

Separation Anxiety in Children Going to School

Separation anxiety that presents itself in children going to school is a regular part of childhood development for many kids. However, it can be very distressing to both the child and the parents. Although it can be a very exciting time when a young child first enters school, it can also be very stressful and frightening for some children. A child who is extremely nervous about attending school for the first time may experience feelings of intense fear, which can then lead to panic and resistance.

What Is Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a common condition that occurs in many children during childhood. This condition typically first appears around the time of a child's first birthday. At this age, it is not uncommon for children to become visibly distraught when their parents attempt to leave them in the care of another person. Children will often fight the parent's attempts to leave, resulting in crying, yelling and even temper tantrums. This stage often resolves within a few months; however, it can often return when the child is first attending school.

How Does It Occur?

For many children entering the school-age years, it is the first time they will be away from home for an extended period of time on a daily basis. Being forced to spend their day in a new environment outside of the comfort of their home can often lead to feelings of fear, anxiousness, nervousness and panic. If these feelings become intense enough, it can lead to the development of avoidance behaviors such as excessive clinginess, crying, yelling and even temper tantrums.

Even children who are accustomed to spending time outside of the home daily, such as those who attended daycare, may experience separation anxiety when they start school. The change in the environment, a new routine, new faces and an unfamiliar setting can all contribute to the development of separation anxiety in school-aged children.

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What Symptoms Might Your Child Display?

In order for parents to be able to help their children work through separation anxiety, they must first be able to identify the condition. Once parents recognize the symptoms of separation anxiety, they can then start to develop strategies to counteract the condition and help their children work through it. Common physical symptoms of separation anxiety in school-aged children include:

Nausea
Vomiting
Shortness of breath
Panic attacks
Sweaty palms
Headache

Emotional symptoms of separation anxiety are often displayed as well. Many times, a child will complain of an illness close to the time when he or she has to leave to go to school. Complaints may be vague, such as a [sore throat](#), headache, upset stomach or not "feeling well." Children may display other emotional symptoms of separation anxiety, including:

Nightmares
Difficulty falling asleep (see [Managing Toddler Sleeping Problems](#))
Fear of sleeping alone at night
Fear of the dark
Fear of being alone
Excessive worrying about being lost
Fear of leaving their parents side any time they are outside of the home
Constant belief that something bad is going to happen to them
Displaying clingy behavior
Following parents all over the home

Many times, the symptoms of separation anxiety can be mistaken for other personality traits, such as rebellion, defiance, stubbornness or anger. It is important for parents of children who suffer from separation anxiety to understand that the underlying cause for these symptoms is [anxiety](#), fear and panic, and not the negative behavior traits listed above.

All of these symptoms are relatively common in school-aged children suffering from separation anxiety. For the majority of children, separation anxiety is a temporary condition that will go away once the child becomes more comfortable with the new school environment. Some children continue to experience separation anxiety for extended periods of time. When this happens, if the child is unable to advance past this developmental stage, parents may need to seek professional help.

If a child with persistent separation anxiety does not receive proper treatment, there are potential long-term effects, such as the development of panic and anxiety disorders as an adult. Additionally, problems with academic and social development can develop if the child's condition interferes with his schooling and social life.

Are There Specific Triggers?

Getting ready to leave for school often triggers the anxiety symptoms. The panic from separation anxiety generally will set in as the child is getting ready to leave for school. The anxiety is associated with the initial drop-off, which brings about the realization that the child is not going to be able to spend the day at home. Once that drop-off period has come and gone, the child generally will adapt very quickly in the classroom, and will remain calm throughout the rest of the school day.

Additional factors that can trigger separation anxiety include:

Stress

Illness

Birth of a new sibling

Living in a new home

Attending a new school

Tension at home

Lack of sleep

How It May Make You Feel

Most parents have a difficult time saying goodbye to their child when staring at his tearful eyes and hearing his excessive pleas. Parents may experience guilt over having to leave their child in this emotional state. Many parents also feel stressed and overwhelmed by the amount of effort they have to put in to bringing their child to school each day. Parents should take comfort in knowing that this is a normal part of a child's development and it will pass in time. It can also be helpful to focus on the fact that your child's unwillingness to leave you is an indication of a healthy bond between parent and child.

What You Can Do To Help

Sometimes, no matter what a parent does to prevent separation anxiety, the child will still experience it. In most cases, the child will just have to go through this stage of development. There are, however, some strategies that parents can use to ease their child's anxiety and make the transition to school easier. These strategies include:

Do not leave for school if your child is hungry, tired or restless. These factors can all intensify the anxiety. Make sure your child received an adequate amount of sleep and eats a healthy breakfast.

Make a few practice runs to the school a few weeks before the school year begins. Drive by the school often and explain to your child that is where he will be going when school starts. For these practice runs, wake your child up, have him get dressed and follow the exact school day routine you would follow on an actual school day.

Attend any open house or meet the teacher nights that are offered by the school. Let your child see his desk, explore the classroom and spend some time getting acquainted with his new classmates and his teacher.

Remain calm and be consistent with your drop-off routine. Say goodbye in a loving yet firm manner. Remain calm and do not become emotional. Reassure your child that he will be fine and that you will be there to get him when the school day is over.

Take your child shopping to pick out a new backpack and lunchbox. Get him excited about going to school.

When Professional Help May Be Necessary

The majority of children with separation anxiety will progress out of the phase without the need for any professional assistance. If separation anxiety persists for an extended period of time and the child does not seem to be making a healthy transition into the classroom, parents should seek assistance from a physician or a qualified mental health professional. If a child refuses to go to school, especially if the child is over the age of 12, there may be other issues that the parents are unaware of. In such cases, professional help or more intensive treatment may be necessary.

Considerations

Although it is important for parents to remember that separation anxiety is usually a temporary condition, they must also pay attention to their child's complaints and pay attention to their own intuition. If a child becomes noticeably upset about one particular caregiver, teacher or classmate, or exhibits signs of distress regarding certain individuals at school, there may be something else going on. Be sure to speak with your child and find out exactly what his complaints are, then address those complaints with the teacher or caregiver.

Sources:

KidsHealth.org

[American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](http://AmericanAcademyofChildandAdolescentPsychiatry.org)

Original article written by **Delialah Falcon**:

<http://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/story/23268882/separation-anxiety-in-children-going-to-school>