

What is Separation Anxiety?

From an attachment perspective, it is common for infants to go through a developmental stage where they begin to react with fear towards strangers or people they don't see regularly. This is a natural part of forming secure attachments with their primary caregivers. It's common for parents to worry about causing distress and, as a result, may avoid separations, which can inadvertently reinforce the anxiety. Parents and educators are essential in helping children navigate these moments by fostering a sense of security. By consistently responding to their child's needs, adults help build trust and teach them to feel safe even in unfamiliar situations. This tip sheet offers recommendations from an attachment-based perspective to help you understand and manage separation anxiety, supporting your child in developing the confidence to cope with separations and transitions

WHAT IS SEPARATION ANXIETY

At around 6 months of age children may not like to be separated from their parents or may react with hesitations or fear to people they do not see everyday. This is called separation anxiety or stranger anxiety and is a normal part of early childhood development. Many children feel upset or worried when saying goodbye to their caregiver, especially in new or unfamiliar environments. While this is expected, some children may need extra support to adjust.

Separation Anxiety Disorder is more than just a child being upset when saying goodbye. It is where a child experiences excessive fear or anxiety about being apart from their primary caregivers beyond what's expected for their age or stage. While it's normal for young children to feel some distress during separations (like starting daycare or school), children with Separation Anxiety Disorder:

- Worry constantly about something bad happening to their caregiver or themselves when apart
- May refuse to go to school, sleep alone, or be in a room by themselves
- Often experience physical symptoms like stomach aches, headaches, or nausea when anticipating separation
- May become overly clingy, ask repetitive reassurance questions, or become distressed long before the actual separation happens

This significantly impacts the child's ability to engage in normal daily routines—like school, social activities, and sleep—and can be very stressful for families.

Why Might My Child Find Separation Hard?

Every child is unique, but some common reasons include:

- ◆ **Changes in routine or environment** (e.g., starting kindergarten).
- ◆ **Sensory sensitivities** (e.g., loud noises, bright lights, busy spaces).
- ◆ **Difficulty with transitions or switching between activities.**
- ◆ **Life stressors such as divorce, separation, illness, death of a pet or family member and other stressors including natural disasters.**
- ◆ **Communication challenges or previous stressful experiences.**
- ◆ **Difficulty with developmental domains** (e.g., sensory processing, emotional regulation, executive functioning, motor skills, self-care skills).

Helping Your Child Say Goodbye: Practical Psychology & Occupational Therapy(OT) Tips for Easier Separations

How Can I Support My Child?

Here are some practical, informed strategies to ease separation anxiety:

Before the Separation: Setting the Stage for Success

- ✓ **Build a predictable routine** – Consistency helps children feel secure. Have the same morning steps each day (e.g., breakfast, brushing teeth, packing their bag).
- ✓ **Use visual schedules** – Simple picture schedules can show your child what their day will look like.
- ✓ **Talk about what to expect** – Keep it brief and positive: “You’ll have fun playing, and I’ll be back after lunch!”
- ✓ **Practice short separations** – Playdates, staying with a relative, or quick trips away can help build confidence.
- ✓ **Read books about goodbyes** – Stories like *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn can help children process their feelings.
- ✓ **Introduce a transitional object** – A small comfort item like a family photo, special bracelet, or stuffed toy can provide a sense of security.
- ✓ **Play "kindy" at home** – Pretend play can help your child feel more familiar with the drop-off routine.

👋 **During Drop-Off: Making Goodbyes Easier**

- 💛 Create a special goodbye ritual – A fun handshake, a hug, or a short phrase like “See you after playtime!” can be reassuring.
- 💛 Hand to Hand - Hand your child over to the educator, greet the educator with confidence - this helps your child feel secure in knowing that a competent adult will be caring for them (avoid drop and run without connection).
- 💛 Keep goodbyes short and sweet – Long, drawn-out farewells can increase anxiety. Say goodbye with confidence and go.
- 💛 Trust the educators – Let your child see that you feel safe with their teachers. A simple “You’re in good hands!” can go a long way.
- 💛 Use a transition activity – Encourage your child to start an engaging activity, like playing with a favorite toy or reading a book, before you leave.
- 💛 Stay calm and confident – Children pick up on your emotions. A relaxed, positive attitude reassures them that everything is okay.
- 💛 Non-verbal communication - show confidence in your facial expression and also your tone of voice. Send cues of safety not threat.
- 💛 Acknowledge their feelings – If your child is upset, validate their emotions: “I know it’s hard to say goodbye, but I know you’ll have fun. I’ll see you after lunch!”

🏠 **After Separation: Helping Your Child Feel Secure**

- ☀️ **Celebrate small wins** – If your child made it through drop-off less distressed, praise their bravery: “I saw how strong you were this morning!”
 - ☀️ **Talk about their day** – Focus on the positives: “What was your favorite part of today?”
 - ☀️ **Be on time for pick-up** – This builds trust and predictability.
 - ☀️ **Maintain connection outside of kindy** – Extra snuggles, special one-on-one time, or a fun after-school routine can help ease the transition.
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Supporting Yourself as a Parent

It's okay if goodbyes are hard for you too! Here are some reminders:

- ♥ **Be patient with the process** – Separation anxiety takes time to improve.
- ♥ **Take care of yourself** – A few deep breaths after drop-off can help you reset.
- ♥ **Lean on your village** – Talk to educators, other parents, or professionals for support.

When to Seek Further Support

If separation anxiety persists beyond a few weeks or impacts daily life, additional support may help. Consider reaching out if your child:

- ♦ Shows intense distress that doesn't ease over time.
- ♦ Has physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches.
- ♦ Avoids kindy or becomes withdrawn.
- ♦ Has difficulty sleeping due to separation fears.

An occupational therapist or psychologist can work with your family to develop tailored strategies to support your child.

