

# Separation Anxiety and Toddlers' Fears

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Many children first show fear around the age of 7- 8 months. The first reactions may be simple startle reactions to loud noises or sudden movements. But a major source of fear may be new people or new situations – this stranger fear is especially common from 8 – 14 months. But other kids go through it from 18 months – 3 years. Or they may experience it when a new stress appears: a move to a new home, a new baby in the house, starting pre-school or a visit to a grandparent's house. One common experience is separation anxiety when you leave them with another caregiver.

## Ways to reduce separation anxiety:

- Preparation and Practice
  - Meet the caregiver in advance, spend time together, demonstrate to your child that you are comfortable with this person.
  - Visit the environment in advance, get familiar with it. Try a few short stays on low stress days when you don't *need* to be away, so that the child is ready for a longer stay when you need them to be.
  - Prepare your child– talk about when/where you'll be going, and also talk about when you'll be back. Sometimes talking about this upsets your child, but better that than to be surprised to discover you gone. When talking about this, show confidence that they will handle it well.
  - Read books about parents going away and coming back.
- Comfort Items for when you're apart (at a babysitter's or with a babysitter at home)
  - Make sure your child has some familiar objects – favorite books, or toys, comfort foods
  - Consider a special activity for your child (e.g. blowing bubbles may be a guaranteed pleasure for your child whether or not you're there)
  - Give them part of you to hold on to – a picture or video of you, a love note from you, a recording of your voice that a caregiver can play if they're feeling lonely
- When the time comes to separate: Say goodbye briefly before leaving, be cheery and positive, demonstrating your confidence that they'll be fine while you're gone
  - Don't try to sneak out! Your child may cry when you leave, but will soon settle down. But if you sneak out, that's very distressing when your child notices you're gone.
  - Don't waffle about leaving. If you say you're leaving, then come back as soon as they look sad, then try to leave as soon as they seem settled, then return when they look sad – prolonging your departure like this will make it much harder!
- Ask your caregiver not to mention you unless the child brings you up. If the child asks they caregiver about you, they should calmly and simply explain where you are and when you'll be back, then encourage the child to play.
- Don't call to check in. Your child may be happily settled in, and a phone call may upset them.
- Be casual when you return: In the book Owl Babies, when the mother comes home, she says "What's all the fuss? You knew I'd come back." And the babies say "I knew it." If your child tells you (or shows you) that they were sad that you were gone, you can empathize with that, but also reinforce that they were safe and well cared for while you were gone, and you came back just as you had promised.

## **Tips for Handling Fears** (most from Becoming the Parent You Want to Be by Davis & Keyser.)

- Avoid situations you know will be scary to a child if they are not necessary situations. If you're not sure about a book, movie, or activity, check it out yourself in advance to see whether you think it will trouble your child.
- Some situations that might frighten your child are nevertheless necessary. (Like going to the dentist or getting a shot.) If you can't avoid a situation that you know may frighten your child, then discuss it with them in advance, letting them know what to expect, how you will be there to help them, and what fun thing you'll do together afterwards.
- Sometimes we just can't prepare when we stumble across something (for example, a Halloween mask in a store window). Sometimes, the thing that frightens a child is not something we had thought would frighten them. (Such as when a child who is normally comfortable around animals gets startled by a sudden movement.) If this happens, you just need to manage it in the moment.
- Respect the fear but don't reinforce it.
  - Don't dismiss or ridicule a fear.
- Don't give them the message that it's not OK for them to act scared around you. If you do, they will continue to have fears, but will be reluctant about sharing them with you, so you won't be able to support them in moving past the fear.
- Talk about the fear. Ask questions to better understand it. Provide information to help them calm their fears. Let them know that everyone gets scared sometimes, but as we learn more, we figure out how to manage our fears.
- Work together to make an action plan to conquer the fear. Don't just "rescue" the child... that teaches them that they're helpless. Instead, help them figure out steps *they* can take.
- Read books about fears. *Monster Bed* by Jeanne Willis is a great book on monsters under the bed. Ask your librarian or search online for more ideas.
- Work to eradicate a fear in small, easy steps. For example, if your child is frightened of dogs, try reading books and watching videos about dogs. Play with toy dogs. Meet a small, calm, friendly dog. Or go to a pet store that does day care where you can watch dogs through the window, but the dogs can't reach your child. Then gradually move up to meeting dogs out in public.