

# Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is a normal part of childhood development, and typically begins around one year of age when infants start to exhibit “stranger anxiety”. The most common signs of separation anxiety include crying, protesting, or tantrums when separating from parents or other caregivers. As they grow, the majority of children are able to overcome this separation anxiety and acclimate to situations without their caregivers present. However, some children have continuing difficulty with separation fears which may reach the levels of a separation anxiety disorder.

## What are the symptoms of separation anxiety?

- **Worries about harm.** Concerns about something bad happening to them or their parents or other caregivers (e.g., getting kidnapped, getting lost, getting into an accident) are common. Younger children may have difficulty identifying a specific worry, but may be able to identify a general “bad” feeling.
- **Distress upon separation.** Significant distress through crying, pleading, tantrums, clinging, or reassurance-seeking behaviors upon separation (or when separation is anticipated).
- **Fears of being alone.** Common feared situations include going to school, the caregiver leaving the house (work, errands), sleepovers, or even being in separate rooms.
- **Nightmares related to separation.** Nightmares about separating from their caregivers (either about the actual act of separating or harm occurring due to separation).
- **Physical complaints.** Frequent complaints of stomachaches, headaches, or nausea upon separation from caregivers (or when separation is anticipated).

## When does separation anxiety become problematic?

*Separation anxiety is the most common anxiety disorder in children under 12 years of age, affecting up to 5% of youth.*

**Persistence:** The separation anxiety lasts for more than 4 weeks, consistently occurs during most situations involving separation, and does not get better despite repetitions (e.g., daily school drop-offs)

**Distress:** The child demonstrates significant anxiety upon separation (or anticipation of separation) and is showing outward signs of distress (crying, clinging, tantrums, physical complaints).

**Impairment:** The child’s separation fears interfere with school attendance and achievement, parent or caregiver work schedules and performance, or impacts family relationships and functioning (e.g., increased conflicts, frequent reassurance-seeking questions, disrupting sleeping arrangements).

## How is separation anxiety treated?

Separation anxiety disorder is best treated with cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). A therapist targets the situations that cause separation anxiety and helps the child develop skills to manage their worries. A detailed list of situations where the child has trouble separating is created, and the situations are addressed in order of increasing difficulty. Over time, the child builds self-efficacy as they face these situations and learn that the feared outcome is not likely to happen. The ultimate goal of treatment is to provide the child practical skills to manage their anxiety, decrease safety behaviors (avoidance, reassurance-seeking), and have the child resume age-appropriate activities (school, sleepovers).