



Learning about Separation Anxiety

By Lourslaine at Organic Early Learning

Definition: The normal fear or apprehension of infants when separated from their mothers or other major attachment figures, or when approached by strangers.

Usually most clearly evident between: 6 months to 4 years of age. However, both the intensity level and timing of separation anxiety vary tremendously from child to child.

When may separation anxiety considered a disorder: Symptoms which to satisfy the diagnostic criteria must persist for at least 4 weeks and must cause clinically significant distress or social, academic or occupational problems. May include unrealistic fear of losing major attachment figures or of harm befalling them, refusal to attend school, refusal to sleep alone, repeated nightmares about separation, and complaints of somatic symptoms such as headaches, narsea or vomiting when separation is threatened.

COMMON CAUSES OF SEPARATION ANXIETY DISORDER IN CHILDREN:

Change in environment. Changes in surroundings, such as a new house, school, or day care situation, can trigger separation anxiety disorder.

Stress. Stressful situations like switching schools, divorce, or the loss of a loved one—including a pet—can trigger separation anxiety problems.

An over-protective parent. In some cases, separation anxiety disorder may be the manifestation of your own stress or anxiety. Parents and children can feed one another's anxieties.

Insecure attachment. The attachment bond is the emotional connection formed between an infant and their primary caretaker. While a secure attachment bond ensures that your child will feel secure, understood and calm enough for optimal development, an insecure attachment bond can contribute to childhood problems such as separation anxiety.

THERE ARE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO MAKE THE PROCESS OF SEPARATION ANXIETY EASIER: (TIPS FOR PARENTS)

Practice separation. Leave your child with a caregiver for brief periods and short distances at first. As your child gets used to separation, you can gradually leave for longer and travel further.

Schedule separations after naps or feedings. Babies are more susceptible to separation anxiety when they're tired or hungry.

Develop a quick "goodbye" ritual. Rituals are reassuring and can be as simple as a special wave through the window or a goodbye kiss.

Leave without fanfare. Tell your child you are leaving and that you will return.

Follow through on promises. For your child to develop the confidence that they can handle separation, it's important you return at the time you promised.

Keep familiar surroundings when possible and make new surroundings familiar. Encourage them to bring a familiar object.

Try not to give in. Reassure your child that they will be just fine—setting consistent limits will help your child's adjustment to separation.

Listen to and respect your child's feelings. For a child who might already feel isolated by their disorder.

Talk about the issue. It's healthier for children to talk about their feelings—they don't benefit from "not thinking about it." Be empathetic, but also remind your child—gently—that they survived the last separation.

Support the child's participation in activities. Encourage your child to participate in healthy social and physical activities. They're great ways to ease anxiety and help your child develop friendships.

TIPS FOR SCHOOL:

Help a child who has been absent from school return as quickly as possible. Even if a shorter school day is necessary initially

Identify a safe place. Find a place at school where your child can go to reduce anxiety during stressful periods

Allow your child contact with home. At times of stress at school, a brief phone call—a minute or two—with family may reduce separation anxiety.

Send notes for your child to read. You can place a note for your child in their lunch box or locker. A quick “I love you!” on a napkin can reassure a child.

Reward your child’s efforts. Just like at home, every good effort—or small step in the right direction—deserves to be praised.

PROFESSIONAL TREATMENT FOR SEPARATION ANXIETY DISORDER MAY INCLUDE:

Talk therapy: Talk therapy provides a safe place for your child to express their feelings. Having someone to listen empathetically and guide your child toward understanding their anxiety can be powerful treatment.

Play therapy: The therapeutic use of play is a common and effective way to get kids talking about their feelings.

Counseling for the family: Family counseling can help your child counteract the thoughts that fuel their anxiety, while you as the parent can help your child learn coping skills.

School-based counseling: This can help your child with separation anxiety disorder explore the social, behavioral, and academic demands of school.

Medication: Medications may be used to treat severe cases of separation anxiety disorder. It should be used only in conjunction with other therapy.

Composed by: Lourslaine Andrade Lopes, Organic Early Learning

Sources:

Oxford, Dictionary of Psychology. Author: Andrew M. Colman. Page: 688.

Authors: Lawrence Robinson, Jeanne Segal, Ph.D., and Melinda Smith, M.A.
Last updated: November 2019. <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/anxiety/separation-anxiety-and-separation-anxiety-disorder.htm>