

# **Things I wish someone had told me about childhood anxiety before I dealt with it as a parent!**

## **The Parent's Guide to Childhood & Separation Anxiety**

By Stacey Turner and other expert contributors

### **What is separation anxiety?**

I can assure you, it's not naughty behaviour! Anxiety is an emotion. Anxious thoughts creep in making the child think that something bad might happen and these thoughts – and feelings - take over. Your child's body reacts to these anxious thoughts in a fight or flight way. While every child and family are different, the basic patterns of anxious thinking, physical and behavioural symptoms appear in a similar way.

Separation anxiety is anxiety provoked in a young child by separation or the threat of separation from the child's mother or main carer. Separation anxiety is often a normal stage of childhood development from approximately eight months (sometimes younger, as was our case with our daughter) to five years, sometimes older. It can reappear at times of change and stress.

Separation anxiety can include difficulty in sleeping in their own bedroom, as the child does not want to be on their own and separated. They seek great comfort in being close to parent/carer. The frustration here is it can appear out of nowhere even after your baby/toddler slept blissfully in their own room! It is typically when your child starts realising that they're their own person and that they are missing you.

Sadly, if it's not recognised and the right support is not put in place, panic and distress continues and can manifest. The reason for this is that the child doesn't learn that it's OK to feel the way they do or how to manage it. There is no magic wand, but we can guide our children, help them to feel better and show them it's not so scary.

We can help children reframe thinking and form healthy attachments forming good quality and healthy independence.

### **How is it different to childhood anxiety?**

Have you ever heard someone describe their child as a worrier? Generalised anxiety is when a child's worries are constant and can often be excessive. The worries are usually about a range of different things, rather than concentrating on specifics. A child with anxiety has trouble getting these worries out of their thoughts and as a result finds it hard to settle on a day to day basis. Anxiety can encompass other anxiety disorders, and so it is so important to seek professional help to establish the needs of the child. Then, together with a professional, you can take it from there. It can be a very overwhelming time for parent and child. Often, not knowing is the hardest, so take that step forward and reach out for help.

Worried about your children? You can access help via the following websites and helplines:

[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

[www.barnardos.org.uk](http://www.barnardos.org.uk)

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk) helpline: 08088025544 (Stacey Turner is an ambassador for youngminds!)

Parenting helpline – Family Lives: 08088002222

Homestart helpline: 08000636368

Working for and with single parent families

Gingerbread helpline: 08088020925

YouTube's friendliest and most honest community for mums -The Channel Mum family is about love, trust, friendship and support: [www.channelmum.com](http://www.channelmum.com)

When a child consistently focuses on fear and negative thoughts, the results can be disastrous, but by facing fears, we teach our children confidence, resilience and how to be problem solvers, which is an incredible achievement.

My sister was, and still is a constant worrier, and often would over-think situations. Luckily, it was recognised and we could put things in place as a family and offer alternative solutions to support her needs, such as when we had to travel. Stef had to know why she was getting in the car, where she was going and who she was seeing, what time we were coming home and everything the journey entailed. Sometimes, we had to run her right through to what would happen when we would return that night and reassure her that her pyjamas would be ready on her bed. We were constantly offering her reassurance. Other strategies that helped Stef was having snacks available throughout the journey and soothing transitional objects. Quite often, it was something of mine she could smell. As Stef grew up, she became more aware and has taken control herself. With a total change of lifestyle focusing on health and fitness, she is on top of it and it is wonderful to see her as the confident and self-assured lady, mother and wife she is today.

## **Spotting the signs that your child is anxious**

Children who are anxious tend to think of most things in a way that differs from normal thinking patterns. Thoughts tend to jump straight to the negative, assuming the worst, with conclusions of threat and danger.

It is important to note that it is very common for young children to become anxious, it is necessary for healthy development testing problem solving skills and whether conclusions are pro-active or re-active. While many children grow out of fears, such as fearing monsters under the bed, many continue to worry, with anxious thoughts creeping in causing distress daily.

It's worth noting here that, as the parent/carer, you will feel the panic and worry your child is experiencing caused by fear. Allow this to be your driving force to seek help.

## **Twelve signs of separation anxiety**

Your child may:

1. Be very clingy.
2. Retreat to a corner or hide under furniture.
3. Have difficulty settling back to a calm state.
4. Find it distressing to be in their own bedroom and settle themselves to sleep.
5. Be reluctant to go to sleep: when a child closes their eye's, you disappear and this can stimulate nightmares.
6. Wetting or soiling the bed.
7. Experience toileting accidents in the day.
8. Refuse to go to school: even if your child likes school and their friends.

9. Complain of physical sickness such as a headache or stomach ache just before or at the time of separation (this was a constant struggle for us).
10. Fear something will happen to a loved one.
11. Worry that they may be permanently separated from you.
12. Have little appetite or pick at and complain about food.

If your child's separation anxiety seems to appear overnight, there is the possibility it could stem from a traumatic experience, such as bereavement, and is not separation anxiety. The symptoms may appear the same, but are treated differently.

## **How to deal with anxiety when it's happening**

This is a very big topic that entails a few important questions; how do I deal with this? And what can I do?

### **How do I deal with it?**

It is a healthy and positive step forward that as the parent/carer you acknowledge how you feel. How do you feel about it? Often, as the parent, we are too consumed with putting our kids first and desperately searching for answers that we tire ourselves out and forget our needs. You know you need to do something about it and there is no magic wand, but if you take the time to acknowledge it properly, you can then confidently reach out for support. I know this is hard because you are probably now exhausted and upset, so it is these emotions you need to acknowledge first. A very clever lady I know reminded me...there is a reason why in the event of an emergency in flight, you must put the oxygen mask on yourself first before your child.

Now, acknowledge that there is anxiety within your child; anxious thoughts are creating a range of emotions you can face together. Your child is not naughty, your child is reacting to the situation that is causing these anxious thoughts that are also possibly causing distressing behaviour.

Here's a first step to take once you've acknowledged your own thoughts and feelings. Embrace your child, hold them close and say: "I'm sorry you feel the way you do, what can I do to help you"? To your child, this is immediate acknowledgment and feels your support.

I am often asked: "How do I separate from my child?" to go to work, the shops, for a night out with your friends, or just to get five minutes to yourself. My advice is to get down to your child's level, look them straight in the eye's and confidently say: "I can see you feel upset we are going to be apart, it's OK to feel the way you do. Let's find your teacher/father/grandmother/babysitter and let him/her know you feel upset." In front of your child, say to that person: "Molly is feeling upset at us parting, but she understands I need to leave, can you please support her and help her feel OK about this?" Then say to your child: "Mummy must go now, I will be back to pick you up and I want to hear all about your day and your teacher knows how you feel and is here to offer you support, I will be back later – goodbye."

Please let your child's teacher know if this parting is making you upset, so support can be put in place for you.

### **What can I do?**

This is another common question that I am asked a lot.

My first recommendation is to reach out to your GP and here's why! Did you know negative thinking can have an impact on children's health in many ways? You will have already seen the signs. I need you to know what

services and support are available. I want to reassure you and for you to feel comfortable about going to your GP and understand what to expect.

Dr Phillippa Smith, a GP in Yorkshire for more than 12 years, advises: “If someone seeks advice from me about a child with anxiety, depending on the age of the child, I could refer them to various places. If it’s a very young child (up to five), I would always suggest the health visitor gets involved, as they can give both advice and support to the child and their family. Once they are at school, we can refer to the school nurses. If there are severe concerns, such as danger to the child or other family members, we can refer directly to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services). They have access to play therapists, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists. Sometimes, we ask community paediatricians for input, especially if there are issues around bed wetting or worries about autistic spectrum disorders. In some places in the UK (for older children of 11+), we have ‘Time to Talk’, which is a free counselling and support service for children and teenagers. I would always encourage any parent who has concerns to chat to their GP as the first port of call, as they should be able to help support the child and the parents. Dealing with anxiety can be stressful for other family members too and may be associated with worries or even mental health problems in parents.”

You’ve acknowledged what’s going on and have spoken with your GP. Hopefully you’re armed with lots of information to take that next step forward of seeking help to put alternative solutions in place to support yours and your child’s needs.

*“A little secret! Concentrate on creating harmony and awareness within yourself. Your child will naturally be drawn to and join your calmness and be soothed.” – Stacey Turner*

Speaking to the nursery or school is the next important step. This can be done in a positive and constructive way, so you can all move forward together. Usually, a plan is put together by the parents and nursery/school and then an appointment to review in a fortnight is scheduled. There are policies and procedures that nurseries and schools must follow and abide by, so please don’t be frightened to approach this with the teachers and be honest. Remember, we all need to work together for your child to settle and be taught. Any teacher worth their weight knows the importance of effective communication and teaming up with the parents.

Check in with your child’s teacher at least once a week, sometimes a little nod with a happy thumbs-up in the playground is all it takes.

If you’re working with professionals, please don’t stop when you start seeing improvements. Often therapy practices take a little while to start working and take a great deal of effort and hard work on both sides. I can see why you might be tempted to break away, but keep it up. Often the follow-up is just as important as the initial stages of therapy for review, to keep the momentum going and to tackle things as they arise.

Daily practices that have worked for us:

- Positive reinforcement. Look for every opportunity to offer this! “I really loved the way you helped me pack your bag” “Thank you so much for your help”.
- Reassure your child there is no threat in the situation by offering helpful thoughts.
- Offer a step by step approach and keep communicating the plan with them.
- Promote well-being through consistent routines and practices to include relaxation.
- Lead by example: I’m feeling frustrated because...how do you feel?

## **What is an alternative solution?**

An alternative is required if the current solution is not working, so as professionals, we need to assess by looking at the unique needs of the child and provide alternative solutions.

Taking an active role as the parent/carer with younger children is so important to change anxious thoughts. You need to establish what your child is so frightened of and offer them support in helping to think of other ways to view the situation. Identifying the primary source of fear is a very helpful step. Once you know what your child is frightened of, you can work from here and offer support through role play - this worked amazingly well with our daughter Molly!

I printed photos and created stick puppets by gluing the pictures onto lollypop sticks and through role play, together, we could establish what her greatest fears were and then role play ideal scenarios offering her alternative ways of viewing the situation. It was fun as we danced our puppets around the kitchen table offering her the reassurance she needed. We then introduced friends and other teachers into our collection and soon Molly was recreating scenes from her day to include helping other children to settle!

You can use your child's favourite characters or draw/create your own, but I personally prefer using photos. Choose what works best and be guided by your child.

## **How to deal with it when it's not happening; the in-between times when things seem OK?**

It is important to look at the structure of your day and how you can create a more calm and balanced approach. I often have mums say to me: "I know this is going to be hard, I'm not sure what I'm going to do!" First, worrying in this way is not helping you right now, so let's break that thought pattern. Now it's about putting things in place (alternative solutions) to support what is going to be hard and that includes self-care for you. Be kind to yourself and know you're certainly NOT alone and you need to take things step by step. Help yourself with supportive and positive thoughts, just as you're trying to encourage with your child. The better you are, the better your children.

When looking at the child, considerations of nutrition, sleep and a good routine play a vital part in a successful day ahead.

Let's look at keeping active:

Regular exercise provides so many benefits to our children's growing bodies and is essential for promoting well-being and aiding in the support of anxiety in children. Being active is nature's natural anti-depressant with the release of endorphins; physical competence builds self-esteem and children are more alert, energetic and academically motivated.

Being active helps with:

- Strong muscles and bones
- Weight control
- Good skin
- Decreased risk of developing type 2 diabetes
- Better quality of sleep
- A better and more positive outlook on life
- Encouragement for a more active, balanced and positive life

## Let's look at sleep

Kate Cohen, Certified and accredited Sleep Sense Consultant (Dana Oblemans Sleep Sense Program) has been helping families improve sleep since 2016. Kate advises: "Sleep isn't just one of life's luxuries, it's just SO essential for children and parents to get the rest they need to function well daily. There has been a lot of research into the benefits of sleep and we all know that if we sleep well we feel generally better in the morning and as you can imagine, this is also the same for children.

Studies have shown that children who sleep well are much more able to get up and get on with their day in a more balanced way. A child that doesn't sleep well in the night will be running higher cortisol levels (it's a bit like red bull for kids), so they will find learning and concentrating on specific tasks hard and they may get upset quite quickly in day to day situations either with their peers or parents/carers. In addition to this, one of the more recent discoveries has been the link between childhood obesity and sleep. If children don't sleep well, then they could gain more fat and are at a high risk of being overweight from three years old.

I think it's worth having a think about your child and how they handle the day. If there are any issues and they are finding sleep difficult, it's worth focusing on trying to make the sleep better to positively impact their day to day life.

## Let's look at nutrition

Expert Children's Nutritional Therapist, Diane Lobo, has been helping families since 2012, she advises: Eating a diet that is nutritionally balanced may significantly help support children who are experiencing anxiety.

Nutrition tips for supporting children who experience anxiety include:

- Focus on keeping blood sugar levels balanced. The body works hard to keep blood sugar within a certain range throughout the day. Fluctuations outside this range can cause changes in mood, energy and concentrations levels. Some children are more sensitive than others to blood sugar levels but keeping them within range may help reduce anxiety.
- Focus on breakfast – avoid high sugar breakfasts such as sugary cereals and white toast and jam. These foods may imbalance blood sugar levels, starting the day off with a blood sugar peak, followed by a low. This can then set the body off on a rollercoaster of blood sugar fluctuations throughout the day as the body must return to optimal level.
- Include some protein for breakfast – it helps to slow down the release of sugar into the blood stream as well as support more sustained energy levels and mood. You could try eggs, meat, seafood, plain yogurt, milk, nut or seed butters.
- Eat small frequent meals, for example try breakfast, lunch, dinner, with a mid-morning and afternoon snack.
- Do not skip breakfast.

## How to instil confidence in your child

We instil confidence in our children by providing a safe, supportive home, fostering healthy development and leading by example. Also, by showing we understand that a situation may appear upsetting and offering alternative ways of thinking - so interrupting what has become common thoughts.

*"The secret to truly communicating with our children to create feelings of safety and trust is using our body language, facial expression and tone of voice. Our magic wand is the non-verbal cues. You will feel the connection."* – Stacey Turner

Molly is now seven and a half years old and while she still has the wobbles, like all children, I am very pleased and proud to report she has become confident in not only supporting her sister and recognising when other

children need support, but also, she has become more accepting of separation and knows that I will return. More times than not, Molly feels quickly settled and happy.

## Summary:

1. Acknowledge the situation for yourself and your child.
2. Seek help where you can get it:
  - GP where it can be logged on your child's medical records for further help and support. Also, where you can be referred for further assistance.
  - Nursery/school. Does your child's school have a nurture department?
  - Seek help privately if necessary. You can speak to a therapist, nutritionist, sleep expert...
3. Stick to a daily routine to include good nutrition and exercise, sleep and those alternative solutions to support those wobbly times.
4. Be sure to put those alternative solutions in place, lead by example and I promise you, it will get easier!
5. Have faith and remember self-care for you.

I want you to know that anxiety problems amongst children are very common and while they can be a serious problem, they can be supported and over-come for a much healthier future.

*Stacey x*

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## Stacey Turner

With a love of writing and a joy of working with children as an early years' professional of over 25 years, Stacey Turner was inspired to create a book – **I'm Going To Nursery** to help settle her eldest daughter into nursery during a very difficult transitioning time. Stacey is well placed to create such a book with all her years of experience settling other children, so as soon as she recognised her daughter needed support, she put pen to paper, using every avenue of expertise and the result is what we see before us today in the hope it will help and support other children and parents. Stacey's very nurturing approach stems from a deeper understanding of the early years and how important it is to meet social and emotional needs of our children. Originally from Melbourne, Stacey lives in London and has two daughters aged eight and ten. **I'm Going To Nursery** was born in June 2012 and Stacey continues to write and develop other stories which help children through tricky times.

EDIT: Stacey is currently re-writing **I'm Going to Nursery** acceptable for all families. Stacey said, "Not all families have a mummy and I'm on a mission to support all family situations.!"

**I'm Going To School** will be released in 2021. The stories are often inspired by her own daughters and can usually be found at the art table in her kitchen creating with her girls, if not running her mental health charity, It's OK To Say.