

Little Bright Minds Preschool

Separation anxiety is a normal developmental stage that many children experience when starting at a new child care facility. For some, it can be a temporary adjustment period, while for others, the distress is more intense. With the right strategies, parents and caregivers can help children transition smoothly.

Causes and signs in a child care setting

Causes

Several factors can trigger separation anxiety when a child begins attending a child care facility:

- Object permanence: Around 6–12 months, babies learn that objects (and people) still exist even when they can't see them. However, since they don't understand time, they don't know when their caregiver will return, causing fear.
- Stranger anxiety: Developing around the same time as object permanence, this is a fear of unfamiliar people.
- Changes in routine: A new child care setting is a major shift in routine. Older toddlers and preschoolers may experience separation anxiety during any significant life change, such as a new sibling or a family move.
- Caregiver stress: Children are highly perceptive and can pick up on a parent's own anxieties about separation. A parent's stress can influence a child's emotions, making the drop-off more difficult.
- Overprotective parenting: While well-intentioned, an overprotective parenting style can sometimes hinder a child's ability to cope independently with new situations.

Signs

In a child care facility, a child with separation anxiety may exhibit the following behaviors:

- Intense crying, fussing, or screaming at drop-off.
- Clinging to the caregiver and refusing to let go.
- Expressing a fear of strangers, even those they've seen before.

- Waking at night or having nightmares about separation.
- Complaining of physical symptoms like headaches or stomachaches, particularly on child care days.
- Withdrawing from other children or activities.

Strategies for a smooth transition

Before starting child care

- Familiarize your child with the facility. Take your child to visit the new center and meet the caregivers before their first day. Many centers offer an orientation period for this reason.
- Ease into it. If possible, start with a gradual transition, such as shorter days or fewer days per week, and build up to the full schedule.
- Read books about child care. Reading stories about other children having positive experiences at daycare can help normalize the experience and build excitement.
- Practice separation. Leave your child with a trusted friend or family member for short periods to get them used to being away from you.

During the transition

- Develop a goodbye ritual. Create a quick, consistent goodbye routine, such as a special wave or a high-five. Rituals are predictable and reassuring.
- Keep goodbyes brief and confident. Long, drawn-out goodbyes can make the separation more difficult. Be calm, kiss your child goodbye, and reassure them you'll be back.
- Bring a comfort item. A favorite stuffed animal, blanket, or family photo can serve as a transitional object, providing a sense of familiarity and security.
- Time drop-offs wisely. If possible, schedule drop-offs after a snack or nap so your child is well-fed and rested.

In partnership with the child care staff

- Maintain open communication. Keep a channel of communication with the caregivers to stay updated on your child's adjustment. Many child care centers use apps to provide real-time updates and photos.
- Share information. Provide caregivers with information about your child's habits, preferences, and any recent changes at home that might affect their mood.
- Celebrate successes. Praise your child's bravery and emphasize the fun parts of their day at pickup. This positive reinforcement helps them feel proud of their accomplishments.

When to seek professional help

While most children eventually adjust, prolonged, intense distress can be a sign of a more serious condition called Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD). If your child's anxiety:

- Seems unusually intense for their age.
- Lasts for more than four weeks.
- Interferes significantly with their ability to function in daily life.
- Includes panic attacks or other concerning behaviors.

It is a good idea to consult with a pediatrician or child psychologist for guidance.