Separation Anxiety Disorder

A guide for children, teens, and caregivers



Separation anxiety disorder involves strong, persistent fear about being away from a parent or another trusted caregiver. It goes beyond what is expected for the child's age and disrupts everyday life. Separation worries are common in young children; the disorder can affect older children and teens too.

Common symptoms

- Strong distress about separation
- Fear that a caregiver will be harmed or not return
- Avoiding school or activities to stay near a caregiver
- Trouble sleeping apart or separation nightmares
- Stomachaches or nausea

Why does it happen?

Temperament, biology, and stressful changes or losses may contribute. Several factors can overlap, and no single cause explains every case. Children and caregivers are not to blame.

Treatment and outlook

The clinician checks development, health, family changes, and any real danger at home or school. Treatment must fit the child's age; ordinary separation distress in a toddler needs a different approach from persistent school avoidance in an older child.

CBT uses agreed, gradual practice with safe separations. Caregivers learn a predictable goodbye and return plan. School staff can help the child rejoin class in manageable steps.

Medication is sometimes considered for significant anxiety, alongside a clear follow-up plan. Ask about the evidence for your child's age and condition. If an antidepressant is used, report new agitation, worsening mood, or suicidal thoughts promptly.

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Living with separation anxiety

Practical steps between appointments



Home and school

Prepare together. Explain where you are going and when you will return. Use a brief, predictable goodbye; follow through on return plans.

Build gradually. Practice short separations with a trusted adult. Agree on manageable steps; avoid sudden, forced separations.

Work as a team. Coordinate with school, listen without shaming, and praise effort even when your child still feels anxious.

When to seek help

Seek help when distress exceeds what is expected for your child's age or disrupts daily life.

Seek early help for missed school. Have physical symptoms checked.

Get urgent help

For suicidal thoughts or a mental health crisis, call or text **988** in the US. Call **911** for immediate danger or a life-threatening emergency. Children and teens: tell a trusted adult right away.

For your next appointment

What does your child fear will happen during separation? Which practice steps have worked? Agree with the clinician and school on the next step and what to do after a difficult morning.

Learn more

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Sources and References

1. **Clinical Practice Guideline for the Assessment and Treatment of Children and Adolescents With Anxiety Disorders**
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