



# Separation Anxiety

*When your child doesn't want you to leave*

## You & Your Child

A guide for  
new parents

Separation anxiety is the fear that anyone, young or old, can have when they are separated from something familiar. With children, this usually means being afraid to be separated from their parents or caretaker.

Separation anxiety typically begins when a child is approximately 7 months old and is usually felt most strongly when a child is between 10 months and 18 months old. But children can still experience great fear about being separated from their parents when they are as old as 5 or 6.

Separation anxiety is normal and is part of healthy psychological development. It is a sign that your child has a close attachment to you and does not want to leave a safe, familiar place.

But it is important to handle separation anxiety properly so that your child will develop the coping skills needed to handle being separated from you when he or she is older.

**ON BACK**  
WHAT TO DO TO EASE YOUR  
CHILD'S SEPARATION ANXIETY.



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# WHEN YOUR CHILD DOESN'T WANT YOU TO LEAVE

Parenting  
Ages  
Birth-2

## *Give your child something to comfort him or her*

Let your child have a stuffed animal, favorite doll, toy, or a picture that he or she finds comforting.

You might try drawing a picture together that your child can hold and look at when you leave.

## *When choosing a sitter, pick someone who is caring*

If you can, leave your child with a sitter he or she already knows.

If you can't find someone familiar, have the sitter come early so your child can become acquainted with him or her before you leave.

## *Be clear and specific*

Tell your child where you are going, why you are going, and when you will be back.

Always reassure your child that you will be back.

## *Be gentle and direct*

When giving your child the details of why you are leaving, use a pleasant tone of voice. "I'm going to work now so I can earn money. I will be back to pick you up in four hours."

## *Address your child's feelings*

Show that you know your child is sad that you are leaving. This will help your child become comfortable with the sadness he or she is feeling.

It is very important to help your child understand his or her fears and feelings.

## *Leave, don't linger*

The best approach to leaving is to say a simple goodbye and then leave.

The sooner you go, the sooner your child can get over the feelings that separation brings.



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## *Experiment at home*

Start playing peek-a-boo as soon as your child enjoys the game. This will help get your child used to the idea that things reappear after they go away for awhile.

Try telling your child you are going to the other room and you will be back in 5 minutes. Just make sure you come back in 5 minutes.

Do it in doses. Try leaving your child a little bit longer, maybe 15 minutes. Then, stay away a little longer each time, maybe 20 minutes, then 25 minutes.

## *Know when separation anxiety is a problem*

You can tell if the problem is severe by judging how intensely your child cries when you leave, how long your child cries, and his or her behavior.

In most cases, children cry for only a short time.

If your child cries uncontrollably for a long time after you leave and does things to hurt himself or herself, such as biting, you may consider having your child seen by a psychologist or psychiatrist, who can recommend ways to treat anxiety.

## *What you should NOT do when leaving your child*

Some things won't help your child get over the fear of being separated from you.

- Do not sneak out when your child is not looking. This leaves your child thinking the worst.
- Do not say, "It's okay, you'll be fine." Your child won't believe you.
- Do not stick around waiting for your child to stop crying. This only prolongs the inevitable.
- Don't say, "I'm leaving now, okay?" This makes you seem uncertain about leaving and may lead your child to think that he or she can say "no" and you won't go.



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