

# SEPARATION ANXIETY

A stage in baby's development that every mum encounters within the first year. Director of Alpha Counselling, Joanie Reilly, gives us the reasons a baby feels anxious at being separated from its parents and what can be done to help this difficult transition.





I smile remembering when my little twin nephews came to stay overnight while their parents had a break. As they were being handed over, their parents taught us the little jingly rhyme, "Down at the railroad...", that they used to sing to their boys from a very early age. As the twins lived far away, they did not know us very well, and it was a big thing for them to suddenly be separated from daddy and mummy. Even though we supplied a constant flow of attention, every so often a little lip would begin to quiver. Within seconds, someone would burst into "Down at the railroad....." and everyone else would join in. The two little faces would look at us with astonishment and we would keep it up until smiles began to appear. We sang that rhyme till we were hoarse, but we never saw a tear. At that time, we did not know the words 'separation anxiety', but we had found a wonderful, though exhausting, cure!

In the womb, the developing baby is building not just physical, but strong emotional bonding to mummy, and even with daddy. When a little infant is born it is already familiar with its mother's smell, and all the varied sounds of her voice and laughter. Today, hospitals place a newly born infant on the mother's chest so that the now separated baby can connect immediately with the familiar smell of her skin and sound of her heartbeat.

### OUR MOST BASIC NEED AS HUMANS IS THE NEED FOR LOVE AND BELONGING

One of our deepest primal fears as humans is the terror of being abandoned or left alone – of being 'separated'. Our most basic need as humans is the need for love and belonging. A little helpless new born is totally dependent on the care of others, particularly its mother. In the early months, the young mother spends hours holding her baby close to her body, feeding him, stroking his face and body and speaking in loving tones. This gazing is building the early seeds of healthy self esteem and helping her child internalise a sense of belonging and safety.

Just as connectedness is our most basic need, isolation is our most damaging state. A crying baby is speaking. It is his only way of calling for help. If nobody comes, he eventually moves into 'separation anxiety', the terror that he is all alone. Since a young baby has no concept or experience of time, he has not yet gained the inner assurance that his needs will be met. Leaving a young baby to cry and cry

without any human intervention is very damaging. You cannot 'spoil' a young baby with too much attention. He has too many needs.

**ALWAYS KISS YOUR CHILD AND WAVE BYE-BYE WHEN YOU LEAVE. NEVER TRY TO SNEAK OUT WHEN HE IS OTHERWISE ENGAGED. THIS CAN ACTUALLY CREATE SEPARATION ANXIETY.**

### HELP BABY DEVELOP A SENSE OF BELONGING AND SAFETY

The entire first year of life is ideally built around helping baby take in this sense of belonging and safety, and from there they can move out and explore the world. Between six and nine months babies start to realise that when they can't see you, you have gone. You may only be in the next room, but for them you have disappeared and they begin to panic. This fear of being abandoned is what is called 'separation anxiety'. This time can sometimes feel almost claustrophobic to the mummy. The baby may also develop a fear of strangers, which also does not make it easy to leave the child with someone else. Although it's frustrating and you may feel trapped, try not to get angry or impatient. Around their first birthday it usually improves.

### HOW CAN I PREPARE MY BABY FOR SEPARATIONS?

Practice at home:

- Playing 'peek-a-boo' with a young baby helps them realise mummy disappears but she comes back again.
- Let your baby initiate separation. Let them crawl off down the hall or into another room and wait a few moments before going after them.
- Develop goodbye/comeback rituals with your baby. Show your baby the meaning of goodbye. Wave 'bye bye' to your baby when you leave the room, and come back quickly and comfort them if they get upset. Babies understand language very early. Use the same expressions again and again, 'I'm going, but I will come back.' Eventually, they will learn that everything will be okay when you're gone for a minute or two and that you'll always come back.

- Leave your baby with a relative or someone they know well for 15-minute periods. Then stretch it to an hour. Your baby will learn that when you leave you come back, without the added stress of being with someone unfamiliar.

### TIPS FOR LEAVING YOUR BABY WITH A BABY SITTER OR CRÈCHE

- When you hire a baby sitter, ask them to visit and play with your baby several times before leaving them for the first time. On your first outing, ask them to come half an hour earlier so that they and your baby can be well engaged before you leave.
- Gradually leave. Get your child engrossed in an activity or toy with their carer and gradually recede. Then give them a quick kiss and say bye bye.
- Always kiss your child and wave bye-bye when you leave. Never try to sneak out when he is otherwise engaged. This can actually create separation anxiety. If your child thinks that you might disappear without any notice, he's not going to let you out of his sight.
- Avoid a dramatic farewell. Keep smiling and waving happily as you walk away – even if he is hysterical and you feel like crying yourself.
- Once you leave, leave. Do not go back into the house or crèche to calm your child. It only makes it harder on everyone. Your baby will most likely be distracted and happy again by the time you are out of the driveway.

No parent likes to see their child distressed or to feel unnecessary sadness, but coping with separation is one of the many challenges your child will have to learn to manage. Donald Freidheim, director of the Schubert Centre, Ohio, says, "Learning to cope is an important developmental task. Your child has to learn that there are times when he's going to be unhappy". When you have done everything you can to make separation transitions as easy as possible, it is okay to let him cry for a while. In a calm, positive, matter of fact voice, reassure him that he's okay and then leave – without feeling guilty.

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