

Positive Parenting of Infants

Separation Anxiety

Most infants go through a stage when they suddenly react with hesitation and fear to strangers or people they do not see every day. It can be a real surprise when your child seems afraid of someone they have usually greeted with a big smile. You may feel embarrassed and unsure about how to manage the situation. You may also worry about upsetting your child when you must leave them with other caregivers. Parents have an important role to play in helping their children learn to cope with new experiences. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you understand separation anxiety and help your infant feel secure.

What Is Separation Anxiety?

Up to the age of six months, most infants can be left with others and held by strangers without any protesting. However, at around six months, they may not like to be separated from their parents, or may react with hesitation or fear to people they do not see every day. This is called separation anxiety or stranger anxiety.

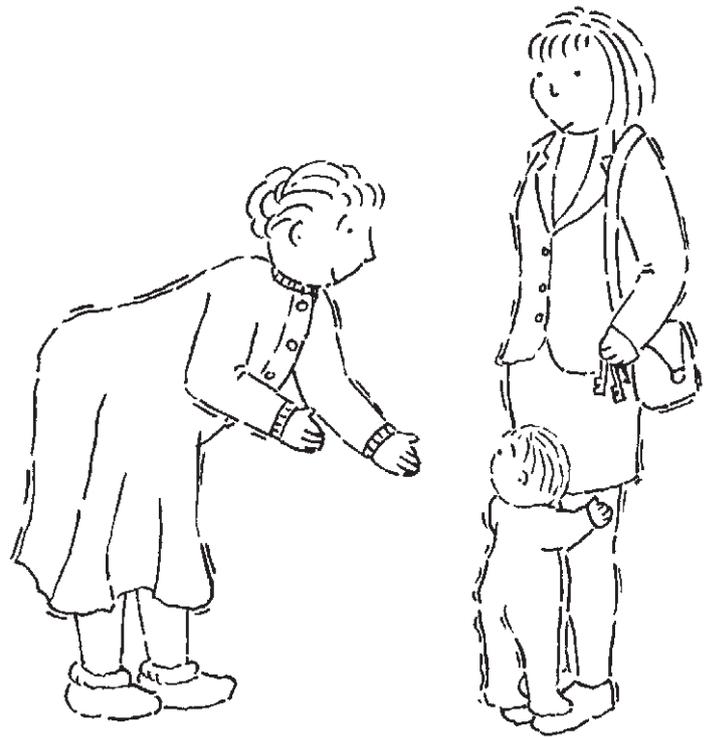
Separation anxiety can involve fretting, crying, screaming, protesting or clinging to and refusing to separate from a parent. It usually reaches a peak soon after a child's first birthday and disappears by the time the child is two years old. It is normal and a sign of change in children's social development.

Infants differ in their reactions to separation and strangers. Some seem very fearful while others show hardly any reaction. Infants also differ in how they reunite with their parents after separations. They may become upset and cry, or want to be picked up and held. Others ignore or avoid their parents. Some children seem angry even though they want to be held by their parents after separations. The reaction is usually worse in unfamiliar places.

Why Do Infants Become Anxious?

Many things may cause infants to react with anxiety, including unfamiliar adults looking at, speaking to, trying to hold or play with them. It also can occur when there are loud, unfamiliar noises, or if parents attempt to leave their child with unfamiliar caregivers.

When infants lose sight of their major caregiver, they may become upset. They do not know how long the separation will be and cannot form a picture of their parent in their mind. This means they are unlikely to wait calmly and confidently for their parent's return. Once they can crawl



and keep their parents in sight by following them, infants are less likely to become distressed. Infants soon learn that people and objects still exist even when they cannot see them. From experience, infants also learn that wherever parents have gone, they always return.

Only one in four or five infants, does not show separation anxiety. These infants may adjust easily to new situations of all kinds, or this phase may pass so quickly it is not noticed. Some infants in day care can be used to their parents coming and going and have a large circle of adults who care for them, so they may not show separation anxiety.

How To Help Your Child Feel Secure

Spend Quality Time with Your Child

Infants cope better with new challenges when they have lots of warm, caring and enjoyable experiences with their parents. Look at, talk to, smile at and hold your child whenever you can.

Where Possible, Minimise Separations

When you are at home, try to have your child close by while you do your daily activities. Talk or sing to your child while you work. When you must leave the room, wait for your child to follow if they are able, or talk so your child can hear you are near by, or pick your child up and take them with you. Sometimes parents try to sneak out of the room when their child is not watching. When this happens, children may watch their parents more closely and keep themselves busy less often.

Let Your Family and Friends Know What To Expect

Let your family and friends know that your child is going through a shy phase. Suggest that they try to approach your child slowly by smiling, talking or offering something to play with. Your child may then be more willing to go to them. Even if your child does not go to them, you will have avoided tears and bad feelings. Do not force your child to be held by someone they do not want to go to. This can make the situation worse.

Give Your Child Time To Become Comfortable with Others

When your child meets someone new, let them stay close to you until they show you they are ready to explore, move around the room or be held by someone else. Do not try to force your child to mix with others. They will mix with others when they are ready. Try to take some familiar things, such as a toy, teddy, doll or blanket, into new places to help your child feel safe and secure.

Respond to Your Child if They Are Upset

Infants can get more anxious when parents ignore their distress. The more anxious the child feels, the more likely they are to cling to their parents. If your child starts to cry when being held or spoken to by another adult, hold them yourself until they are calm. You will often be able to settle your child by simply picking them up, cuddling and speaking calmly and warmly to them. Do not criticise your child for not wanting to go to another adult. Comments such as *Don't be silly* can make the problem worse.

Stay Calm When Your Child Is Upset

When your child is upset, avoid becoming tense and anxious yourself. Your child needs calm, confident, relaxed parenting when they are upset. Hold them and show them, through your relaxed actions, that they are safe.

Encourage Desirable Behaviour

When your child smiles or responds to new people, praise them—*Edward, I like the way you're smiling and talking with Auntie Sue.*

Let Others You Trust Mix with Your Child

Try not to be too protective. Infants need lots of chances to meet and mix with others in familiar places. Experience

will teach your child that you are still nearby and available, even if they are with someone else.

Be Consistent When You Must Leave

When you must leave your child, find a phrase that you can always use to let your child know you are going away, such as *Bye bye for now*. This can help your child learn that you are going away but you will return. Another phrase, such as *Here I am again*, can show your child the separation is over.

Choose a Caregiver Your Child Knows

It is not always possible to prevent your child from protesting when you leave, but you can make sure you leave your child with a responsible caregiver. Children need to be well supervised and cared for at all times. Leave your child with someone they know, or allow time for them to become familiar with a new person before you leave.

Points To Remember

Separation anxiety is a normal part of child development. As your child gets older and learns that you always come back to them, they will learn how to calmly separate from you and mix with others.

Key Steps

- Spend quality time with your child.
- Avoid unnecessary separation and stay in your child's view when possible.
- Let your family and friends know what to expect.
- Give your child time to become familiar with new people and places.
- Respond to your child if they are upset.
- Stay calm if your child is upset.
- Praise your child for smiling at or approaching others.
- Give your child chances to mix with family and friends.
- Develop a consistent routine for when you must leave your child.
- Use a caregiver your child knows.

See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.



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