feel more safe and comfortable.

Tips for encouraging healthy separation and independence in children

- **Keep calm during separation.** If your child sees that you can stay cool, he or she is more likely to be calm, too.
- **Support the child's participation in activities.** Encourage your child to participate in healthy social and physical activities.
- **Help a child who has been absent from school return as quickly as possible.** Even if a shorter school day is necessary initially, children's symptoms are more likely to decrease when they discover that they can survive the separation.
- **Praise your child's efforts.** Use the smallest of accomplishments—going to bed without a fuss, a good report from school—as reason to give your child positive reinforcement.