






Please Don't Go!

Separation Anxiety and Children



It is often hard for a parent or other loved one to leave a young child who cries and clings. The child is experiencing separation anxiety. Children may not understand when loved ones will be back. These situations can be upsetting to the loved ones who have to leave—as well as to the child. Here are some things to remember about separation anxiety.

-  **A little separation anxiety is normal.** The child's behavior can be a positive sign. It shows that he recognizes and has formed important attachments with loved ones. (A child who never shows distress at a parent's leaving or never shows a preference for one caregiver over another may be a greater cause for concern.)
-  **Anxiety tends to follow a predictable pattern.** Fear of less familiar people and places often begins when a child is about 8 months old, although it can begin as early as 5 months of age. Separation anxiety usually peaks between 10 and 18 months and fades by the age of 2 years. This anxiety may become greater at any age or may return in an older child when there is a change in environment or when other changes occur, such as the birth of a new baby in the family.
-  **You can help make partings easier for your child.**
 - Read a children's book about separation.
 - Stay with her until she becomes familiar with a new place or person.
 - Tell her calmly you know she doesn't want you to leave. Reassure her you will be back.
 - Tell her Mommy or Daddy will be back after naptime or at dinnertime, even if she can't tell time. Be sure to keep your word.
 - Let her have her favorite blanket or other "lovey" for comfort. Some children like one of Mom's sweaters or another familiar possession they can keep until you return.
 - Avoid leaving your child when she is hungry, tired, or sick.
 - Never tease or scold her for her upset feelings or sneak away without telling her at all.
 - Don't bribe her not to cry.
-  **Your stress level can contribute to separation anxiety.** Your anxiety about child care arrangements or guilt about leaving may add to your child's distress. Be sure to make arrangements for child care that you feel confident about. And remember, some time spent apart can be good for you both.
-  **Sometimes, it may be more than separation anxiety.** Consider other possible sources of stress in your child's life or consider an alternative child care arrangement for
 - a child who continues to be inconsolable in a new child care or other setting for more than two weeks, or
 - a child who stops eating or sleeping well, refuses to interact with others, and has an ongoing change in behavior.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



Children's Research Center
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
51 Gerty Dr. • Champaign, IL 61820-7469
Telephone: 217-333-1386
Toll-free: 877-275-3227
E-mail: iel@illinois.edu
<https://illinoisearlylearning.org>



Illinois
State Board of
Education