



# Sharon Baptist Head Start

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## What to Do If Your School-Aged Child Struggles With Separation Anxiety

**This can be a challenge for some kids, particularly at the beginning of the school year.**

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It's perfectly normal to have a fear of being separated from a parent starting at about 6 months of age and often resolving at about the time school starts. But many children continue to have separation anxiety after they begin school, some even into high school or college.

Separation anxiety often runs in families, as do many types of anxiety disorders. If you or your partner have memories of feeling nervous about leaving home for school or experienced intense homesickness, it should come as no surprise your child may as well.

Kids who were shy as babies around new things (initially looking away when presented with a new toy, for example) or around unfamiliar people are biologically more likely to experience separation anxiety. Parents who express discomfort of their own and exhibit anxiety about introducing their children to new things, worry that other places are dangerous in some way and expose their kids to limited novelty also increase the likelihood their children will have separation anxiety. Another factor that impacts separation anxiety for a child is a past history of trauma or a current stressor in the child's life like divorce, moving homes or the loss of a family member or pet.

If your child, regardless of his age, expresses anxiety about going to school, or says he doesn't want to go, he may be struggling with separation anxiety that began before school even started. If kids are younger, they may not even recognize that is the reason they feel anxious, and instead you may just see some regression in behavior, such as more clinginess than usual, reticence to play with others, a loss of some milestone like potty training, being more teary or having more tantrums than usual or expressing fears that harm will come to you or to themselves.

There are many ways to help your child through separation anxiety, to make it easier for them to leave home for school every day. First and foremost, check your own anxiety. If you feel nervous about your child going to school, being away from you, harm coming to them and the like, then your child will pick up on that, and it will keep their anxiety high. You will be providing evidence there is plenty to fear. This is often unwittingly the case, because once you have been a child with separation anxiety, it is not unusual to grow into an adult and parent with separation anxiety that gets expressed in the form of fear of being separated from your child. So first parent, heal thyself. Think about your fears and how you can either grapple with them to decrease them or seek help therapeutically to decrease them so you will be able to stop transmitting fear to your child.

The next step is to actively create familiarity in regards to new settings or changes ahead of time whenever possible so that they no longer seem so new or uncertain. It's uncertainty that is often the fuel of the anxiety, so the more familiarity you can create, the better. For example, if you move and your child must start a new school, ask the school to let you visit the classroom ahead of time. Show your child where they he or she will walk in, tell the child what will happen, see the halls, the classroom, the cafeteria. If you can meet the teacher before your child makes the switch to that school, even better.

If you haven't already, create a goodbye ritual for when you will say goodbye in the morning. Having a routine and a ritual breeds certainty and comfort. Make the ritual short and sweet. Prolonged goodbyes increase anxiety. If you're dropping your child off, don't linger, as this makes your child have to keep deciding between being with you and getting engaged in the classroom, and your child will pick you.

Even if your child isn't changing schools, she may still be struggling with the recent start to the new school year. If so, talk to the school about finding a staff member who will help your child after you drop her off and say goodbye to get

engaged in the room. Identify a go-to person your child can be with if she is struggling, and make it clear to your child this person is someone you trust to stand in for you when you are not there.

Younger children often benefit from taking a comfort transitional object with them in their backpack or to have in their cubby. This should not be their most beloved stuffed animal or blanket, because it could get lost or damaged, but another one they like from home to be able to touch or cuddle if they are feeling anxious during the day.

Make sure you, or whoever is retrieving your child after school is not late! Lateness or ever being left at school will increase his anxiety about going in the first place. Some children benefit from a watch to be able to see what time it is and know what time you will be coming for them. Once you do get them, be enthusiastic and curious about what they did during the day, and make it fun for them to tell you about what they have been doing.

Whenever possible, prepare in advance for the next day. Help them have everything laid out and ready, so the morning is relaxed, less rushed and less stressed. Have them pick out their outfit, pack their backpack, make their lunch choices and anything else they can easily do ahead of time. Get up early enough to be ready before them, so you can help them and leave with plenty of time to not be rushed.

Choose your spot to say goodbye, with your ritual and then cheerfully say goodbye. You can expect that separation anxiety can take some weeks to resolve. Do not let your child stay home from school to manage their anxiety. This can quickly turn into a school refusal problem. If the anxiety is making it difficult for your child to function at school or if your child is so withdrawn he or she can't make friends, participate or speak up, then an evaluation from a child psychologist or psychiatrist may be needed. Treatment can be extremely effective, reasonably quick and is very important, because left untreated, other anxieties may develop, become more debilitating or lead to anxiety in adolescence or even adulthood.

## References

Saltz, G. (2018, September 11). What to Do If Your School-Age Child Struggles With Separation Anxiety. Retrieved from <https://health.usnews.com/wellness/for-parents/articles/2018-09-11/what-to-do-if-your-school-age-child-struggles-with-separation-anxiety>