Many kids experience sadness or fear when they separate from their parent. It can be hard for parents to know what’s age-appropriate and what’s cause for concern.

**Understanding Separation Anxiety: A Guide for Parents**

### Key Facts

**What is Separation Anxiety?**
Separation Anxiety is the experience of children becoming upset or afraid at the thought or experience of separating from parents. Children may become unusually nervous or clingy when needing to separate from parents and may try to avoid being alone or with new people. It is most common in children under three years of age and typically resolves with time and experience.

**What is Separation Anxiety Disorder?**
Separation Anxiety Disorder occurs when fears about separating from parents become severe and negatively impact the lives of children and their families. Children with separation anxiety disorder worry excessively about separation from parents in ways that are not typical for their age. Children’s fears about separating from parents are persistent and intense.

**What does it affect?**
While many children experience some separation anxiety, certain factors may make children more likely to experience separation anxiety disorder, including:

- Environmental factors, like experiencing a natural disaster or health event
- Recent grief or loss
- Recent change in routine or environment (e.g., moving, changing schools)
- Family history of anxiety disorders

**When does it happen?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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**How does it impact sleep?**
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**When does it happen?**

- **0-6 months:** Children tend to attach well to new caregivers and can be easily soothed. They may not notice when parents leave.
- **7-12 months:** Children develop object permanence and begin understanding that caregivers exist, even when they can’t see them.
- **1-3 years:** Children develop some anxiety and become upset when parents leave the room or leave them with new caregivers.
- **4+ years:** Children typically adjust well to separating from parents, may demonstrate increased anxiety during times of change, like starting a new school.

**Some separation anxiety is a normal part of children’s development.**

### What does it look like?

- Frequent headaches, especially before or during separation
- Clinging to parents, shaking hands/feet
- Frequent stomach-aches, especially before or during separation
- Tears, crying, and/or screaming
- Excuses to avoid leaving parent, pleading for parent to stay
- Running away or hiding to avoid separation, following parents like a “shadow” at home

**Potential Impacts**
- Lower feelings of independence
- Poorer academic outcomes
- Greater loneliness
- Missed ‘milestones’ like sleepovers and field trips
- Increased school avoidance

**Impacts on Health & Wellbeing**
- Greater risk for anxiety and depression
- Poorer physical health concerns
- Increased risk of health problems, like asthma, allergies, and infections

**Family Impacts**
- Greater parental guilt and frustration
- More parental time off work
- Lower parental social connection
- Reduced sleep for parents

**Tips for Parents**

1. **Prepare in advance.** Help children adjust by navigating new experiences with them. For example, if starting a new daycare, make some parent-child visits together before their first day.

2. **Keep a routine.** Develop a consistent positive routine that’s short and upbeat. Practice this routine in lots of different settings to help kids adapt.

3. **Know when to seek help.** If your child’s anxiety is impacting the wellbeing of themselves or others, it may be time to get help. Psychological interventions like cognitive behaviour therapy are highly effective at treating separation anxiety.

4. **Practice makes perfect.** Start small to help kids adjust to separating. Consider having a familiar adult babysit for short periods of time and scale up experiences as kids adjust.

5. **Return on time.** Tell kids when you’ll be home in a way that they can understand (“I’ll be home after you have dinner but before bedtime!”). Come home on time to help build trust.

**Resources**
Scan me for extra resources for parents, and to see all the citations for this poster!