

# Top Tips for Separation Anxiety

## Have a Routine

Make sure you have a routine for school mornings – routines help children to feel safe. Make sure there's also a routine in place for your child's arrival at daycare or school, including set tasks that your child can engage in when they first arrive. Incorporating enjoyable activities into your child's arrival routine will also help your child to cope.

## Say Goodbye in a Helpful Way

It can be tempting to sneak out while your child's distracted, but this can make your child's anxiety worse in the long term. Long drawn out goodbyes can also escalate your child's distress.

Say a proper goodbye but keep it brief and tell your child when you'll be back. Use words they'll understand – "I'll be back later today after nap time". If your child is distressed try to remain calm – if they can see you're upset they'll become even more distressed.

## Help Your Child Practice Being Brave

Practicing separation can help your child cope when they have to separate from you at school. Start with small challenges and work towards longer periods of separation.

How you practice separation will depend on which situations trigger your child's anxiety and how anxious your child is when they separate from you, but some examples include: staying home with a family member while you leave the house to run errands (start with short periods of time initially), going out with another family member while you stay at home, playing in a separate room of the house, going to a friend's house for a play date, etc.

## Reward Your Child for Being Brave

Your child will find it hard to practice separating from you and they probably won't understand why they need to. A pre-determined reward system will help to keep your child motivated to face their fears, even when it's scary. Rewards might include: an extra scoop of ice-cream for dessert, receiving a "you can have a friend over on the weekend" voucher, or special time with mum or dad. Just make sure that you're consistent with rewards and follow through. Rewards that are delayed or reneged on will undermine the process.

## Speak to Your Child's Teachers

Speak to your child's classroom teachers about your child's anxiety so they can support your child after you leave. For example, teachers can help your child to establish friendships so they feel safe or give your child tasks to do as a distraction. Classroom teachers can also give you information about how your child copes after you say goodbye.

## SEPARATION ANXIETY

**It's normal for kids to develop anxiety early in their development but children with separation anxiety disorder show high distress in anticipation of separation from a primary caregiver (usually mums).**

**Common signs of separation anxiety are:**

- High levels of distress or tantrums at separation
- Reluctance/refusal to sleep alone or away from home
- Needing a parent to fall asleep
- Following parents around the house
- Clinginess
- Calling parents when they're out
- Stomachaches or headaches in anticipation of separation

**School aged children are usually convinced that something bad will happen if they're separated from their parent:**

- What if mum's in a car accident?
- What if I get lost?

**Pre-school kids can't articulate their worries, but can usually identify that they "don't like" being away from mum or dad.**

**Causes of separation anxiety will vary but common causes are:**

- Experiencing a traumatic event
- Parent illness or death
- Divorce or separation
- Changes to routine
- Starting school or day care

**If your child shows signs and symptoms of separation anxiety, speak to your GP about a referral to a child clinical psychologist.**