

Separation Anxiety

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Aims

- **Understanding separation anxiety**
 - A form of anxiety, rooted in **fear**
 - General managing anxiety strategies
- **Strategies for children**
 - Long term/General strategies
 - Specific strategies
 - Siblings
 - Transitions/change/times of difficulty
- **Strategies for parents**

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Learning to Manage Separation Anxiety

We want to be able to take the separation anxiety away quickly because we love our child and don't want to see them in distress.

When our children experience any form of anxiety, it gives us the opportunity to teach them how to manage when life is **hard**, when they face a **new change**, or when they need to **do something without us!**

We can show children that we can manage our tough feelings with **love, compassion and tenderness** for ourselves and others, and they can carry this with them for the rest of their lives.

Learning to manage anxiety and what is happening in our bodies when we are anxious is incredibly **empowering and resilience building** as many of us face inevitable anxiety in our lives.



The emotion driving anxiety is FEAR.

Fear may be present because of past difficult experiences, imagined consequences, low self esteem, low confidence.

When our brain perceives fear, it presumes we are in DANGER. The cave person part of our brain becomes activated and we go into survival mode.

Something to hold in mind...

Being truly empathic not only means relating to others, but to ourselves... the parts of ourselves which have really struggled with the pain of separation, loss or fears of belonging.

This can be really hard! (But, we need it!)



Separation Anxiety - a 'holistic' approach

The 'work' to ease separation anxiety is mostly **everywhere else**, not only in the moments of separation/goodbyes themselves.

- Understanding the root of our child's fears more
- Feeling the secure base of their main caregiver inside even when away from them - learning to trust the self
- Unhurried connection with our child

Separation Anxiety - a 'holistic' approach

Talking through the root of the fear surrounding separation

- It is important to focus on **overall reasons** for the anxiety or insecurity, and what the child needs in a more holistic way to internalise resilience, safety, self confidence and security.
- Use play based forms of expression e.g.:
 - 'Can you draw what you're afraid of'*
 - 'What weather does it feel like when I go?'*
 - 'Can polar bear tell me what he doesn't like about leaving Daddy?'*
- This helps us provide the deep reassurance children need and work through their 'worst case scenarios'. We must remember that children don't fully understand the world yet so may have fears which they cannot see a resolution for e.g. *what would happen if their parent was in a car accident while they were at school?*

Separation Anxiety - a 'holistic' approach

Feeling the secure base of their main caregiver inside even when away from them - learning to trust the self

- A child's main caregiver is the person they turn to in all moments of challenge and change
 - A good 'secure base' will offer comfort, reassurance, guidance, regulation, encouragement
- As children develop, they need to develop all these skills within themselves, and this comes from internalising the secure base of their main care giver.
- We need to show our children that we trust that they can manage difficult situations, or that they are manageable
- We need to give children opportunities to show themselves what they can do, what they can overcome and what they can manage holding their care givers' belief in their heart - this then develops into self belief and can be shared with the parent rather than dependent on the parent.

Separation Anxiety - a 'holistic' approach

Does your family routine/rhythm allow time for unhurried connection with individual children?

- Having a repetitive, familiar routine which incorporates 1:1 time with children as well as unhurried time as a family helps.
- You do not need to come up with interesting, exciting, expensive things to do together as a family - reliable movie nights, meal evenings, hot chocolate mornings, birthday/festival traditions are all more valuable than we realise as parents.
- Which times of day feel most rushed? What small, sustainable changes can you make which will have the greatest impact? What might we need to let go of?

Strategies for easing separation anxiety

- **Tangible reminders of connection** - create them together as special quality time
 - 'The Invisible String', 'The Kissing Hand' book
- Address behaviours in a **pro-active** way e.g. if you know they'll be anxious at bedtime, let them know you'll go in to check in on them before they need to ask. This shows your child they are held in mind.
- **Speak positively about who your child will be with** to create safety and trust
- **Plan and practice goodbyes** as well as your reunions.
 - Let children know you're thinking of them and use the tangible reminders e.g. bracelets or notes
- **Avoid colluding with the anxiety** that your child will not be okay without you by keeping them with you even when you know they will be safe
 - This tells children that you too are worried that they will not be able to manage without you and doesn't build connection to inner resources.

New siblings/Siblings



Separation Anxiety linked to siblings/other commitments

“The pain of sibling rivalry with all its accompanying confusions, should never be underestimated” ... children can feel “not as lovable to my Mummy as my little sister”

Margot Sunderland 2006

Imagine a complete stranger came into your home and your child instantly loved them as much as they love you. How would you feel?

Nurturedfirst Instagram account 2023

Separation Anxiety linked to siblings/other commitments

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- **Reminding children of the tangible reminders of connection** e.g. invisible strings made out of love
- **1:1 time every day joining into your child's play world** (this is how children communicate their hopes, worries and feelings best)
- **'Your** baby/sister/brother' - create ownership
- Having an **outlet for big feelings**
 - projection using toys
 - normalising feelings by having space to express them whilst having boundaries on behaviours - emotion cards, drawing, play dough
- Hold awareness of developmental stage of your older children and **what they are capable of** e.g. are they able to empathise fully yet? What do our children need our help with?
- **Sincere empathy** for how hard it is to have to share everything, as well as wonderful and fun

Separation Anxiety linked to siblings/other commitments



- **Candle metaphor**

- Remind children that with each new child in the family, a new candle is lit from the first but the flame doesn't diminish in any way.

- **Cups of water metaphor**

- Get out a cup of water and explain that the water inside symbolises your love for your child.
- Ask the child what happens to the cup of water when a new baby arrives into the family
- Often, children think half the water gets poured out into a new cup, and then when another sibling arrives, then it gets shared out again. You can extend it to include this love being spread around other family members, friends, pets etc.
- Then, go back and fill the first cup again and put a firm lid/tin foil on it - explain to children that your love for them starts completely full and always, always will be. Explain that each sibling or family member has their own cup of love which cannot be emptied out and is not 'in competition' with anyone or anything else. Even if you may have less time together, the love in the cup will ALWAYS be the same.

These are helpful for if your child's separation anxiety seems to be borne from insecurity around sibling jealousy, or your time being shared with work or other commitments

Transitions



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Tips and strategies for easing the transition

- **Visual timetables** for the school day and time at home. What will goodbyes look like?
- Model **talking enthusiastically** about what will be different whilst also naming and acknowledging concerns/worries
- **Worry jar** - a place to put questions and uncertainties to externalise outside of the head/body
- Discuss your children's '**worst fears**' about change to alleviate any anxieties that can be.
- **Encourage questions**, but know that it is okay to say "I don't know" in response. You can offer **empathy** for how hard it is to not know something.
 - Make a book of questions with their answers so your child can revisit it rather than seeking constant reassurance from you (this builds self regulation and resilience).
- Having a **calm and measured** approach to the transition helps build resilience. **Resilience only builds in moments of tension**

Support for Parents

Strategies for Parents

- Hold onto **YOUR tangible reminder of connection** to your child!
- Plan and practice what **YOU will do when you say goodbye** to your child
 - distraction? A coffee? Call with a friend? A run?
- **Seek the support YOU need** to work through the thing making separation painful for you
 - counselling, vulnerability with a friend or partner, reading up.
- **Time away from your child is time for your child** - what are you role modelling to your child when you go to work, keep your body healthy, maintain wonderful relationships with friends or family?
- Focus on other **pillars of health** for all of you
 - diet, exercise and sleep



Questions?

Thank you!

Helpful resources

- Happy, Healthy Minds - The School of Life
- An Emotional Menagerie - The School of Life
 - A book of poetry for KS2 age children to help develop emotional vocabulary
- The Whole-Brain Child - Dr Daniel Siegel and Dr Tina Payne Bryson
- What To Do When You're Scared and Worried: A Guide for Kids - James J Christ
- Anxiety is Really Strange - Steve Haines
 - For parents to understand anxiety more, easy to digest comic strip style book
- YouTube video - 'The Triune Brain' as explained by kids
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVhWwciagOE>
- The Invisible String - Patrice Karst
 - For separation anxiety

