

TIP SHEET FOR RELATIVES AS PARENTS

TALKING ABOUT SEPARATION ANXIETY

Generally, children go through periods when they become upset when you leave them. This is separation anxiety. Have you experienced this and have you wondered if it is ok? There are developmental stages when separation anxiety is normal. For example, at around 8 months of age, children generally begin to become anxious, clinging, and easily frightened about unfamiliar people or objects. It may peak between 12-18 months. These age ranges are only general guidelines for when/if a child experiences separation anxiety because each child develops in his or her own way and schedule. Separation anxiety is a sign that the child is reaching an important developmental milestone where attachments have developed between the caregiver and child (Brazelton, 1992). The child now understands that there is only one of you, and shows these anxious behaviors because he wants you to stay close to him.

Sometimes, separation anxiety may be a reaction to traumatic stress, such as the loss of a loved one, moving to another family, or a stay in the hospital. In these situations, separation anxiety is expected and is normal. For many children living with grandfamilies, separation anxiety may not show up for many months or years after they've come to live with relatives. Even elementary-aged children or teenagers can experience separation anxiety. Why? The child first has to build that bond or attachment to their new caregiver. After that, they experience the emotional developmental stage of separation anxiety.

In some cases, the anxious reaction is excessive and ongoing, which might suggest the child has symptoms of Separation Anxiety Disorder. If you suspect your child has Separation Anxiety Disorder seek professional help to develop a coping strategy that will work for your family.

How you can help your child with separation anxiety

- **Separation / Return games-** Young children not only love to play games, they learn a lot, too. "Peek-a-boo" and "Where's the baby?" are classics. Hiding and finding objects and "hide and seek" around the house are fun too.
- **Practice Separations** – You can practice "hello" and "bye-bye" from room to room. Be sure to reassure the child that you'll be back soon before you pop back in with a smile and "hello". Gradually make the practice separations longer as they learn that you will come back when you say you will.
- **Prepare your child**– Separations will probably go more smoothly if the child is not hungry, sick, or tired. Let the child know, in a way they can understand, when you will return and stick to your word.
- **Don't sneak away** – Good-byes should be brief and affectionate. Don't make a big fuss over leaving. Stay calm and matter-of-fact. Keep your own anxiety about leaving under control. Seeing you distressed will confirm to the child that there really is something wrong.
- **Use a transitional object** – Help your child pick a transitional object or reminder from home (like a picture of you or something that belongs with you) to carry or keep in a pocket or desk.

Information for this tip sheet was excerpted from:

www.library.adoption.com *Separation Anxiety in Young Children*;

www.special-needs.adoptionblogs.com *The Line Between Separation Anxiety & Trauma*

www.drgreene.com *Separation Anxiety*

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