

Stranger Anxiety

# How to Help My Toddler Feel Safe with New People



# Why Does Stranger Anxiety Happen?

Stranger anxiety is a **normal part of development**. It typically shows up around 6 to 12 months and can last through age 2. If your little one clings to you, cries, or looks uneasy around unfamiliar faces, know that this is completely expected – it's a sign their brain is developing and learning to tell the difference between familiar and unfamiliar people!



## Brain Development

Their brain is learning to recognize who feels familiar vs. unfamiliar – an important survival skill.



## Protective Instinct

Being cautious around strangers is an evolutionary trait that helped keep babies safe.



## Still Learning Trust

Toddlers don't fully understand social norms yet – they're still figuring out who they can trust.

# What Your Baby Is Telling You



## You Are Their Safe Place

Their hesitation around strangers reflects the deep trust they have in you.



## Attachment Growing

As babies attach more to primary caregivers, they become more aware when someone else enters their space.



## Your Response Matters

Babies look to caregivers for emotional cues. If you're calm and comfortable, it helps them feel at ease.

# Practical Strategies to Help Your Little One



## Give Time to Warm Up

Allow your baby to observe from the safety of your arms before engaging with someone new.



## Stay Close for Reassurance

A gentle hand on their back or a reassuring word can make a big difference as they explore at their own pace.



## Let Them Take the Lead

Encourage new people to engage with low pressure — playing alongside or offering a toy rather than rushing a hug.



## Validate Their Feelings

Try: *"Yeah, that's a new face! It's okay, I am right here with you."* This builds trust and helps them feel understood.



## Model Confidence

If they see you talking and smiling comfortably with a new person, it signals that the person is safe.

## More Ways to Support Your Child



### Practice with Familiar Faces

Regular, predictable exposure to extended family or trusted caregivers can help ease stranger anxiety over time.



### Use Books & Stories

Reading about meeting new people can help toddlers process and prepare for real-life social situations.



### Should I Comfort Them?

Yes! Comforting your child teaches them that their feelings are valid and that you're a secure base they can trust.



### Don't Force Interaction

No need to push them into uncomfortable situations. Respect their need for space and allow trust to build naturally.



### This Is a Phase

Most toddlers outgrow stranger anxiety by age 2–3 as their social confidence grows.

# When to Seek Extra Support

Stranger anxiety is a normal developmental phase, but it may be helpful to check in with your **Ollie psychologist** if your child:

Shows **extreme distress** that doesn't improve over time

Becomes **inconsolable** around unfamiliar people, even in familiar places

**Avoids social situations** entirely or refuses to engage with anyone but their primary caregiver

Has difficulty **adjusting to new caregivers** even after repeated exposure

- Remember, we are here to provide guidance tailored to you and your child's needs. You're doing all the right things by being patient, supportive, and responsive — and your child will gain the confidence to navigate new interactions with ease!

References: APA (American Psychological Association), AAP (American Academy of Pediatrics), CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention), Zero to Three (Early childhood development resource), HealthySteps (Pediatric health & development program)