

Separation Anxiety: What It Is & What You Can Do



Understanding Separation Anxiety

Whether it's daycare drop-off, heading to work, or even going to the bathroom — separation can feel like a big deal for toddlers, and if we're being honest, it's usually really hard for caregivers too. You are not alone! Separation anxiety is really common and **developmentally expected**.

~6 Months

Separation anxiety typically **begins** around 6 months of age.

12–18 Months

Anxiety **peaks** between 12 to 18 months — this is completely normal.

Up to 36 Months

Generally present until 36 months, but decreases **significantly** over time.

Why Does It Happen?



A Sign of a Strong Bond

Separation anxiety is *actually* a sign of a strong attachment. Your child cries because **you are their safe place** — and that's a beautiful thing.



No Concept of Time

Toddlers aren't wired to understand time the way we do. When you say *"I'll be back soon,"* it doesn't mean much to them. Even a short goodbye can feel like forever.



Co-Regulation

Your emotions set the tone. If your child picks up on your guilt or hesitation, goodbyes get even harder. Confidence from you means confidence in them.

Tips for Smoother Separations



Keep Goodbyes Short, Sweet & Predictable

Lingering can actually make separation harder. A quick hug and a confident send-off works best. Try: *"I love you! I will see you after snack time!"* or *"Have a great day at school! I can't wait to hear about it later!"*



Create a Fun Goodbye Ritual

If goodbyes have been especially tough, try adding a repeatable ritual — a kiss on both cheeks, a routine high five, or a funny phrase like *"See you later, alligator!"* Routine builds security, and these little rituals help toddlers feel more in control.



Practice in Low-Stress Situations

Games like peek-a-boo, stepping into another room briefly, or short visits with a trusted family member help toddlers learn that you will **always** come back. Starting early and small makes a big impact before bigger transitions like daycare or preschool.

Extra Tools for Comfort & Connection



Books About Goodbyes

Books can give toddlers **words for what they're feeling** and reassure them that separation is temporary. Reading together before a transition is a gentle and powerful tool.




Transitional Objects

A small stuffed animal, a cozy blanket, or even a **family photo** can help your child feel connected to you while you're apart – a tangible piece of your bond they can hold onto.



Never Sneak Away

It might seem easier to leave while your child is distracted, but disappearing without a goodbye can **increase anxiety** and make future separations even harder. Always say goodbye – confidently and consistently.

 **Reassuring reminder:** Most toddlers calm down within **minutes** of you leaving. Many kids transition to play quickly once they settle into their routine. Crying doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong – it means your bond is strong.

What to Keep in Mind



Consistency Is Key

The more predictable the routine, the more secure your toddler will feel over time. Stick to your goodbye ritual every single time.



It Strengthens Your Bond

Separation anxiety actually *deepens* your attachment – it teaches your child that you will **always** come back, building lasting trust and security.



Know When to Reach Out

If your little one cries for hours, refuses to eat or sleep, or avoids new environments even with trusted caregivers, it may be worth checking in with your **Ollie team**. You don't have to do this alone.

References

- References: American Psychological Association (APA), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Zero to Three, HealthySteps.