



Au Pair Extraordinaire

For parents who care

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Separation Anxiety – February 2011

By Kerry Skinner

In early childhood, crying, tantrums, or clinginess are healthy reactions to separation from a primary care giver. Around the first birthday, many children develop separation anxiety, getting upset when a primary caregiver tries to leave them with someone else. Though separation anxiety is a perfectly normal part of childhood development, it can be very unsettling for the parent and the child.

How Separation Anxiety Develops

Infants adapt pretty well to other caregivers. Parents probably feel more anxious about being separated than infants do! As long as their needs are being met, most infants younger than 6 months adjust easily to other people.

Sometime between 4-7 months, infants develop a sense of 'object permanence' and begin to learn that things and people exist even when they're out of sight. This is when many start playing the "dropsy" game — dropping things over the side of the high chair and expecting an adult to retrieve it (which, once retrieved, gets dropped again!). During this time, infants also start to realize that there is generally only one mom and dad. When they can't see you, it means that you have gone away and they do not know if or when you'll come back. Whether you're in the kitchen, in the next bedroom, or at the office, it's all the same to your child. You've disappeared, and your child will do whatever he/ she can do to prevent this from happening.

The intensity and timing of a child's separation anxiety varies tremendously from child to child. If a child's anxiety is excessive enough to interfere with normal activities like school and friendships, and lasts for months rather than days, it may be a sign of a larger difficulty known as a Separation Anxiety Disorder.

Common symptoms of Separation Anxiety Disorder

Children with Separation Anxiety Disorder constantly worry or fear separation from one or more primary care-givers. They often have the following fears and worries:

- **Fear that something terrible will happen to a loved one:** The most common fear a child with Separation Anxiety Disorder experiences is the worry that harm will come to a loved one in the child's absence. For example, the child may constantly worry about a parent becoming sick or getting hurt.
- **Worry that an unpredicted event will lead to permanent separation:** Children with anxiety disorder may fear that once separated from a parent, something will happen to keep the separation. For example, they may worry about being kidnapped or getting lost.
- **Nightmares about separation:** Children with separation problems often have scary dreams about their fears.

Separation Anxiety Disorder can get in the way of children's normal activities. Children with this disorder often:



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- **Refuse to go to school:** A child with Separation Anxiety Disorder may have an unreasonable fear of school, and will do almost anything to stay home.
- **Display reluctance to go to sleep:** A child with Separation Anxiety Disorder often has difficulties sleeping either because of the fear of being alone or due to nightmares about separation.
- **Complain of physical sickness like a headache or stomach ache:** At the time of separation, or before, children with this disorder often complain of feeling ill.
- **Cling to the caregiver.** Children with separation problems may shadow you around the house or cling to your arm or leg if you attempt to step out.

Common causes of Separation Anxiety Disorder

Separation Anxiety Disorder occurs because a child feels unsafe in some way. Take a look at anything that may have thrown your child's world off balance, or made him/her feel threatened or could have upset your child's normal routine. If you can pinpoint the root cause (or causes) you'll be one step closer to helping your child through his/her struggles.

The timing of separation anxiety can vary widely from child to child. Some Children may go through it later, between 18 months and 2½ years of age. Some may never experience it. And for others, certain life stresses can trigger feelings of anxiety about being separated from a parent. The following are common causes of Separation Anxiety Disorder:

- **Change in environment:** In children prone to separation anxiety, it is possible that changes in surroundings—like a new house, school, sibling, caregiver or day care situation—could trigger Separation Anxiety Disorder.
- **Stress:** Stressful situations like switching schools, or the loss of a loved one, including a pet, could also trigger this disorder.
- **Over-protective parent:** In some cases, Separation Anxiety Disorder may be the manifestation of the parent's own anxiety—parents and children can feed one another's anxieties.

Tips for helping your child feel safe and secure

Many children understand the effects their behavior has on their parents. If you come back into the room every time your child cries and then stay there longer or cancel your plans, your child will continue to use this tactic to avoid separation.

At the beginning, it can be gratifying to feel that your child is finally as attached to you as you are to him/her. But you're likely to feel guilty about taking time out for yourself, leaving your child with a caregiver, or going to work. And you may start to feel overwhelmed by the amount of attention your child seems to need from you. Below are some tips to help parents empower their children:

- **Practice:** Practice being apart from each other, and introduce new people and places gradually. If you're planning to leave your child with a relative or a new babysitter, then invite that person over in advance so they can spend time together while you're in the room. If your child is starting at a new day care center or preschool, make a few visits there together before a full-time schedule begins. Practice leaving your child with a caregiver for short periods of time so that he/she can get used to being away from you.



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- **Be calm and consistent:** Create an exit ritual during which you say a pleasant, loving, and firm goodbye. Stay calm and show confidence in your child. If your child sees that you can stay cool, he/she is more likely to be calm too. Reassure him or her that you'll be back — and explain how long it will be until you return using concepts children will understand (such as after lunch) because your child can't yet understand time. Give him/her your full attention when you say goodbye, and when you say you're leaving, mean it; coming back will only make things worse.
- **Follow through on promises:** It's important to make sure that you return when you have promised to. This is critical — this is how your child will develop the confidence that he/she can make it through the time apart.
- **Provide a consistent pattern for the day:** Don't underestimate the importance of predictability for children with separation 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/she may feel more safe and comfortable.
- **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.

Children with anxious parents may be more prone to separation anxiety. In order to help your child overcome Separation Anxiety Disorder, you may need to take measures to become calmer and more centred yourself. Try some of the following strategies to keep your stress in check.

- **Talk about your feelings**
- **Exercise regularly**
- **Eat right**
- **Practice relaxation**
- **Get enough sleep**
- **Keep your sense of humour**

Your own patience and self awareness can go a long way toward helping your child with Separation Anxiety Disorder. But some children with Separation Anxiety Disorder may need professional intervention.

As a parent, how do you know when to seek help for your child?

Look for "red lights," or extreme symptoms that go beyond milder warning signs. If your efforts to reduce these symptoms don't work, it may be the time to seek the assistance of a qualified child



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therapist. Remember, these may also be symptoms of a trauma that your child has experienced. If this is the case, it is important to see a specialist trained in child psychotherapy.

Red lights

If you see any of the following "red lights" and your interventions don't seem to be enough, it may be necessary to get a professional to diagnose and help your child.

- Age-inappropriate clinginess or tantrums
- Constant complaints of physical sickness
- Withdrawal from friends, family, or peers
- Refusing to go to school for weeks
- Preoccupation with intense fear or guilt
- Excessive fear of leaving the house

