

A. The transition of going back to school can be a challenging adjustment for everyone. Children of all ages experience different levels of anxiety on the first day of school. Some may experience severe separation anxiety or school avoidance. While separation anxiety is normal, knowing when your child is experiencing anxiety that may require intervention will allow you to get them additional help if necessary.

Understanding typical separation anxiety in developmental stages may help you in gauging whether or not your child is experiencing anxiety that may require seeking help.

Between 4 and 7 months of age babies develop object permanence. This is when they begin to realize that they are not a “part of” their mother. Additionally, they are beginning to understand the concept that things and objects exist even though they may be out of sight. As children make this connection, they also understand that when you (their parent) leave their sight, that you are gone. This results in your child attempting to keep you from leaving.

Separation anxiety can begin anytime between 8 months and 3 years of age, but it is different for every child. It typically tends to heighten around 18 months. Some children will continue to experience varying degrees of separation anxiety throughout their elementary years and maybe into young adulthood. Separation anxiety can be distinguished from a more serious anxiety disorder or indicator of a bigger issue in that it subsides shortly after a parent leaves. It is not uncommon for a younger child to cling to his parent when he knows she is about to leave and then start crying as soon as she returns, leaving the impression that he has been crying the entire time she was away. This, too, is a normal reaction.

Your reaction to your child's anxiety around separation is critical in how he will then respond. Here are some helpful tips on separating with your child:

DO:

- Prepare your child for the first day of school/event where she will be separated from you by using a calendar as a visual. Color the first day of school a different color and have her mark every day off the calendar until the big day.
- Prepare your child for the process of separation so she knows what to expect. For example: “We are going to get to your school and I am going to walk you into the classroom, help you get seated, give you a kiss and a hug, and say good-

Q: My 6-year-old son has always been an anxious child. As a toddler he would get so upset when I left him with anyone else that he would make himself sick. Over the past few months he has become increasingly anxious when he is away from me or is anticipating being away from me. I am very concerned about him with the onset of school approaching.

Help!

bye.”

- Communicate empathy of the fears and/or anxiety she may be expressing, either verbally or non-verbally by reflecting. For example: “I know the first day of school can feel a little scary,” or “You look like you are feeling nervous about going to school today.”

- Follow it up with encouragement. For example: “You are going to make lots of new friends and learn so many fun things.”
- Reassure your children that you will be back to pick them up or be there to meet the bus at the end of the day.

- Make your good-bye short and sweet. When it's time to go, do it quickly, even if your child is crying – he WILL stop. Trust that his teacher/caregiver will care for him.

- Leave the room with an air of confidence and a smile on your face (regardless of how you are REALLY feeling about leaving him) so that you communicate verbally and non-verbally that he is going to have a great day.
- Understand that this is a normal developmental stage.
- Celebrate your child's first day of school/return from the event for which you were separated when you pick them up!
- Give your child a transitional object such as a picture of you or a rock that she can keep in her pocket that reminds her of you.
- Assure him that you will come back ... that you always come back.
- Talk about some concrete things you will do after you pick him up. For example: “You and I will go to the library when I pick you up.”

DON'T:

- Leave your child unprepared for what is to come and what to expect.
- Linger and draw out the good-bye, even if your child gets upset.
- Devalue your child's feelings by saying or implying, “There's nothing to be afraid of.”
- Stay longer if your child gets upset – this reinforces the behavior.
- Get upset when saying good-bye to your child ... wait until AFTER you leave the room.
- Get angry with your child for having a hard time separating from you.
- Make a big deal about separating from your child or “over-talk” it.

Separation anxiety is something that can come and go through different developmental stages. During pre-adolescence, when children are beginning to find their independence but still seek the security of their attachment with their parents, separation anxiety can resurface. If your child is not able to overcome his feelings of anxiety and it begins to impede his daily functioning, or if he exhibits excessive resistance to going to school, it may be indicative of a separation anxiety disorder. A mental health provider (counselor, psychologist, psychiatrist) can assess and diagnose separation anxiety disorder.

If your children experience the following symptoms, it may be wise to have them assessed:

- Continuing anxiety or distress about leaving home, being away from a parent (or primary caregiver), and/or the anticipation of these kinds of separation.
- Ongoing anxiety or worry about losing a parent (or other caregiver) or about their parent/caregiver being harmed.
- Unending anxiety or worry that the child will be separated abruptly from her parent/caregiver, such as being kidnapped or getting lost.
- Resistance to attending school or otherwise leaving home or the parent/caregiver.
- Fear about or resistance to being home alone or even in other settings without the parent or an adult present.
- Refusal to go to sleep without the parent/caregiver nearby

and/or anxiety about sleeping away from home.

- Ongoing frequent nightmares about separation and related anxieties.
- Persistent physical symptoms when there is separation or anticipated separation, including dizziness, headaches, nausea, or palpitations.

To be considered a separation anxiety disorder, the following criteria must also be met:

- Symptoms should last for at least four weeks.
- Symptoms should begin when the child is younger than 18 years old.
- The symptoms cause significant distress in the child and/or the symptoms interfere with social and/or academic functioning.
- These symptoms are not resulting from another anxiety or psychiatric disorder.

A family history of anxiety may play a part, as well. Anxiety disorders can often be treated with therapy and, in some instances, medication may be necessary. If your child begins to improve on his own over time, intervention is likely unnecessary. ●

Leslie Petruk, MA, LPC, NCC, is the director of SteppingStones Counseling & Consulting of Charlotte (www.steppingstones-nc.com) and a mother of three.

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