



Separation anxiety

Many children experience anxiety when separating from their families when they first attend an early childhood service or start school.

What's separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a common and normal fear that children have of being away from their families.

A developmentally appropriate level of separation anxiety is a sign of the close attachment between children and their families and tends to lessen with age. However, if the anxiety becomes excessive, it can interfere with the child's daily functioning and learning, and they may be at risk of developing an anxiety disorder.

From around six months of age, many children begin to show anxiety when they're away from close family members.

As they don't yet have a separate sense of self, babies see family members as part of themselves and so feel that a part of them is missing when they're separated. Babies may not understand that adults will come back after leaving them. Babies and young children may also feel anxious around unfamiliar people and in new settings.

This anxiety tends to reduce over time as a child's familiarity with their early learning service or school increases. Older children also develop a separate sense of self, so better understand that their families will return.

What are the signs?

Children vary in their levels of emotional sensitivity.

Some children worry while others are more carefree and don't show anxiety when separating from family. Children also show their anxiety in different ways – some may be visibly upset or appear nervous, while others may have physical symptoms such as headaches.

Other common behaviours include:

- crying
- tantrums
- clinginess and not letting go of a family member
- needing a favourite toy to settle
- shyness
- difficulty joining in social activities with other children
- headaches
- stomach aches and vomiting
- difficulties sleeping
- refusing to speak to family members or educators.

Children's anxiety is generally short-lived

They're quite often happy playing within a short time of their family leaving. Over time, most children learn to feel safe in their new surroundings and gradually experience less separation anxiety.

How can educators help children manage this anxiety?

By being emotionally available and showing understanding about children's fears, you help to manage children's anxiety when it's too big for them to manage on their own.

But it's important to find a balance between supporting and reassuring children and allowing children to practise managing their own emotions. You can do this with a range of strategies:

Work with families

- Communicate regularly with the child's family and check if there are any issues that may be increasing the child's anxiety (for example, a death in the family, divorce).
- Develop a clear morning routine with the child's family so that the child feels safe and can predict when family members will leave and return (for example, sharing a special goodbye hug).
- Ask families to say 'goodbye' to their child, let them know when they'll be back and where they'll pick them up, and avoid lengthy goodbyes.
- Reassure families that the child is being supported, and communicate which activities are used to help settle the child.

Build trust with the child

- Greet the child each morning or connect them to other staff who the child knows well.
- Be calm, warm, reassuring and friendly.
- Acknowledge their emotions and provide comfort.
- Help the child become engaged in an enjoyable activity once they enter the room.
- Increase the child's feelings of safety and connectedness by suggesting they bring a familiar toy or photo from home.

When separation anxiety becomes more serious

By preschool and school age, children are less likely to experience separation anxiety or its intensity will reduce.

However, a small number of children experience a level of anxiety that interferes with their daily functioning and learning. When children become anxious more easily, more often and more intensely than other children, they may be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, including separation anxiety disorder. About 4% of preschoolers and school-age children develop this condition.

If you're concerned about a child's level of anxiety, note whether:

- the child appears more anxious, more often, than other children of their age and level
- their anxiety has continued over a period of time
- their anxiety stops them participating in activities at the early learning service or school or with peers
- their anxiety interferes with their ability to do things other children their age do easily
- the fears seem out of proportion to the issues in their life
- the child is not attending or refusing to attend the service or school.

If you think a child is showing more serious signs of anxiety, speak to their family about your concerns. Suggest they talk to their GP. The child may need a referral to a mental health professional for an assessment.

Learn more about [anxiety here](#).

Be You Professional Learning

Check out content on social and emotional learning (SEL) and teaching for resilience in the [Learning Resilience](#) domain.

References

Battaglia, M., Touchette, E., Garon-Carrier, G., Dionne, G., Côté, S., Vitaro, F., Tremblay, R., & Boivin, M. (2015). Distinct trajectories of separation anxiety in the preschool years: persistence at school entry and early-life associated factors. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 57: 1, 39-46.

External links

Better Health Channel – [Anxiety and fear in children](#)

Early Childhood Australia – [About separation anxiety](#)

Raising Children Network –

- [Separation anxiety](#)
- [Anxiety and fears in children](#)