

MENTALHEALTH

factbox

Separation anxiety

Separation anxiety is a fear of the unknown during separation and not feeling connected.

It is common on varying levels, and can develop at any time and reappear at times of stress and change.

It can result from undiagnosed disorders at any age, such as dyslexia.

It can also be caused by another child/person in the room with the situation unrelated to your child.

It may impact on the whole family, and could be caused by an extremely over protective parent, drastic change, stressful situations or the loss of a loved one (including a pet).

It may also cause poor school performance.

Follow Stacey at www.staceyleeturner.com and tune into the Parents Show on Radio Verulam 92.6FM on the September 13 to hear her discuss separation anxiety with other guests.

New school traumas? How to tackle separation anxiety

For many children, the anxiety of being separated from parents when they start school means it is a traumatic time for all involved. Separation anxiety expert Stacey Turner looks at how to cope in the second part of this feature.

Imagine your child learning self-care, soothing and survival skills in their formative years, skills which build confidence, trust and resilience they can carry forward and draw on when required in the future.

For a child to learn it's OK to feel the way they do and that it's OK to reach out for help is vital to ensure they feel heard, understood and valued.

Anxious children tend to think of most things in a way that differs from their peers, thoughts tend to jump straight to the negative, assuming the worst with conclusions of threat and danger. While many children grow out of these fears, such as fearing monsters under the bed, many continue to worry with anxious

thoughts creeping in and causing daily distress.

Embrace your child, hold them close and say: "I'm sorry you feel the way you do, what can I do to help you? We're in this together!"

To your child, this is immediate acknowledgment and helps them feel your support. Don't just think these things, say them, engage in conversation in the hope they will open up and reveal what is causing them distress.

Every child is different, so it's important to look for creative ways to help engaging your child through their own interests.

I really want to encourage you to reach out and ask for support if you think you need it.

Your GP will refer your child onto many age appropriate services. If wetting or soiling of the bed is constant, please consult your GP.

School can help - it's not just your responsibility! A private specialist or psychologist specialising in separation anxiety or childhood anxiety disorders may also be appropriate.

Taking an active role as the parent/carer is important. With or without help, you need to establish what your child is so frightened of.

Learning to rephrase things can have a profound impact. Your tone of voice and a positive presence are vital.

Communication with their teacher and support staff is a MUST. Equally, it's important to ensure the teacher encourages your child to let them know when they are feeling upset.

It could be a little note with a sad face, and the teacher can have a helping/soothing response at the ready. I like to think we are all

An illustration created by Claire Spake with guidance from Stacey Turner to represent separation anxiety without the use of words.



a part of mentally healthy schools.

Keep your morning routine as simple and stress free as possible. If you can, walk to school, as it helps break the intensity and provides time together.

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A quick goodbye while your child is engaged is OK, but this does not suit every child or indeed parent.

Establish what your child likes and dislikes about school, and these can then be included in a

plan with the teacher. Is your child getting the help they need, do they feel engaged enough?

A good question for your child is: "What is the worst thing that can happen?"

Be guided by your child, allow them to explain, start writing the answers down together and create solutions. If your child loves drawing, it's helpful to draw or create the answers in pictures to visualise at times of distress.

Encourage your child to create a comic strip using a template of the scene causing distress. Create a second comic of the ideal scenario. This also helps gauge further understanding.

When working with a child or family, I encourage the use of visualisation techniques to intercept thoughts. It's helpful to partake in an activity while talking, such as cooking to alleviate the intensity, as face to face can be very intimidating.

A watch may be helpful for your child to have a positive control and know when it's time to come home. Provide a story for after school or the time you will collect your child, such as going for coffee or cooking dinner together. This way, a positive story starts forming in their mind with something to look forward to.

A comfort item, such as a little teddy on a keyring you've chosen together attached to your child's bag or a tiny textured heart sewn into the pocket of your child's uniform is also helpful.

'Every morning was torture and tears' - parents' stories

Local parents have come forward to offer their own experiences of separation anxiety.

Hannah, mum to 10 year old son Harlen said: "At first, I couldn't believe that at 10, you could feel like this, yet I've learn't you can feel like this at any age!"

"I wish there were some school guidelines, some empathy would be nice. We've been left in the school corridor struggling with even the teachers not knowing what to do, we feel so let down."

Hannah stressed: "It is so important not to be judgemental of the person going through it or the parent. The world is a tough place to live in, this is a serious misunderstood mental health issue and we should all be kinder, less judgemental and more supportive. Trust your instincts and don't be afraid to seek help and talk, talk as much as possible."

Stacey replied: "I remember feeling alone when we were going through it. I strongly believe in a less judgmental world where

people offer more support than judgement. I'm sorry you feel so let down, I really hope a meeting with the school will offer hope and solutions created to support you all."

Claire, mum to a six year old daughter said: "She would start getting anxious on a Sunday night with full-on tears and begging then every morning was torture with tears and upset."

"When we arrived at school she was obsessed with the visual timetable and would make us go through it several times so she knew exactly what was happening. The school was great and always had the timetable up ready for her."

"We found out she was having real trouble with someone at school. It had been going on since reception and although we had raised it before, it had escalated and now she was even worse with her separation anxiety reaching maximum level of crazy."

Stacey's response: "Poor thing, this is an example of a child displaying actions of a situation

frightening them. They are fearing what's going to happen tomorrow, knowing mummy can't be there to help. I am so happy you and the school have successfully worked together to achieve a positive outcome and one you can keep coming back to."

"With separation anxiety, children not only want to be comforted, they need to give affection because they worry how you are, panicking how you are doing without them."

"It helps to look at ways for them to give that affection whether it's through an item or taking a photo in the morning and telling them: 'When you're missing me through the day, I can look at this'."

"Sometimes, my girls leave kiss marks on the mirror or a little note or picture for me to come across during the day."

These are a handful of suggestions Stacey feels essential to get going. Each child and family experience differently, therefore it is essential to seek help for your individual circumstances.



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