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Ages 8 to 12 Months: Separation Anxiety

During these four months, your child may sometimes seem like two separate babies. First, there's the one who's open, affectionate and outgoing with you. But then there's another who's anxious, clinging, and easily frightened around unfamiliar people or objects. Some people may tell you that your child is fearful or shy because you're "spoiling" her, but don't believe it. Her widely diverse behavior patterns are not caused by you or your parenting style. They occur because she's now, for the first time, able to tell the difference between familiar and unfamiliar situations. If anything, the predictable anxieties of this period are evidence of her healthy relationship with you.

Anxiety around strangers is usually one of the first emotional milestones your baby will reach. You may think something is wrong when this child of yours who, at the age of three months, interacted calmly with people she didn't know, is now beginning to tense up when strangers come too close. This is normal for this age, and you need not worry. Even relatives and frequent babysitters with whom your baby was once comfortable may prompt her to hide or cry now, especially if they approach her hastily.

Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety usually peaks between 10 and 18 months and then fades during the last half of the second year. In some ways, this phase of your child's emotional development will be especially tender for both of you, while in others it will be painful. After all, her desire to be with you is a sign of her attachment to her first and greatest love, namely you. The intensity of her feeling as she hurtles into your arms is irresistible, especially when you realize that no one, including your child herself, will ever again think you are quite as perfect as she does at this age. On the other hand, you may feel suffocated by her constant clinging, while experiencing guilt whenever you leave her crying for you. Fortunately, this emotional roller coaster eventually will subside along with her separation anxiety.

She'll become much more "clutchy" about leaving you, and just as she's starting to realize that each object is unique and permanent, she'll discover that there's only one of you. When you're out of her sight, she'll know you're somewhere but not with her, and this will cause her great distress. She'll have so little sense of time that she won't know when, or even whether, you'll be coming back. Once she gets a little older, her memory of past experiences with you will comfort her when you're gone, and she'll be able to anticipate a reunion. But for now she's only aware of the present, so every time you leave her sight, even to go to the next room, she'll fuss and cry. When you leave her with someone else she may scream as though her heart will break. At bedtime she'll refuse to leave you to go to sleep, and then she may wake up searching for you in the middle of the night.

Coping with Separation Anxiety

If your child has a strong, healthy attachment to you, her separation anxiety probably will occur earlier than in other babies, and she'll pass through it more quickly. Instead of resenting her possessiveness during these months, maintain as much warmth and good humor as you can. Through your actions, you're showing her how to express and return love. This is the emotional base she'll rely on in years to come.

The following suggestions may help ease separation anxiety.

- Your baby is more susceptible to separation anxiety when she's tired, hungry or sick. If you know you're going out, schedule your departure so it occurs after she's napped and eaten. Try to stay with her as much as possible when she's sick.
- Don't make a fuss over your leaving. Instead, have the person staying with her create a distraction (a new toy, a visit to the mirror, a bath). Then say goodbye and slip away quickly.
- Remember that her tears will subside within minutes of your departure. Her outbursts are for your benefit to persuade you to stay. With you out of sight, she'll soon turn her attention to the person staying with her.
- Help her cope with separation through short practice sessions at home. Separation will be easier on her when she initiates it, so when she crawls to another room (one that's baby-proofed), don't follow her right away; wait for one or two minutes. When you go to another room for a few seconds, tell her where you're going and that you'll return. If she fusses, call to her instead of running back. Gradually, she'll learn that nothing terrible happens when you're gone and, just as important, you always come back when you say you will.
- If you take your child to a sitter's home or a child-care center, don't just drop her off and leave. Spend a few extra minutes playing with her in this new environment. When you do leave, reassure her that you'll be back later.

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