

Separation Anxiety in babies and toddlers
By Natalie Ebrill

Separation anxiety is a normal phase in your child's life when they become upset or anxious if their main carers leave their side or separate from them. On average it usually starts around 7 months and lasts until around 17 months, sometimes it can last longer. With safe, loving parenting and close relationships children usually grow out of it unless they experience a traumatic event in their life as a young child.

From birth babies form special bonds with their main carers and begin to understand who the familiar faces are in their life. Once your baby is old enough to realize who the special people are they begin to react to strangers, even friendly ones. When separation anxiety starts baby begins to whinge and cry when their main carers, usually mum and/or dad leave their side. During this phase baby may even react to familiar faces such as grandparents, extended family, regular babysitters or childcare staff. Simple events like moving from one room to another in the house or putting your child to bed can cause anxiety for your baby and constant stress for you the parents.

Remember children have no concept of time or what day it is, so if you have just started back at work it is normal for them to wake at night or from a sleep upset and checking to see if you are still there. They may also start to demand that only one parent puts them to bed or performs certain tasks. If it is practical for you and keeps the peace during this phase do what works for your family. If you feel overwhelmed with being the main caregiver all the time, persist with your partner doing things for the child as well as yourself. For example; alternate the nights you put the child to bed to create a clear and predictable routine, especially if you have more than one child deserving your attention.

The simplest way to manage separation anxiety is to offer your child as much attachment and loving parenting as you can manage in each day and respond quickly when they are upset. It is a phase and it should pass with time, love and patience.

Try these suggestions:

Be honest with your child when leaving them and say goodbye, don't sneak away. Saying goodbye will encourage trust and they will begin to learn that you do come back.

Involve your partner in some games when all together to help your child adjust.

1. Peek a boo. This basic game teaches your baby that you disappear and reappear.
2. Set up playtime with your baby or toddler and partner in the lounge room together and then announce that you are leaving but "coming back". Initially just go out of sight and call out to your child so they hear your voice while your partner attempts to soothe and distract them until they are calm. Once your child is calm again return to the room saying "I'm back!"

If your child is getting upset at bedtime or waking more frequently overnight offer extra cuddles and reassurance as needed until they settle for sleep again. (In this age group check for teething and earaches as well)

Be sensitive to your child's anxiety when meeting new people or in new situations. Look for signs of distress and try and prevent your baby being passed around or taken from

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you for cuddles if this upsets them. Don't push your toddler to go play with the other children.

Have some cues for work days and stay at home days. Tell your child at the beginning of the day who they will be with that day. Your toddler will really appreciate this and your baby will soon learn the names before they can say them and then be able to anticipate the day ahead.

Say goodbye and then leave quickly if you need to leave your child with a carer and they are upset. You can ring and check on them after a while to reassure yourself that they are ok.

If starting a new babysitter invite them over to play at your home with your child and yourself a few times before leaving them alone the first time. This will allow some time for your child to become familiar with the new babysitter and at least know their face if they are upset while you are gone. If your child is too distressed at bedtime at night but is a sound sleeper once asleep, put them to bed before you go out. If they are a light sleeper have the babysitter come over before bedtime so your child knows they are there in case they wake. You deserve a break and some quality time with your partner, months and months of a clingy child can be very draining. It won't last forever.

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