

Separation Anxiety in the Family

Mums and dads, you've probably been there. Your little ones, especially the younger ones, can experience anxiety and distress when they're away from you for a period of time. **MH** explores what separation anxiety is, its causes, and how it can be resolved.

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Most parents will be able to relate to the deep sense of guilt felt as they walk away from their screaming child on the first day of school, or the anguish experienced on returning to work after maternity leave. Suddenly your child is no longer under your protective wing around-the-clock. You now have to trust others to care for your pride and joy. This can cause a condition known as separation anxiety.

What is Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety is the distress caused by being apart from a loved one. It is normal for children, particularly young ones, to become anxious when they are separated from a parent. In such cases, children might react by crying or becoming quiet and withdrawn.

Separation anxiety doesn't only occur in children, however; parents can also experience anxiety due to being separated from their child and the associated feelings of being powerless to protect them. In children, a certain degree of separation anxiety is healthy and an expected part of normal childhood development, usually occurring between infancy and age six.

Children between the ages of 18 and 24 months begin to explore the world around them but prefer to know that a parent is close by if needed. They will begin to feel mild separation anxiety if their caregiver is absent.

The separation anxiety felt by parents isn't dependent on age, but rather circumstances. One or both parents will take time off work after the birth of the child, giving time to create bonds and attachment. When it is time to return to work, separation anxiety sets in and parents can begin to doubt the wisdom of leaving their children in the care of anyone other than themselves. This is intensified if the caregiver is unknown to the parent. If one parent stays at home to care for the children, the bond becomes even stronger, making the separation anxiety even stronger when the time comes for the child to go to crèche or school. The parent can feel responsible for the trauma the child is experiencing, making the separation almost worse for them than it is for the child.

Causes of Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is the result of several factors:

Environmental change

Any additional stress or change of daily routine in a child's life, such as parents' work schedule, sibling activities, and an illness of someone close, death, traumatic event, relocation, joining a new school or even returning to school after a break, can cause separation anxiety.

Personality

There are certain sensitivities and personality traits that people are born with. For instance, some are confident and outgoing whereas others are fearful and shy. Research has shown that children, and parents, predisposed to separation anxiety are likely to be more sensitive than the average person, making them naturally more cautious and fearful.

The family tree

There is a tendency for anxiety to run in families. This is due to a person's genetic make up, just like height, looks, athletic ability or hair color.

At around the age of eight to 10 months, healthy separation anxiety can be seen when an infant becomes apprehensive at meeting strangers, more commonly known as stranger anxiety.





Stressful events in life

Situations that are stressful can indirectly or directly increase the level of anxiety in a family. For instance, constant quarrels between parents may make a child more likely to feel distress, which can eventually culminate into separation anxiety. The same constant quarrelling could make a parent feel insecure in the stability of their relationship with their partner, causing them to become overly attached to their child.

A sense of security

A sensitive child may become apprehensive and insecure when faced with expected separations and may cling to their parents and cry. This can be upsetting for the parents

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as well; however, when a parent shows distress this is likely to make the anxiety worse for both parent and child. Most children affected by separation anxiety grow into secure individuals as they get older and realise that separation from their parents is temporary and a normal part of life.

Signs of Separation Anxiety

Children experiencing separation anxiety could become intrusive, demanding and constantly wanting attention in the family setting. This can become a catalyst for family conflict as the child's increasing

demands can cause frustration for parents, creating conflict and resentment within the family.

Alternatively, children with separation anxiety can become eager pleasers, conscientious and compliant to their parents in an attempt to prevent separation. Depending on the age of the child, they may experience a fear of the dark, animals, kidnappers, and monsters, to name just a few common childhood fears. These fears are age appropriate, however, in separation anxiety they are more intense and can overwhelm the child when faced with separation from their parent.

Another way in which separation anxiety might show itself include anger; some children will claim that they aren't loved when faced with separation and will normally direct their anger at the parent initiating the separation.

Extreme separation anxiety can cause children to lack concentration in school, which can cause academic difficulties as well as poor social skills when interacting with other children.

Treating Separation Anxiety

Treating separation anxiety involves all those who play an important role in the upbringing of a child. Family and school staff have a central role to a child with separation anxiety and should be primarily involved in providing ongoing interventions in order to treat this condition.

Schools can help children overcome separation anxiety by


At home, it is important that parents listen to the feelings of their child and keep the child calm and assured when they are upset about the prospect of separation.

providing emotional support and encouragement – assuring the child that their parent will be back soon and assuring the parent that their child will be safe. Following a structured schedule can also help the child realise that there is a set routine after which they will be going home. If the child's separation anxiety is extreme, settling the child will require collaborative efforts between parents and school staff. Certain adjustments can be made, such as scheduling check-ins on arrival, establishing relaxation techniques, and identifying safe places for the child.

Let your child know that the separation is temporary and not an indication of your lack of love for them.

Parents can also teach relaxation techniques and plan for fun activities that the child can look forward to after the separation.

All of these actions at both school and at home, can help provide a tolerant and sympathetic environment that will facilitate the healing process of a child with separation anxiety. If these measures don't help and the child is experiencing a severe form of separation anxiety, other interventions might be necessary such as counselling.

In most cases, separation anxiety is normal and healthy and doesn't require specialist intervention. Primarily, creating a loving and supportive home environment, and establishing good cooperation with school staff can help children affected by separation anxiety overcome their fears. Typically, when a parent sees that their child is settled and has adjusted to the temporary separation, they feel more confident and at ease, relieving their own separation anxiety. 

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