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Soothing Your Child's Separation Anxiety

The “clingy” infant arrives around 10 months of age, and parents know when they see it. Suddenly, leaving the child’s line of sight causes the little one great distress—thanks in part to the child’s undeveloped sense of time and lack of experience with a parent’s absence.

Fortunately, separation anxiety passes with time. It’s a normal stage of development for most children, usually ending by the last half of the second year. As the toddler learns that Mommy and Daddy keep coming back after they leave, the fear subsides and the child’s confidence builds. It’s getting from here to there that can make for some trying moments, and often some tender ones, as well.

This fear in the child is called separation anxiety, and it is a normal, healthy part of growing up. It usually peaks between 10 and 18 months, fading by the end of the second year. During this time, your child is learning that you won’t always be right there at her side. That can be a very painful lesson. But your child is also benefiting from these first steps of relative independence, and learning how to use the memory of routine to reassure herself emotionally.

For a parent, the emotions of dealing with your child’s separation anxiety can alternate between wonderful and difficult. That strong tug of feeling so intensely loved and needed by a child can be a powerfully affirming bond, but it can also start to feel suffocating and stir resentment or guilt within a parent for having to leave the child on occasion. Rest assured: This phase will pass.

Fortunately, there are effective ways to help parents and children manage this transition. A child’s strong, healthy attachment to a parent usually means the child will pass through this phase earlier and more quickly than she otherwise would. You can encourage this by showing as much warmth and good

humor as you can during this time, and keeping any resentment at bay. By demonstrating love and warmth, you’re preparing your child to express and return love, a strong foundation she’ll rely upon for years to come. Here are some additional suggestions for making this transition as smooth, brief, and positive as possible:

- Separation anxiety is more likely when your baby is tired, hungry, or sick. Try to schedule your outings for times after she’s eaten and napped. Also, try to stay by her side as much as possible when she’s sick.
- Try to create a diversion to distract your baby’s attention when you leave. Your babysitter can help with that by sharing a new toy, giving your baby a bath, or showing your child her reflection in the mirror, among other techniques. Then say goodbye and leave as quickly as possible.
- Many children will cry at your departure regardless of what you do because they want you to stay. Try to remember that those tears will usually vanish within minutes of your leaving, as your child’s attention turns to her caregiver.
- Practice “leaving” at home to help your child prepare for “real” absences. When your child initiates separation—perhaps by crawling to another (baby-proofed) room—don’t follow her immediately. Give it one or two minutes. When you leave a room your baby is in, let her know you’re leaving and that you’ll return shortly. If your baby fusses, call out to her instead of running back in. In this way, your baby will learn that these brief separations are no big deal because you always come back—just as you say you will.
- If you take your child to a sitter’s home or a child-care center, spend a few extra minutes there playing with your child in this new environment, rather than just promptly leaving. When you leave there, be sure to reassure her that you’ll be back later. ●