

# SEPARATION ANXIETY: THE GREAT CONTRADICTION

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*Parenthood is full of contradictions: we want to keep our children safe, yet we also want them to be adventurous and try new things; we want them to feel like the most important people on the planet, but we don't want them to become conceited or arrogant; and we want them to be independent but can't help feeling a little rejected when they don't need us anymore.*

*This last scenario can be summed up in two words: Separation anxiety.*

*But the real question is who suffers more? The parents or the children?*

*The clinical definition attributes the affliction to the child. It usually develops at around eight or nine months, but can appear as early as six months, and can last for up to three years old. What happens is that after babies have grasped the concept of object permanence (the idea that someone or something exists even when you cannot see them) at around four to seven months, they start attributing feelings to the "objects" they see most often. Their minds will start making the connections that those lovely people whose faces they see all day, every day are also the people who feed them, change them, bath them and make them giggle and smile.*

**I think I shall keep you and call you Mummy and Daddy.**

*Now that they've "found" you and decided they like having you around because you make them feel safe and happy, they're not going to like it when you disappear.*

*You must remember that to a baby disappearing could be as simple as you ducking behind the couch to play peek-a-boo. They have no idea when and if you will be back. So what does the baby do? It cries!*

*Our primary goal as parents is to make our children happy, and our job is figuring out how to do this. When we struggle to "fix" things and the crying doesn't stop, we feel like we are failing and our own anxiety rises. So we may feel like we, too, suffer from our child's separation anxiety. However, it's not as bad as it sounds, every child "suffers" from it and it CAN be managed. We automatically assume crying is a bad thing, but remember that crying is also one of a baby's only ways of communicating.*

**Separation anxiety is actually a GOOD thing**

*Separation anxiety is a very normal and important stage in your baby's development. Ironically, it's a stepping stone towards independence, because when a baby starts to understand that Mummy will come back, that's when they start to develop a sense of security and self-confidence.*

*So when a healthy baby:*

- Cries
  - Won't let you put them down/leave, or
  - Rejects people other than you
- they might be feeling some separation anxiety.*

## **How do I tell if there's a more serious issue?**

*When you feel your child may be “going through something”, it is always wise to rule out illness or an explainable trigger first. If there are signs your child may be sick, have their paediatrician or family GP examine them to rule out any medical issues. Also be aware of other changes in your child's life that may have triggered more extreme separation anxiety, such as:*

- *The arrival of a new sibling*
- *Stress from an older sibling*
- *Starting day care or meeting a new caregiver*
- *Separation from or loss of a loved one or special pet*
- *Tension in the home*
- *Potential bullying at school*

*These matters might require a little extra effort, reassurance and love to navigate. A counsellor might also be of help if you feel you need a little more guidance.*

*Once you have ruled out any underlying reasons for a change in your child's behaviour, you can face this new, and sometimes stressful, stage with more confidence.*

## **Be prepared**

*The first thing you can do to prepare your child for this phase is setting up a routine that works for you and your family. Babies learn through repetition and this builds a sense of confidence needed to navigate through unsettled periods such as separation anxiety.*

*A good bedtime routine is key as so much of a baby's development circles around their sleep habits.*

*During the day, you can prepare your baby for this phase by playing games such as peek-a-boo or hiding a toy under a cloth and then pulling the cloth away to reveal the hidden treasure (TA-DA!). This is a fun and happy way to introduce the baby to the concept that things don't disappear when they cannot be seen.*

## **Time to leave**

*So now you have to pop to the grocery store and you are leaving baby with Nana. What do you do?*

*To avoid the tears and screaming, it would seem easiest to wait for baby to be playing happily with Nana and slip out the door when he/she is distracted, right?*

*No.*

*Remember, you are trying to build self-confidence and your baby needs to trust you and learn that Mummy will be coming back.*

*It is better to create a routine of loving and quick goodbyes and joyful reunions. Yes, the baby might cry when you leave, but will soon learn through your routine that Mummy will return, and it will be wonderful when she does.*

**\*TIP:** Try not to use negative language when saying goodbye. Saying things like: “I’m sorry Mummy has to go, I know you are sad. Mummy is also sad to leave her baby,” reinforces the idea that leaving is a bad thing to be feared. Rather keep it upbeat and focus on the positive by rather saying: “Mummy is quickly popping out, I will be back soon for a big cuddle.”

Even though an infant cannot understand your words, it is important to start a positive goodbye routine from the get-go. Always let a baby know when you are leaving, that way they can start looking forward to your return.

As a child starts to develop language skills they may start asking questions about your return. The best thing to do is to always tell the child where you are going and when you will be coming back. Young children don’t understand time, so try using time references they will understand, like: “Mummy will be back before dinner time” or “Mummy will be back after your nap”.

A transitional object such as a favourite teddy bear or blankie will also provide extra comfort at this point.

### **Now I feel I may have separation anxiety**

Your child has successfully run the gauntlet of separation anxiety. He/she feels safe and secure in the knowledge that Mummy and Daddy will always be there for them even when they cannot see them. Now they are ready to get out there and explore the world with a sense of self-confidence and independence.

This is where the parenting contradictions I mentioned earlier rear up. Now you may be feeling a little rejected or may struggle with the feeling of not being needed as much. Or you may fear what may happen if you are not there to watch your baby every second.

Reassure yourself by setting up an environment in which you know your baby can play/explore safely. Check up on them every now and again. If your child has started at day care, make sure you have done your research and chosen a facility where you feel comfortable to leave your child. Your goodbye routine will be reassuring for both you and your child in the first few harrowing days/weeks.

Remember, it is just as important to look after yourself so that you can be at your best to be there for your children. Seek help from friends, family or a professional when you feel you need it. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness or failure; in fact it is exactly the opposite.

### **Don’t be anxious**

There is no need to fear separation anxiety. It is a vital part of your baby’s development and sets them up for a life of happy, healthy independence.

You are bringing up a normal, well-adjusted child. **CONGRATULATIONS!**

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