Understanding Separation Anxiety in Infants and Young Children

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Learning Objectives

- To understand
 - Separation Anxiety
 - Object Permanence
 - Attachment Theory
 - Temperament Types

 Separation anxiety is typical in very young children (those between 8 and 14 months old). Children often go through a phase when they are "clingy" and afraid of unfamiliar people and places.



Baby separation anxiety is a healthy and normal phase most babies go through.

How Separation Anxiety Develops

- Babies adapt pretty well to other caregivers. Parents probably feel more anxiety about being separated than infants do! As long as their needs are being met, most babies younger than 6 months adjust easily to other people.
- Sometime between 4-7 months, babies develop a sense of object permanence and begin to learn that things and people exist even when they're out of sight. This is when babies start playing the "dropsy" game dropping things over the side of the high chair and expecting an adult to pick them up (which, once retrieved, get dropped again!).
- The same thing occurs with a parent. Babies realize that there's only mom or dad, and when they can't see you, that means you've gone away. And most don't yet understand the concept of time so they do not know if or when you'll come back.
- Whether you're in the kitchen, in the next bedroom, or at the office, it's all the same to your baby. You've disappeared, and your child will do whatever he or she can to prevent this from happening.

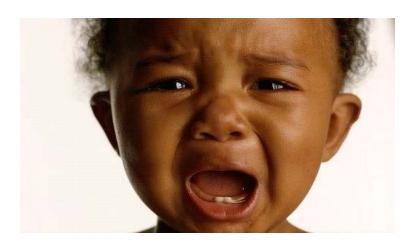
Facts about Separation Anxiety

• Infants: Separation anxiety develops after a child gains an understanding of object permanence. Once your infant realizes you're really gone (when you are), it may leave him unsettled. Although some babies display object permanence and separation anxiety as early as 4 to 5 months of age, most develop more robust separation anxiety at around 9 months. The leave- taking can be worse if your infant is hungry, tired, or not feeling well.



Facts about Separation Anxiety

• Toddlers: Many toddlers skip separation anxiety in infancy and start demonstrating challenges at 15 or 18 months of age. Separations are more difficult when children are hungry, tired, or sick—which is most of toddlerhood! As children develop independence during toddlerhood, they may become even more aware of separations. Their behaviors at separations will be loud, tearful, and difficult to stop.



Facts about Separation Anxiety

• **Preschoolers**: By the time children are 3 years of age, most clearly understand the effect their anxiety or pleas at separation have on us. It doesn't mean they aren't stressed, but they certainly are vying for a change. Be consistent. Your ongoing consistency, explanations, and diligence to return when you say you will are tantamount.



Jean Piaget: The Father of Object Permanence



- Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, conducted studies to show that object permanence plays an important role in cognitive development.
- Young infants do not yet possess the ability to remember or even think about things they cannot see. And this ability actually goes beyond 'out of sight, out of mind' because to them, if they cannot see it, it simply does not exist.
- In other words, their entire world is only what they can see at any given moment.
- This is why we may take a toy away from an infant and then infant will not react. The infant will not even cry or even try to look for what has disappeared. It's just gone as if it's never been there!

Playing Object Permanence Games

Peek-a-Boo

- From approximately 6-12 months of age, this is supposedly one of the best activities to teach children that something or someone who cannot be seen still exists in their world.
- For example covering a toy with a blanket then saying, "Where's the ball?" followed up by uncovering the toy and saying, "Here's the ball!" will help our children understand that the ball did not disappear just because the blanket covered it.
- Hiding then reappearing from behind a door, playing with a Jack-in-the-box, or pulling objects from containers are also fun and effective ways to interact with our children while helping facilitate their intellectual and emotional development.

Playing Object Permanence Games

'Playing' Leave and Return

- Whether it is simply leaving a room or leaving children with a babysitter and then reliably returning, this activity will help our children realize that even when they cannot see us, they know we will always come back.
- A caregiver who is regularly out of sight yet consistently returns can actually encourage the development of object permanence as well as a strong sense of security.
- Since many people suggest that object permanence involves all the senses, not simply visual perception, we can help solidify the idea by calling our children when we are away so that they hear our voices and realize that we still exist even though they cannot see us.

Ensuring a Secure Environment

- One of the best ways to help develop object permanence is to give young infants a secure, dependable, and loving environment in which to learn.
- It is important to introduce regular routines and familiar patterns so that babies start to establish a sense of expectation.
- So, by giving our children reliable and stable environments we are encouraging object permanence and all the benefits this concept includes.

Object Permanence Video

The Good News about Baby Separation Anxiety

- It's a positive, healthy sign: Separation anxiety in babies is an absolutely normal and healthy phase of child development.
- It will lessen and pass: Each baby is different, but typical baby separation anxiety is said to occur somewhere between 7-18 months and last about 2-5 months.
 - (And if your baby or toddler doesn't show signs of separation anxiety, it doesn't necessarily mean that something is 'wrong' just like we adults have distinct personalities, so do babies).
- Your baby is securely attached to you (secure attachment is a term from attachment theory: The fact that your baby wants you all the time means that you've done a great job. Your bond is strong and healthy. Your baby associates you with security and love and feels 'whole' when you are together.



The Good News about Baby Separation Anxiety

- Your baby is getting smart: Your baby's brain is really on the fast track now. Your baby has discovered that he or she can affect the world with his or her actions; 'I cry, Mom comes!'. This is a great step, 'but' it also means ...
- Your baby is starting to remember: Before your baby was completely living in the now; No recollection of the past and no anticipation of the future. Now your baby remembers that you were there a minute ago but you're not here now. Your baby is now doing abstract thinking, wow! Your baby can now create an image of something not present, in this case, you! (This step in child development is called object permanence the object remains in your baby's mind, so to speak).
- However, your baby is still so much in the 'now' that he or she thinks your absence is permanent. Your baby hasn't yet learnt that when you leave, you will come back.



Attachment Theory

- British psychologist <u>John Bowlby</u> was the first attachment theorist, describing attachment as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings."
- Attachment theory suggests that the relationship children have with their earliest caregivers colors all their future relationships. That means our emotional and social behavior in adolescence and adulthood mirrors the patterns we developed with our first carers. In response to early interactions, infants, and children develop one of two attachment styles, secure or insecure.

Secure Attachments

- When children have playful, trusting, mutually responsive, and dependable relations with first caregivers, they develop a secure attachment pattern of behavior.
- Secure children grow up with the benefit of having healthy social attitudes. When older, they engage in meaningful relationships that buffer them from stress and anxiety. Feeling emotionally connected allows adults to face problems and better navigate traumatic situations.
- Throughout life, secure people expect those they are connected with to meet their needs, and will reciprocate. They can articulate and discuss their feelings, and easily show appreciation and affection to those they care about.

Insecure Attachments

Avoidant Attachment

- Children develop avoidant relationship behaviors if early caregivers discourage expressions of distress or affection. They learn to hide feelings which blocks their own ability to feel loved. Sometimes avoidant children withdraw completely from social interaction.
- Avoidant adults have difficulty creating <u>emotional</u> connections. Often, they
 experience extreme discomfort having or sharing feelings, and usually
 harbor a mistrust of intimacy.

Insecure Attachments

Ambivalent Attachment

- Ambivalence occurs when children are not sure whether their carers will
 provide the comfort and reassurance needed. The caregiver sometimes
 responds to their distress and other times not. Because the caregiver is
 unpredictable, the child does not develop confidence their needs will be
 met.
- As adults, those with ambivalent attachment are susceptible to problems such as high anxiety, eating disorders, or <u>depression</u>. They have difficulty managing <u>stress</u> and the challenges life presents, but may not seek help.

Insecure Attachments

Disorganized Attachment

- If a <u>child</u> signals their need for attachment, and the signals are not responded to, the child can develop a disorganized attachment pattern. This often happens if the caregiver has severe emotional or mental health problems, or if a carer is abusive to the child. Early signs of disorganized attachment are disruptive behaviors, withdrawing from others, and delayed development.
- Adults with a disorganized pattern are at high risk for mental health and personality disorders. They often have a string of broken relationships behind them, may be self-harming, suicidal, aggressive, or controlling. They clearly demonstrate the significant imprint early care giving has on human development.

Why Attachment Matters

 Researchers have found that attachment patterns established early in life can lead to a number of outcomes. For example, children who are securely attached as infants tend to develop stronger <u>self-esteem</u> and better self-reliance as they grow older. These children also tend to be more independent, perform better in school, have successful social relationships, and experience less depression and anxiety.



Attachment Videos

- Harlow's Monkeys
- Strange situation

What Are the Symptoms of Separation Anxiety Disorder?

Following are some of the most common symptoms of separation anxiety disorder:

- An unrealistic and lasting worry that something bad will happen to the parent or caregiver if the child leaves
- An unrealistic and lasting worry that something bad will happen to the child if he or she leaves the caregiver
- Refusal to go to school in order to stay with the caregiver
- Refusal to go to <u>sleep</u> without the caregiver being nearby or to <u>sleep</u> away from home
- Fear of being alone
- Nightmares about being separated
- Bed wetting
- Complaints of physical symptoms, such as <u>headaches</u> and stomachaches, on school days
- Repeated <u>temper tantrums</u> or pleading

Separation Anxiety: What To Do

- Always say goodbye. Kiss and hug your baby when you leave and tell her where you're going and when you'll be back, but don't prolong your goodbyes. And resist the urge to sneak out the back door. Your baby will only become more upset if she thinks you've disappeared into thin air.
- Keep it light. Your baby is quite tuned in to how you feel, so show your warmth and enthusiasm for the caregiver you've chosen.

Try not to cry or act upset if your baby starts crying – at least not while she can see you. You'll both get through this. The caregiver will probably tell you later that your baby's tears stopped before you were even out of the driveway.

• Once you leave, leave. Repeated trips back into the house or daycare center to calm your baby will make it harder on you, your child, and the caregiver.



Separation Anxiety: What To Do

- Minimize scary television. Your child is less likely to be fearful if the shows you
 watch are not frightening.
- **Try not to give in.** Reassure your child that he or she will be just fine—setting limits will help the adjustment to separation.
- Build in time for your baby to get comfortable. Hire a new sitter to visit and play with your baby several times before leaving them alone for the first time. For your first real outing, ask the sitter to arrive about 30 minutes before you depart so that she and the baby can be well engaged before you step out the door.
- Employ the same approach at a daycare center or at your nursery, place of worship, or health club.
- Try a trial at first. Limit the first night or afternoon out to no more than an hour.
 As you and your baby become more familiar with the sitter or the childcare setting, you can extend your outings.
- Remind your toddler that you always return
- When Anna Zirker's twin boys were 2, she put her own twist on this trick: "When they'd say, 'Mommy, don't go,' I'd ask, 'What does Mommy do when she leaves?' and they'd say, 'Mommy comes back,' " says Zirker, of Bend, OR. Still works every time.

Separation Anxiety: What To Do

- A Kiss to Keep: "I use the cute technique found in the book *The Kissing Hand*. I plant a kiss on my daughter's palm, and it comforts her to know a part of mom is with her during the day." —Lori P., Carlisle, Pennsylvania
- Secret Picture: "Both of my children had to bring in a plastic box to put their crayons in, so I taped a laminated picture of our family signing 'I Love You' into the bottom of it. Now they always have us with them and can discreetly look at us for support whenever they need it."
 — Crystal S., Duncan, South Carolina
- Goodbye Game: "Every morning before school, I pull out ten cards showing a picture of lips (indicating a kiss) and a mom hugging a child. Next to each picture there is a number, which tells my daughter how many kisses and hugs she will get from Mommy. Every morning I shuffle the cards and have her choose one. We exchange kisses and hugs and she goes to school much happier." — Wanda S., Brooklyn, New York
- Brag Book: "We bought a small plastic photo album and filled it with pictures of our family.
 When we drop off our son at school, if he starts to cry, his teacher says, 'Come show me
 your pictures.' He says goodbye to us and brings his album to his teacher. He loves naming
 everyone in the album for his teachers and friends." —Randi O., Highland Park, New Jersey
- Change the Subject: "What works best with my kids is to distract them. On the way to school, my son used to get upset and talk about how he didn't want to go to school. To distract him, we started to look for school buses and count how many we saw. He loved it and would talk about riding one when he got older." —Tina C., Ocean Springs, Mississippi

Separation anxiety or trauma?

 If it seems like your child's separation anxiety disorder happened overnight, the cause might be something related to a <u>traumatic experience</u> rather than separation anxiety. Although these two conditions can share symptoms, they are treated differently. Help your child benefit from the most fitting treatment.



Characteristics of temperament

There are at least nine major characteristics that make up temperament:

- Activity level: the level of physical activity, motion, restlessness or fidgety behavior that a
 child demonstrates in daily activities (and which also may affect sleep).
 Rhythmicity or regularity: the presence or absence of a regular pattern for basic physical
 functions such as appetite, sleep and bowel habits.
- Approach and withdrawal: the way a child initially responds to a new stimulus (rapid and bold or slow and hesitant), whether it be people, situations, places, foods, changes in routines or other transitions.
- **Adaptability**: the degree of ease or difficulty with which a child adjusts to change or a new situation, and how well the youngster can modify his reaction.
- Intensity: the energy level with which a child responds to a situation, whether positive or negative.
- Mood: the mood, positive or negative, or degree of pleasantness or unfriendliness in a child's words and behaviors.
- Attention span: the ability to concentrate or stay with a task, with or without distraction.
- **Distractibility**: the ease with which a child can be distracted from a task by environmental (usually visual or auditory) stimuli.
- **Sensory threshold**: the amount of stimulation required for a child to respond. Some children respond to the slightest stimulation, and others require intense amounts.

3 Temperament Types

Easy or Flexible (about 40% of most groups of children)

• Typically, the easy child is regular in biological rhythms, adaptable, approachable, and generally positive in mood of mild to medium intensity. Such a child is easy for caregivers. S/he is easily toilet trained, learns to sleep through the night, has regular feeding and nap routines, takes to most new situations and people pleasantly, usually adapts to change quickly, is generally cheerful and expresses her/his distress or frustration mildly. In fact, children with easy temperaments may show very deep feelings with only a single tear rolling down a check.

Difficult or Challenging (about 10% of children)

- The challenging child is the opposite of the easy child. The child may be hard to get to sleep through the night, her or his feeding and nap schedules may change from day to day, and the child may be difficult to toilet train because of irregular bowel movements. The challenging child typically fusses or even cries loudly at anything new and usually adapts slowly. All too often this type of child expresses an unpleasant or disagreeable mood and, if frustrated, may even have a temper tantrum. In contrast to the easy child's reaction, an intense, noisy reaction by the challenging child may not signify a depth of feeling. Often the best way to handle such outbursts is just to wait them out.
- Caregivers who do not understand this type of temperament as normal sometimes feel resentment at the child for being so difficult to manage. They may scold, pressure or appease the child, which only reinforces her or his difficult temperament. Understanding, patience and consistency, on the other hand, will lead to a "goodness of fit," with a final positive adjustment to life's demands.

The Slow-to-Warm-Up (about 15% of children)

Finally, there is a group of children who are often called shy. The child in this group also has discomfort with the new and adapts slowly, but unlike the challenging child, this child's negative mood is often expressed slowly and the child may or may not be irregular in sleep, feeling and bowel elimination. This is the child who typically stands at the edge of the group and clings quietly to her or his parent when taken to a store, a birthday party or a child care program for the first time. If the child is pressured or pushed to join the group, the child's shyness immediately becomes worse. But if allowed to become accustomed to the new surrounds at her or his own pace, this child can gradually become an active, happy member of the group.

Resources

Read About It

A number of children's books address the topic of separation anxiety. You might want to read some of them with your 2-, 3-, or 4-year-old to reassure her that her feelings are normal and you will come back. Some possibilities include *The Good-Bye Book* by Judith Viorst, *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn, Even if I Spill My Milk? by Anita

Grossnickle Hines, and Benjamin Comes

Back by Amy Brandt.

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Questions & Reflections

