



Early Learning Digest

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Helping Babies Deal with Stranger Anxiety

Stranger anxiety is the distress that young children experience when they are exposed to people who are unfamiliar to them. Infants can begin to experience stranger anxiety as young as six months of age, but it usually begins somewhere between eight and nine months of age and peaks between 12-15 months. They begin to show strong preferences for the people who care for them the most, usually parents.

Infants are beginning to realize that all people are not the same, and that the relationship they have with their primary caregivers is special. Stranger anxiety is a normal part of development and will occur in some form or another in most children. While most cases of stranger anxiety cannot be avoided, there are steps parents can take to minimize the upset that children feel.

Avoid pressuring. Allow children to become accustomed to new faces and new situations at their own pace.

Acknowledge your child's distress. The anxiety children feel when they are exposed to unfamiliar people is real. Say "You aren't sure about her, but she's mommy's friend."

Warn friends and relatives. Some people have their feelings hurt by your infant's rejection. Let them know that it is a normal stage of development.



Teach friends and family approach techniques. Give your child time and space to warm up to them. They can offer a favorite toy and wait for your child to accept it. Tell friends and relatives to use soft, calm voices and wait to approach.

Introduce new caretakers gradually. Invite new caretakers to play with your child while you are still present. If taking your child to a new child care location, visit a few times before leaving your child.

Provide reassurance. Offer lots of love and affection through words and gestures.

One of the best ways to avoid the development of extreme stranger anxiety is to introduce children to new people when they are very young. By demonstrating patience, kindness, and love, children will move through this phase of development with minimal distress.

Source: "Stranger Anxiety," by Kristin Zolten, M.A. & Nicholas Long, Ph.D. Department of Pediatrics, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Center for Effective Parenting, 2006.

Easing Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety varies widely between children. Many toddlers skip separation anxiety in infancy and start demonstrating it at 15 or 18 months of age. As children develop independence during toddlerhood, they may become even more aware of separations. Their behaviors at separations will be loud, tearful, and difficult to stop.

However, parents can survive separation anxiety by using tips to improve transitions.

Create quick good-bye rituals. Give triple kisses, provide a special blanket or toy, and keep it short and sweet. If you linger, the transition time does too, increasing the anxiety.

Be consistent. Try to do the same drop-off with the same ritual at the same time each day you separate to avoid unexpected factors whenever you can.

Give your child your full attention when separating. Be loving, provide affection, and then say good-bye quickly despite your child's cries for you to stay.

Keep your promise. You'll build trust and independence as your child becomes confident in her ability to be

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Coping with Preschoolers' Fears

Everyone, from youngest child to adult, experiences anxieties and fears at one time or another. With kids, such feelings are not only normal, they are also necessary. Dealing with anxieties prepares young children to handle the unsettling experiences and challenging situations of life.

Anxiety is defined as “apprehension without apparent cause.” For preschoolers, anxieties are often not based on reality. Examples are fears of monsters or ghosts, strangers, heights, darkness, animals, blood, or being left alone. Kids often learn to fear an object or situation after having an unpleasant experience, such as a dog bite or an accident.

Signs that a child may be anxious about something include becoming clingy, impulsive, or distracted, showing nervous movements such as temporary twitches, having problems getting to sleep or staying asleep longer than usual, sweaty hands, accelerated heart rate and breathing, nausea, headaches, and stomach-aches. Parents can help kids develop the skills and confidence to overcome fears and anxieties by keeping these tips in mind:

Recognize that the fear is real. Talk about the fear. Words often take some of the power out of the negative feeling. Avoid belittling the fear or forcing your child to overcome it.

Provide support and gentle care as you approach feared objects or situations, but do not cater to the fear by avoiding it. If your child doesn't like dogs and you cross the



street to deliberately avoid one, you are reinforcing that dogs should be feared and avoided.

Teach kids how to rate fear. Children, who can visualize the intensity of their fear, may be able to “see” the fear as less intense than first imagined. Use a rating scale of 1-10 or younger kids can think about how “full of fear” they are, with being full “up to my knees” as not so scared, “up to my stomach” as more frightened, and “up to my head” as truly petrified.

Teach coping strategies. Using you as “home base,” encourage your child to venture out toward the feared object, and then return to you for safety. Kids can learn positive self-statements, such as “I can do this,” to say to themselves when feeling anxious. Relaxation techniques are helpful, including visualization of floating on a cloud or lying on a beach, and deep breathing.

Source: “Anxieties, Fears, and Phobias,” by D’Arcy Lyness, Ph.D., The Nemours Foundation, July 2013, www.kidshealth.org.

Easing Separation Anxiety

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without you when you stick to your promise to return. As well-intended as it may be, avoid the temptation to do an unexpected visit during the day to see how your child is doing.

Be specific, “child style.” When you discuss your return, use language that your child understands. For example, “I’ll be back after nap time and before afternoon snack.” If you are gone overnight, talk about your absence in terms of sleeps. “I’ll be home after 3 sleeps.”

Practice being apart. Take your child to her grandparent’s, schedule play-dates, and allow friends and family to provide child care for you. This allows you a chance to practice your good-bye ritual.

It’s rare that separation anxiety persists on a daily basis after the preschool years. If you are concerned that your child isn’t adapting to being without you, discuss the situation with your pediatrician.

Source: “How to Ease Your Child’s Separation Anxiety,” by Wendy Sue Swanson, MD, MBE, FAAP, American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016, www.healthychildren.org.



If you have concerns about your child's growth and development, please talk to your child's health care provider or go to www.helpme-growmn.org