



How to Help Babies and Toddlers with Separation Anxiety during and after COVID-19



During the past year, you and your family have had to make significant changes to meet the COVID-19 mandates.

Some of you have abruptly ended the routine of daily childcare or school drop-offs. Many of you have replaced weekly errands with online shopping. Others have had to cancel regular visits with family members or friends.

This string of abrupt changes may also have had an impact on your child's separation anxiety. Separation anxiety is a stage of development that is typical for babies and toddlers. It is a sign of attachment to caregivers and is also a common stage of emotional and cognitive development.

As a baby's brain develops, she begins to understand that things exist even if she cannot see them. For example, if a toy is moved into another room, she understands that the toy is somewhere, just not in front of her. The same awareness happens with people, and especially parents, siblings, and primary caregivers. This can lead to separation anxiety.

Separation anxiety is common for babies 9 to 18 months old. It typically lessens around 2 years but can continue to happen when a child feels stressed.

Recently, family experiences have ranged from zero separation to constant separation from family (for example, essential workers). It is a unique time to navigate separation anxiety and can result in added stress for your child and for you.

While this is a challenging time of development, there are ways for you to help your child cope with separation anxiety.

- Talk with your child. Preparing your child for time away is important. Talk to him about what to expect when you leave. Validate his feelings of fear and uncertainty. Answer his questions with honest answers. Sharing information and talking about feelings builds trust and decreases stress.
- Create a short goodbye routine. Children thrive in consistent and predictable environments. Having a short, simple "goodbye" routine can help your child feel safe about the separation. This routine could be sharing a quick hug, waving from a window, or giving them a special toy or blanket to hold. The goodbye routine is a signal that after some time away, there will be time together again.
- Act out the scenario. Imaginary play with dolls or stuffed animals helps children visualize an upcoming event. Play with her using a doll or stuffed animal to act out the upcoming event. Take turns with your child acting out the different roles of people in that setting. You might choose to include a face mask/shield on the dolls or toys so that the child sees each character with and without the mask/shield. This might be a favorite game she will want to play over and over as she adjusts to new experiences.

During typical times, the developmental milestone of separation anxiety becomes better as the child grows older and becomes better able to handle separation from parents or caregivers.

During a global pandemic, the milestone may take longer and may require more intentional effort to resolve. It is okay for you to figure out what works best for your family, to reach out to your community resources including [Help Me Grow Minnesota](#) and to use the resources you need to manage this historic time.

Additional resources include:

- [“Separation Anxiety in Children: Tips to help ease your child’s fear during COVID 19”](#)
– Children’s Health 2021
- [“Separation Anxiety in Children”](#) – National Library of Medicine
- [“How to Ease Your Child’s Separation Anxiety”](#) – HealthyChildren.org by American Academy of Pediatrics