



SEPARATION ANXIETY

Separation anxiety is a normal developmental stage in young children. It's characterised by intense distress at separating from a primary caregiver.

WHY DO CHILDREN EXPERIENCE SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Separation anxiety is a sign of healthy attachment. It's a normal stage of development that begins around the time a child develops object permanence. Symptoms (including distress upon separation, excessive worry about a caregiver's safety and clinginess) usually start to improve around the age of three. However, significant transitions, such as beginning preschool, can cause symptoms to reappear or persist for longer than expected. Separation anxiety is only a concern when it is intense, persistent (present for longer than 4 weeks) and when it interferes with the child's everyday life.

HELPFUL STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY

Separation anxiety is minimised when there are predictable routines, including consistent, calm rituals at drop-off and pick-up. This might include a hug, kiss or high five. A short, calm and positive departure sends a clear message that others consider the child capable of separating for short periods. Children are more settled at separation when they are reassured of their caregiver's return, have a clear understanding of when that will be (e.g., after lunch), and when they can rely on this information. Comfort items, such as a blanket, teddy, toy or photo, can be helpful. Gradually increasing time away from the caregiver is a recommended practice.

WHAT PROLONGS SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Inconsistencies, such as frequent late arrivals and days off, can exacerbate separation anxiety. Leaving without saying goodbye can cause children to worry that loved ones will disappear, whilst long, emotional goodbyes can send the message that the separation is an event to fear.