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Separation Anxiety

Parents' Awareness Series



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What is Separation Anxiety?

Separation Anxiety is one of the most common developmental (age-appropriate) issues encountered by children. Teary and tantrum-filled goodbyes are common occurrences in child's earlier years. Many children around their first birthdays experience **Separation Anxiety**- they get upset, when they do not see their parents or primary caregivers around.

When do children experience these symptoms?

Generally babies up to the age of 6 months go well with people other than their parents or primary caregivers. Between the ages of 7 months to 1 1/2 years, they start having **Separation Anxiety** when they do not see their parents around or when they are left to be with other people even for a small period of time.

Many children experience these symptoms late, between the ages of 18 months to 2 1/2 years. Most of the children grow comfortably out of it in their preschool years, yet some may experience it even in their elementary school years or even sometimes in their adolescence and adulthood.

What do children with Separation Anxiety feel and how do they behave?

They feel that their parents or primary caregivers may not come back after leaving them alone. Some may feel that something bad may happen to their parents.

As they do not have the concept of time when Separation Anxiety sets in, they cannot comprehend that their parents will return back after some period in future.

Children may exhibit behaviors like:

Crying or whining

Some may throw tantrums

Some may become silent and not interact with others even though they are with familiar people

Children also exhibit physical symptoms like vomiting or pain

Some resist the attention of others and may cling or tightly hold their parents and refuse to get down

Earlier, my baby was mixing well and staying with others without any problem. Why is she not able to handle separation now?

As mentioned earlier, babies up to the age of 6 months go comfortably with other people including strangers.

However, at this age, they start developing a concept called '**Object Permanence**'. Now they start to understand that an object or a person exists even when they cannot see them. This understanding brings with it an apprehension that the parent not seen currently may not return in future.

If this stage is handled well by parents, most of the kids grow comfortably out of it with an adaptive learning to remain alone. However, it depends on a child and how parents respond to her feelings and behaviors.

What are the triggers for Separation Anxiety?

Although initially this is a common occurrence, there are times when this issue may increase or reappear if it had disappeared before.

Events triggering Separation Anxiety in children

Joining a preschool
Shifting to a new preschool
A new child care situation- change of a caregiver
Arrival of a sibling
Moving to a new house
Physical illness
Tension at home

Is there anything wrong with us that our child shows these symptoms?

As mentioned earlier, this is a normal developmental issue experienced by almost all children. One way to think about it is that if a child experiences Separation Anxiety, an emotional bonding has been well established between parents and the child!

However, it is very important to address this phase of child's life with a healthy and adaptive way of dealing with the issue. Depending upon the child's temperament and parents' responses to her feelings and behaviors, this may last long in some cases and continue even in adolescence and adulthood.

What can help us manage this issue well?

Helping our child learn to remain separate for a small period of time:

Arrange small time packets when you are in the house and letting the child play and interact with others.

Reading books specifically designed to help child learn about separation and its associated feelings.

This makes the ground preparation for the kid and helps him relate to the character in the story.

Timing of separation

Initially, when the child is learning to become comfortable alone, arrange the separation

event after a meal or a nap time. This is because children are more susceptible to separation anxiety when they are tired or hungry.

Get educated and clear about the issue

Make yourself clear about the situation at hand. Remind yourself that it is normal for my kid to feel this way and show these behaviors.

Good-bye

Say 'Good bye' in a loving yet firm tone when you are actually leaving you. Keep your goodbyes short and reassuring.

Avoid doing followings:

Do not threaten the child or give inappropriate bribe for remaining separate.

Do not compare your child with other kids and make him feel worse.

Do not talk with him or others at inappropriate time or continuously about the his difficulty of remaining alone.

Avoid talking at length about your reasons to leave him alone.

There is no need either for you or your kid to feel ashamed or guilty about this phase.

When do we really need the professional help?

When you have worked enough in helping you and your kid find a normal developmental way out and still things do not seem to get better
(Attend to your intuitions: can you handle it alone or need help)

When it continues beyond its usual time phase

When a child exhibits symptoms of impaired sleep and food intake or other behavioral disturbances

FINAL MESSAGE:

Keep patience and keep going.

Remain open to learn and find help. Be flexible and make necessary changes as needed in the way you interact with your kids.

Parenting is a skill to be developed; not a knowledge to be gathered!

