

Separation Anxiety

This toolkit is for parents or carers of a child with additional needs or developmental difficulties.

Here are some ideas and strategies **around understanding and supporting separation anxiety in both you and your child.**



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What is Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a natural part of child development. On average, children begin to develop separation anxiety around 8 months old, as at this stage of development, children often struggle to understand that when someone leaves a room they are not gone forever. Consequently, they can become distressed whenever they lose sight of you as they might worry that you are gone forever.

In some children with additional needs, separation anxiety can be present as early as birth, as the child can associate certain senses (i.e., smell) with you and may require those senses to be present to remain calm.

What does Separation Anxiety look like?



Crying



Clinginess



Sweating



Shouting/tantrums



Worry

Your child displaying any of these behaviours around a separation of any kind can indicate that your child is feeling anxious. However, it is worth remembering that **every child is unique** and what separation anxiety looks like will vary between children. Therefore, it is important to learn what separation anxiety looks like in your child.

How long does Separation Anxiety last?

Separation anxiety tends to peak during the early toddler years, as children learn that separations are not permanent, and tends to decrease as children grow up. However, this is not always the case, and some children continue to experience separation anxiety into adolescence.

Certain distressing events can also trigger a re-emergence of separation anxiety in your child, as they may create a strong need for comfort from you to ease their distress. These include:



School



Short breaks



Loss



Transitions



Parent/child ill health

Separation anxiety in Parents

How do you feel when you are away from your child? Worried? Sad? Guilty? All of the above? If so, you're not alone! Separation anxiety is a common experience for parents to go through as their child develops.

Like children, **every parent's experience with separation anxiety is different**. We asked our KISS parents about some of their experiences with separation anxiety:

"We want our kids to be heard and understood in an environment where we are not there to represent them"

"You get used to always being there for them"

Here the causes of our parents' separation anxiety ranged from a fear their child's voice would be lost without them present to simply not being used to not being there for them all the time.

Whatever the cause of your anxiety, we hope you can take comfort in knowing you are not alone.



How can I reduce my anxiety?

While it is perfectly normal to experience some anxiety when apart from your child, that doesn't make the experience any less distressing for you.

Here are some ways you can reduce your anxiety during separations, as recommended by our KISS parents!

Plan something exciting

If you find that you are dreading separations from your child/ spend the whole time worrying about them, try planning to do something exciting during that time.

You could catch up with a friend, grab a coffee from your favourite café, or simply sit on the sofa and watch that show you really want to watch.

By planning something that excites you during the separation you give yourself something positive to think about before the separation, and a distraction during the separation.



Surround yourself with people who understand

Creating a network of professionals who understand the needs of your child can help you to be away from y Finding a friend or family member who will he listen to your concerns can also help reduce your anxieties, as sometimes all you need to feel better is to voice your worries to a friendly face.

The Circle of Security®

It is perfectly normal for you to feel anxious about being apart from your child for a period of time and for your child to feel anxious about being apart from you for a period of time. However, it can be helpful to think about how children learn to feel safe in going out and exploring the world around them.

The Circle of Security® image below shows the idea of a circle of separation and reconnection. It suggests that children are always on the circle somewhere and how we meet their needs on the circle depends on where we think they are.



When children are **'going out'** on the top of the circle, to **explore** their surroundings away from you, we can:

- **Watch over them** (Watch over me)
- **Delight in their exploring** (Delight in me)
- **Help them** (Help me)
- **Show enjoyment in what they are doing** (Enjoy with me)

While neither you nor your child may be ready for your child to go and explore far away, or for a long time, you can practice these reactions with shorter separations to help your child learn that it is safe to go out and explore.

When children are **'coming in'** to you for support on the bottom of the circle, we can view this as them needing to have an emotional need met.

Through their behaviour, they might be asking us to;

- **Protect them**
- **Comfort them**
- **Delight in them**
- **Organise their feelings**

There is no perfect parenting

It can be hard to consistently meet all your child's needs at all points in the circle, and that's okay! What matters is always trying to support your child as they move around the circle.

And remember, in parenting, good enough is good enough!

By responding to their emotional need when they come in to us, children become more confident to go out and explore again.

Preventative Tools and Strategies

Here are some long-term and short-term strategies that can help prevent the onset of separation anxiety

Prior to separation

Gradually introduce separations

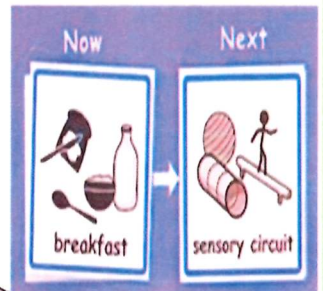
For example: Leaving Jacob in class

1. Mum sits in class with Jacob → leaves for a few minutes BUT remains in view → returns to class and sits with Jacob
2. Mum settles Jacob in class → leaves BUT remains in view → reunite after class
3. Mum settles Jacob in class → leaves AND does not remain in view → reunite after class

Long separations can be very scary for your child. Using shorter separations can help your child build up their confidence levels prior to the big separation.

Create plans and routines

Visual plans can help ease your child's anxieties by showing them what to expect throughout the separation and exactly when they will be reunited with you.



Things don't always go to plan!

Make sure your child is aware that their plan is only a guide so their day may end up being slightly different.

At the time of separation

Language

Language can have a big effect on your child. Negative words and phrases such as '**she left**' or '**he's gone**' can make your child more anxious as they fear you are not coming back.

Try to use positive language and specific return times that your child will understand, like '**your dad will be back after story time**', to help reassure your child that the separation is only temporary.

Attachment objects



Providing your child with an object to remind them of you throughout the day can help them feel connected to you during the separation period and potentially reduce their distress.

Practically speaking, it may be helpful to use a small object that fits in your child's pocket, such as a friendship bracelet with you scent on.

But the most important thing is to make the object personal and consider **what does my child find comforting?**



Timing is everything

Children are often more likely to experience separation anxiety when they are tired, hungry, ill etc. so try to introduce separations when your child is full up and/or well rested.

Top
Tip!

Calming Tools and Strategies

Here are some tools and strategies to use when your child begins to feel anxious



Star Breathing

Start at any **breathe in** side and move around the whole star, completing each action, until you arrive back at the first **breathe in** point.

Actions:

Breathe in – inhale for 4 seconds

Hold – hold your breath for 5 seconds

Breathe out – exhale for 6 seconds

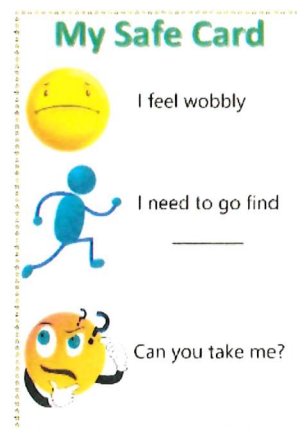
Safe Person

A Safe Person is someone at a location your child can turn to when they begin to feel anxious or worried.

A Safe Person can help your child regulate their emotions or simply stay near the child as they regulate themselves, depending on what your child finds comforting.

You can create a **Safe Card** with your child that they can use to indicate they want their Safe Person or to tell their Safe Person they are feeling anxious or worried.

Some examples of Safe Cards:



Aim to work with everyone involved with your child to promote consistency in your approaches to manage anxiety.

Useful Resources

Self-help Apps

Self-help apps can be a useful and viable way of support. The NHS have published apps on their digital library, some focused on helping you relax include:



Useful websites

The following websites may offer some useful resources and information regarding building resilience, learning disabilities, and mental health support.

- <https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>
- <https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/anxiety-type/separation-anxiety/>
- <https://www.twinkl.co.uk/blog/how-to-help-your-child-with-separation-anxiety>
- <https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/>

Further support

Helping Hands Psychology Team: If you require further support please use the contact details overleaf to contact the Helping Hands team in your designated Children's Centre.

GP: If you are concerned about yourself or a member of the family you can access support from your local GP.

Charities: Charity organisations such as Mind Cymru, Samaritans and Young Minds may also be able to provide you with support.

Mind Cymru	02920 395 123
Samaritans	116 125
Young Minds	0808 802 5544

Local Support Groups: Groups are a great way to meet new people and to talk about shared experiences. Here are the links to some we are aware of in the local area.

https://www.facebook.com/SparrowsAln/	http://www.valleydaffodils.co.uk/
https://www.magicparents.co.uk/	http://www.buildingbridgesproject.org.uk/
https://hopegb.co.uk/	http://www.onelife.wales/About-us/
https://www.asdinfo.wales.co.uk/newport-autism-support-group/	

Contact

This toolkit was created by the **Helping Hands Psychology for Children with Additional Needs** team at the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (ABUHB).

Your feedback is important to us! If you would like to tell us what you thought about this self-help toolkit, please get in touch by emailing ABB.HelpingHandsTeam@wales.nhs.uk. We would love to hear from you.

Additionally, if you need any help or support with using or accessing these resources, please do not hesitate to contact a member of the Helping Hands Psychology Team.

Serennu Children's Centre	Nevill Hall Children's Centre
01633 748023	01873 732713
Caerphilly Children's Centre	
02920 867447	

Please contact the team if you would be interested in any of our other toolkits on the following topics -

Understanding and
Managing Behaviour

Building Resilience

Promoting Sleep

Supporting Siblings

Managing Anxiety

Friendships

Supporting
Transitions

