

# Separation Anxiety

At birth, infants have no concept of their caregivers as separate from themselves and the old phrase, "out of sight, out of mind" applies to very young infants. At around six to eight months, infants begin to understand that parents and caregivers are separate, and by about nine months, the infant can call up a remembered mental image of the parent when they are not present and realize that the parent is GONE! And they have no way of understanding whether or when the parent will return. This experience makes many infants and young children anxious. This can happen even when a parent puts an infant to bed at night and is in the next room. This is the beginning of that period of infant development marked by "separation anxiety" (SA). It can be a challenging time but remember that it is a sign of big developmental gains for the infant!

Starting child care and separating from a primary caregiver are stressful experiences and commonly cause SA in young children. Nearly all children, even those reared at home, will experience some developmentally appropriate anxiety when separated from their primary caregivers, usually between six and 20 months, and peaking at 13 to 18 months. How a child expresses his anxiety will depend on the child's personality, previous experiences with separation and the response of the adults in the child's environment. Common ways of showing anxiety over separation are crying, "clinging", and tantrums.

## When to get help?

Children are identified as having Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD), a much less common mental health condition, when they experience developmentally *inappropriate* distress, or excessive anxiety around separation, for at least four weeks. Intervention is



necessary for these children, because treatments are often very effective and will spare them a great deal of distress as they grow. Anxiety disorders are commonly overlooked in children. 8 to 12% of children suffer from anxiety severe enough to interfere with daily functioning: anxiety can also lead to other mental health problems. ECE settings can provide a valuable point of access to mental health services for children who need them and might not otherwise receive them.

## What are signs of SAD?

The first sign of SAD is usually when the child refuses to go to child care. The child may do this verbally or indirectly by complaining of headaches or stomachaches, by having a temper tantrum in the morning while getting ready or clinging excessively when a parent attempts to leave him at daycare. The child with SAD does not have a specific fear, but a more general concern about separation from the primary caregiver, and the anxious behavior

occurs in any setting in which the child is separated from the caregiver.

## To Help the Infant or Toddler Who is Experiencing SA, and to Prevent SAD in the Child Care Setting

### Encourage parents to:

- Accompany the child for a visit before he actually starts, or for a phase-in period during which parent and child visit the program together over several days before the parent actually goes back to work
- Stay with the child for a *short* period of time when dropping the child off
- Drop the child off when she is not tired or hungry, tell the child when you will return and have a loving, brief and firm goodbye ritual
- Never “sneak out” without saying goodbye; this undermines the child’s trust and the child will always be fearful that the parent will “slip away” when they aren’t looking
- Resist the temptation to come back to check on their child once they leave
- Avoid sharing their own anxiety over separation with their child—it will only confirm what the child already fears
- Learn the names of the caregivers and other children and what the routine is so they can talk to the child about the new people in her life and what she can expect when she goes to her child care setting
- Offer the child a “transitional object”: a photograph, blanket or cuddly toy that stands in for the parent while s/he is away, reminding the child that she is loved and the parent will return
- Pay attention to and acknowledge their own feelings about leaving their child; this helps to process those feelings

### The ECE professional can help ease separation anxiety and prevent SAD by:

- Playing separation and return games like peek-a-boo and “where’s the baby?” with infants and toddlers

- Offering comfort during the day and praise participation in activities
- Identifying the child’s interests and involving him in them when he arrives
- Avoiding moving quickly or touching the child unless you are sure the child wants to be touched
- “Parallel playing” next to the child, letting him direct any interaction between the two of you
- Pairing the child with a “buddy” who can help the child learn new routines and explain the physical environment
- Saying in words what you think the child is feeling, particularly if she is sad or crying; reassure her that her parent(s) will return and give a specific time
- Reading books like *Are You My Mother?* by P.D. Eastman, *The Good-Bye Book* by Judith Viorst, *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn, *Benjamin Comes Back* by Amy Brandt, *Owl Babies* by Martin Waddell
- Repeating familiar nap or mealtime routines from home

If the child’s anxiety worsens, despite the above interventions, lasts for more than four weeks and she is unable to do anything without her parent or primary caregiver by her side; or if she’s inconsolable even after her parent has been gone from her presence for a long time, talk with the family about professional intervention.

### References and Resources

KidsHealth, "Separation Anxiety", <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/sep-anxiety.html>

Hewitt, D. (1995) So this is normal too? Teachers and parents working out developmental issues in young children. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.