

Separation Anxiety Disorder

Children at a very young are usually scared to be away from their parents, however when this fear becomes excessive then your child may have Separation Anxiety Disorder. To have a fear of being away from their parents in very young children is of course normal (ages 8 to 14 months), however when this fear is seen in children over the age of six years and the fear persists for at least four weeks, this may be indicative of Separation Anxiety.

The symptoms of separation anxiety are recurrent distress when separated from an attachment figure, fear or reluctance to be alone for any period of time, worry about losing or harm coming to a loved one, fear of being lost or kidnapped, repeated nightmares involving being separated, reluctance to go to sleep without an attachment figure or to be away from the house, and finally repeated physical complaints when a child knows that they will have to be separated from an attachment figure.

Some warning signs that a parent can look for that may indicate that a child has Separation Anxiety are:

Constant nightmares that you as the parent are going to leave them

Fear that someone is going to break into the house and steal them or kidnap them away from their parents

Refusal to go to school and then when they get to school they cry and exhibit clingy behaviors and ask school personnel to call their parents

Frequent physical complaints when they are at school away from home and you as the parent and when they get home the physical symptoms seem to “go away”.

A constant fear of being alone and being away from an attachment figure for even a very short period of time

What are frequent causes of Separation Anxiety Disorder:

There are a number of reasons that separation anxiety develops in children. However, most frequently it develops after a child has experienced a very traumatic event in their life. Often the traumatic event involves the death of a loved one or a family pet, their parent's divorce, a move to a new house or a new school, or a physical illness whether it is them or a loved one in their life. As a therapist, I also often see that children that have separation anxiety often have very over-protective children that do not let their children out of their sights for even a minute and shelter them from friends and peer relationships when they are young. Often times, these are

children that have little to no peer relationships and spend all of their time sheltered by their parents.

Frequency of Separation Anxiety:

Current research shows that separation anxiety affects as many 4 to 5% of children in the United States ages 7 to 11 years old. It is much less common in teenagers and seems to affect boys and girls equally.

Diagnosis of Separation Anxiety:

Separation anxiety can only be diagnosed if your child meets the diagnostic criteria of Separation Anxiety Disorder. Your child will first need to be seen by a medical doctor in order to rule out any physical problem or illness. If a physical problem does not exist, then your child should be evaluated by either a child psychiatrist, psychologist, or qualified mental health professional trained in treating and diagnosing children.

Treatment of Separation Anxiety Disorder:

The main treatment method for separation anxiety is psychotherapy or psychological counseling. The goal or focus of treatment is to help the child to overcome their fear of being separated from a parent or caregiver. The main type of therapy used is CBT or cognitive-behavioral therapy, which works to change the way the child thinks so their behaviors or actions about being separated from their parent will also change. The therapist will often utilize and rely on the family unit to work in conjunction with the therapist to overcome the child's fears of being alone, allowing the child to know that it is alright to be separated from attachment figures.

Kara T. Tamanini, M.S., LMHC, P.A.
Author and Therapist
Founder of Kids Awareness Series
www.KidsAwarenessSeries.com