

What is Separation Anxiety?



Separation anxiety is when your baby or toddler becomes upset when you leave. This is **very normal and is a healthy sign** that your child has a strong connection with you. It usually begins around 6 to 8 months, can get stronger between 12 and 18 months, and often gets better by age 3. Some children experience it again when starting a new school or child care.

Why does it happen?

As your baby's brain grows, they learn that you still exist even when they cannot see you. This is a big step! But it also means they now worry about where you went and when you will come back. They are not trying to be difficult. They just love you and want to know you are safe. And they love to be with you.

Tips for saying goodbye

■ Always say goodbye.

Even though it feels easier, never sneak out. Your child will feel more anxious if they do not see you leave. That can lead to being more upset and clingy with you. Instead, your child needs to learn that goodbyes happen and that you always come back. It can be really hard to leave if your child is crying and upset. But when you say a loving good-bye and reassure them, your child will learn they can rely on other caregivers to calm.

■ Keep it short and positive.

Say a quick, cheerful goodbye. Use the same routine each time, like a kiss and saying, "I love you! I will see you after your nap." Saying goodbye can be difficult for adults too. Your child picks up on your feelings, so staying calm and positive helps them stay calm and feel safe. Routines are very comforting for young children.

■ Once you leave, leave.

Try not to go back, even if you hear crying. Returning makes it harder for your child to separate the next time. If you are worried, call the caregiver to check in.



▣ **Leave something comforting with your child.**

A favorite stuffed animal, a soft blanket, your child's favorite book, or a family photo can help your child feel close to you while you are away.

▣ **Practice good-byes by playing peek-a-boo or short hiding games.**

These games teach your child that when someone disappears, they always come back.

Bedtime separations

Some children feel anxious about being away from you at night too. A calm bedtime routine, like bathtime, reading, singing, or snuggling, can help. If your child cries after you leave, go in briefly to reassure them. Keep it short and let them know you will see them in the morning.

What about stranger anxiety?

Sometimes, your baby may also get upset around people they do not know well, even grandparents. This is called stranger anxiety. It's also very normal! It doesn't mean your baby doesn't like these people. It just means they are not familiar to your baby yet. Give your child time to warm up to people. Let them see that you feel comfortable, and they will slowly feel the same way.

Remember

Separation anxiety will not last forever. With your support, your child will learn that you always come back. Over time and as they grow, they will learn that they are safe and loved even when you are not there.

Have more questions? Talk to your baby's healthcare provider or one of the professionals supporting your family.

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