

# CAMPAIGN

## How you tackle the trauma of separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety specialist **Stacey Turner**, founder of the It's OK To Say mental health awareness campaign, offers practical advice on settling children of any age going through this traumatic experience.

**Separation anxiety is provoked by separation or the threat of separation from the child's parent or main carer. It is often a normal stage of childhood development from approximately six to eight months onwards, and can reappear at times of change and stress.**

Sadly, if it's not recognised and if the right support is not put in place, panic and distress continues and can manifest at later dates because the child doesn't come to terms with these feelings or how to manage them.

There is no magic wand, but we can guide our children, help them to feel better and show them it's not so scary, supporting them to reframe thinking and form healthy attachments leading to good quality and healthy independence.

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

but it is essential to identify the root cause and take it from there.

Acknowledge within yourself that there is anxiety within your child, creating a range of emotions you can face together.

Your child is reacting to a situation provoking anxious thoughts and even distressing behaviour.

The first step to take is to 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 or just to get five minutes to myself?"

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/parent/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: "I must go now (try and be specific where) I will be back and I want to hear all about your day. Your teacher knows how you feel and is here to support you and I will be back later – goodbye."

Again, try and be specific with time you will be returning or at what part in their day they should expect to see you.

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

I want you to know that anxiety is very common, it's an opportunity for you to lead by example and nurture this wobble, helping to manage big emotions and teaching valuable lessons.

The secret to truly communicating with our children to create feelings of safety and trust is by using our body language, facial expression and tone of voice. Our magic wand is the non-verbal cues.

Speak to your child's nursery or school in a positive and constructive manner, so you can all move forward together.



Separation anxiety specialist Stacey Turner

Picture: STEPHANIE BELTON

Usually, a plan is put together to review to ensure progression. Check in with your child's teacher at least once a week, sometimes a little nod with a happy thumbs-up is all it takes, or maybe a diary is updated and sent home daily.

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.

An alternative solution 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.

There are many strategies that can be put in place and a wealth of information to meet the needs of you and your child, no matter the age. If your concern continues, please do not hesitate to consult your GP and/or other professionals.

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