



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 077 | Emotional and mental health

Separation anxiety disorder

What it means

Separation anxiety disorder involves developmentally excessive fear or distress about separation that persists and interferes with daily life. Some separation protest is typical in infancy and toddlerhood. The disorder is distinguished by the child's developmental stage, duration, intensity, and effects on activities such as childcare or sleep. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Temperament, family vulnerability to anxiety, stressful events, changes in routines, and learning experiences may contribute. Difficulties with communication, sensory comfort, or the childcare environment can also intensify distress. Assessment should explore these factors rather than assuming every separation problem comes from one cause. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

A child may repeatedly fear harm to a caregiver, resist separation, have separation-related nightmares, or complain of physical symptoms before leaving home. Younger children may show prolonged clinging or distress. A difficult first day at childcare alone does not establish the disorder. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A clinician reviews the pattern across time and settings, development, family circumstances, and the child's safety and health. Caregiver and childcare reports help distinguish typical adjustment from persistent impairment. Evaluation also considers other anxiety disorders, trauma, and environmental difficulties that might make separation genuinely unsafe or overwhelming. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Caregiver-involved, developmentally adapted psychological treatment can include gradual supported separations and approaches that reduce anxiety-maintaining patterns. Childcare staff help create a consistent plan. Treatment addresses actual environmental or communication barriers as well. Medication is not a routine first response to toddler separation distress and requires individualized clinical consideration. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Use a predictable, brief goodbye and a clear reunion routine. Start with manageable separations agreed with the clinician, using a familiar caregiver or setting when possible. Practice calmly and acknowledge feelings. Coordinate adults' responses and avoid shaming the child for distress.

When to seek help

Seek assessment when persistent separation distress disrupts eating, sleep, childcare, or family functioning. Sudden severe distress after a frightening event needs review of safety and possible trauma.

Questions for your care team

- Is this age-typical adjustment or a disorder?
- What gradual separation plan should caregivers share?
- Are there environmental or communication barriers to address?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss separation anxiety disorder. Separation anxiety disorder involves developmentally excessive fear or distress about separation that persists and interferes with daily life. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: Myth: every toddler who cries at goodbye has a disorder. Developmental context and sustained impairment matter.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Separation anxiety: distress related to being apart from an attachment figure.
- Functional impairment: difficulty carrying out everyday activities.
- Attachment figure: a person the child relies on for comfort and security.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Anxiety disorders in children

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/anxiety-disorders-in-children/>

[2] Separation anxiety

<https://www.nhs.uk/baby/babys-development/behaviour/separation-anxiety/>

[3] Children and Mental Health: Is This Just a Stage? - National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/children-and-mental-health>