



Stranger Anxiety

New parents can sometimes be quite surprised when their six-month-old baby suddenly screams in protest instead of putting on a beaming smile for grandma as she zooms in for a kiss and a cuddle.

While this might seem unexpected and can be a touch embarrassing at times, your baby is in fact exhibiting a natural stage in their social development. Termed 'separation anxiety', about 75 per cent of children go through a stage where they suddenly react with hesitation and fear to strangers or people they do not see everyday.

They may show behaviours such as fretting, crying, screaming protesting, and clinging which reach their peak soon after a child's first birthday and disappear by the time they are 2 years old. For parents who need to leave their young children with caregivers, separation anxiety can be upsetting, with some parents fearing they might be emotionally harming their child because of the distress they see.

It is important therefore that parents help their children cope with separation by understanding why such anxiety is fairly normal in the first place and allowing their child to feel secure.

Many things cause infants to react with anxiety, including unfamiliar adults interacting with them, loud noises and being left in the company of an unfamiliar caregiver.

When infants lose sight of their parents, they often become upset because they do not know how long the separation will be. They cannot yet form a picture of their mum or dad in their mind and are therefore unlikely to wait calmly and confidently for their parent's return.

As they grow older, children learn that objects and people continue to exist even though they cannot see them and so eventually understand that wherever their parents have gone, they will always return.

To help your child cope better with separation anxiety it is important to spend quality time with them — talking, smiling, holding your child, and sharing enjoyable experiences. While at home, try to keep your child close by as you go about your usual routine. Talk or sing to them as you work. If you need to leave the room, wait for them to follow if they are able, or talk to them so they know you are nearby.

It's often a good idea to let your family and friends know your child is going through a shy stage to avoid too many incidents that may cause anxious feelings. If your child does get upset when being held or spoken to by another adult, hold them yourself until they are calm. Infants become more anxious when parents ignore their distress.

You should not criticise your child for not wanting to go to another adult. Comments such as "Don't be silly", can make the problem worse.

When you need to leave your child, you should always use the same phrase such as “Bye bye for now”. This will help them learn that you are going away, but that you will return. Similarly, a regular greeting such as “Here I am again”, indicates to your child that the separation is over.

Of course it is not always possible for parents to prevent their child protesting when being left in the care of others, but if you allow time for them to become familiar with a responsible caregiver and you are sure yourself that they will be well looked after in a safe environment, your child will eventually develop confidence and mix with others.

PARENTING TIP:

Always remember when dealing with separation anxiety that it is not good for your child to be too protective of them. Infants need lots of chances to meet and mix with others that you trust. Your child will learn that you are still nearby and available, even if they are with someone else.