

Clinical Corner – Separation Anxiety in Children and Adolescents

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One of the most common forms of anxiety is separation anxiety. During certain times in childhood, anxiety increases with transitions to pre-school, kindergarten, and 1st grade, and later in sixth grade or high school. Anxiety may also be present at other times, especially when there is family stress or environmental changes. While some anxiety is normal, if it goes on longer than a month or significantly impairs daily functioning, you should seek help from a therapist who, like me, specializes in anxiety and children.

Children suffering from anxiety may complain of head and stomach aches, throw tantrums before going to school, cling to parents or worry that “something bad” will happen while they are away. They may experience sleep disturbance, fear of the dark or feel unsafe when alone, even if you are in the next room.

Parents often ask me, “What can I do?” Together, in a family therapy session, we develop coping skills that work for each individual child and family. I always start by establishing a predictable routine. This will help your child know what to expect and then be better prepared. This can include routines for getting ready for school in the morning, dropping off at school, picking up after school, doing homework, eating dinner and going to bed.

When dropping off at school, go through your routine and don't linger – the longer you stay, the longer the anxiety lingers. Children pick up on your anxiety. If you trust the school and teachers, your child will learn to trust them too. Reassure your child that they can call you in case of emergency and then identify a safe person (teacher, counselor, nurse or principal) that they can talk to at school if they are feeling upset.

Having worked with families for 15 years, I find that children can be empowered to soothe themselves. I encourage parents and children to problem solve what they can do to feel better and give praise when they use those ideas. Maybe a special piece of jewelry to wear or token in their pocket will help connect them to you during the day. Encourage them to write down their feelings during the day and share them with you later.

According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the potential long-term effects are serious for a child who has persistent separation anxiety and does not receive professional assistance. Children may also develop serious social or educational problems if their fears and anxiety keep them away from school and friends for extended periods of time.

Separation anxiety can be successfully treated and therapy can be fun!