

## **Separation Anxiety in Children**

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Ten-year-old Paul has a stomach ache and asks to stay home from school. When he is at school he asks his teacher repeatedly to call home for his mother to pick him up early because he is not well. He worries that his mother might get kidnapped or hurt. Fourteen-year-old Samantha frequently stays home from school after her parents leave for work. She tells them that it is a “rough school” and “too dangerous”. Some might say these students are showing “school phobia” while in fact; their avoidance of school is their attempt to reunite with the parent or caregiver. Their recurring symptoms are signs of separation anxiety.

Separation anxiety begins before age 18. It causes significant distress or interference with children’s functioning at school, socially, and in other important areas of their lives. Developmentally, separation fears are normal in infants and toddlers. It is not uncommon for four-year-olds to cling to their parent or cry on the first day of Junior Kindergarten. But, by school age, children usually overcome their fears of separation.

By middle childhood, expect your child to be able to go to school without a fuss. He or she should be able to remain at school or with a caregiver without making non-emergency calls to a parent. Your child should have no problems returning to school in September or after a holiday, despite their anticipation or excitement or disappointment or concern.

Adolescents will deny feeling anxious about separation. However, reluctance to leave home and avoidance of independent activities, particularly school, could indicate separation anxiety. An adolescent showing separation anxiety will need therapy.

Children at any age, who believe that their parent might come to harm or leave them, could develop separation anxiety. Their worries can become overwhelming when a parent is ill with a life-limiting illness, or when parents are separating, or when one parent has died. Where it is realistic, reassure your child about their continuing contact with you, or alternate arrangements in your absence.

If your child is showing signs of separation anxiety, consider whether their fear is more severe than the situation would warrant. If so, you need to take action:

- Keep to a consistent morning routine.
- Get advice from your family physician on symptoms of illness that require staying at home; otherwise, send the child to school.

- If you are fearful about your child being separated from you, seek professional advice on ways to keep your child safe while allowing them age-appropriate independence.
- Advise the child's teacher of the problem and enlist his or her help with the daily transition into school.
- Keep in regular contact with the child's teacher to monitor her progress at school.

Teachers can help too:

- Provide consistent arrival routines in the classroom.
- Provide incentives for arriving on time and for good attendance, like rewards or special responsibilities for "early birds".
- Establish clear rules about phoning home only in emergencies.
- Maintain a positive focus with the child, and praise them for their progress.
- Pair the child with a classmate buddy to meet him in the playground and come into class together.
- Document the fearful behaviours and their frequency for discussion with the parents.

**Cognitive behavior therapy** is an effective treatment for separation anxiety. This work engages the child in discussions about their specific fears and beliefs. It helps the child to tell when a fear not so scary after all, and how to cope when it is scary. The therapy is geared to the child's developmental.

**Psychologists** are regulated health care professionals who treat separation anxiety, often using cognitive behavior therapy. Psychologists in private practice receive referrals directly from parents. They can provide valuable treatment to children and advice to parents and teachers.