

Stranger Anxiety

Your newborn baby at birth is not able to differentiate who his parents are. He doesn't mind who is holding him as long as his needs are met. At 1 week, your baby starts to recognize his mother and this is his beginning to show preference for his parents to attend to his needs. He may not issue any protest at being handled by strangers initially. However, when he sees you and realizes that someone else unfamiliar is carrying him, he starts to cry. A newborn is able to smell his mother and prefers to be with her. The mother soothes away stranger anxiety. The baby's sense of security returns when his mother is carrying him.

Many babies between the ages of about 6 months and 2 years develop intense distress when faced with a person who is not dear and familiar to them. They may pout and look very worried — or even burst into wails of terror and despair. Some simply bury their heads on Papa's chest or Mama's shoulder when someone unfamiliar tries to pick them up. This is because he feels insecure and worried with a stranger. This is a normal developmental stage in babies. Sometimes, you can find your baby laughing in response to a stranger's smiles and cooing. However, she will immediately cry if that same stranger tries to carry her. Your baby feels threatened when her sense of security is invaded by a stranger's hold of her. Sometimes, it all depends on the individual's approach to the baby. Babies are frightened by loud noises. If the stranger is a man, your baby is likely to draw back in fear.

Parents can help the baby cope with his stranger anxiety. Whenever your baby cries at the sight of a stranger, do something to reassure him that everything's fine. Hold him and introduce him to the new face. He needs some time to get used to a new friend. When he is confident enough, he may even allow the new friend to hold his hand without bursting into tears.

A baby needs to gain confidence in handling meetings with strangers. When you help him face up to new faces, he will get used to making new friends. He will not cry with strangers anymore.

Most babies will also show true anxiety and upset at the prospect — or reality — of being separated from their parent. Although painful to parents (and of course, babies), separation anxiety is fairly universal among babies and toddlers. If you think about separation anxiety in evolutionary terms — which is how many experts consider its origin— it makes sense: A baby would naturally get upset at being separated from the person to whom he's most bonded, and because that's the person who would protect him from straying and keep him from predators.

How can I help my baby through it?

There are several options available to parents.

Option I: Minimize separations as much as possible and take baby along if he seems to feel anxious. With this option you're basically waiting for your baby to outgrow this perfectly normal developmental stage. If you feel you must have a night out before your child seems ready, have a sitter come over after he has gone to bed.

Option II: If you must leave your baby, for example, to return to work, then try leaving him with people with whom he is familiar, such as his father, grandmother, or aunt. The baby might still protest, but at least he will be with familiar people.

Option III: Childcare by "strangers." Since the first two options won't work for everyone if you find it necessary to leave your child with someone with whom he is unfamiliar, let them get to know one another gradually. Then when you are ready to go away, the two of them will be fast friends.

How should I prepare my baby for separations?

As with any transition, give your baby an opportunity to gradually get used to the idea. Whether you're using a family member or a paid childcare provider, try the following suggestions:

- **Let baby get comfortable.** Ask a new sitter to visit and play with your baby several times before leaving them alone for the first time. For your first "real" outing, ask the sitter to arrive about 30 minutes before you depart so that she and the baby can be well engaged before you step out the door. Employ the same approach at a day care center or at your nursery, church, or health club.
- **Always say goodbye.** Kiss and hug your baby when you leave and tell him where you're going and when you'll be back, but don't prolong your goodbyes.
- **Always say goodbye- Part 2.** Resist the urge to sneak out the back door. Your baby will only become more upset if he thinks you've disappeared into thin air.
- **Keep it light.** Your baby is probably quite tuned in to how you feel, so show your warmth and enthusiasm for the caregiver you've chosen. And don't cry if your baby starts crying — at least not while he can see you. You'll both get through this. No doubt, the caregiver will tell you your baby's tears stopped before you were even out of the driveway.
- **Once you leave, leave.** Repeated trips back into the house or center to calm baby makes it harder on you, the baby, and the caregiver.
- **Try a trial at first.** Limit the first night (or afternoon) out to no more than an hour. As both you and baby become more familiar with the sitter or the surroundings of a childcare setting, you can extend your outings.

How should we handle nighttime separation anxiety?

Your baby's fear of being separated from you at night is very real for him, so you'll want to do your best to keep the hours preceding bedtime as nurturing and peaceful (and fun) as possible. In addition:

- Spend some extra cuddle time with baby before bed by reading, snuggling, and softly singing together.
- If your baby cries for you from his crib or bed, do reassure him and comfort him, but don't stay with him until he falls asleep. This will be painful for you both, but the results will be worth it. You'll have a child who can fall asleep on his own.

What if nothing seems to work?

Babies have different personalities, so some will experience more severe bouts of separation anxiety than others. If your child can't be comforted using simple measures, it's time to reevaluate.

- Take a second look at your sitter or daycare center. Although you executed a thorough search before selecting one, the person or center may be a mismatch for your baby if he continues to become anxious and weepy when you leave.
- Leave your baby with a relative or someone he knows well for 15-minute periods, working your way up to one hour. Your baby can then learn that when you leave you'll return without having the added stress of being with someone unfamiliar.
- Reevaluate your goodbye pattern. Do you sneak out when baby isn't looking? Do you make it seem like you're going off to war? Do you slowly back down the walk waving and crying until baby's out of sight? A simple "see ya' later, alligator" followed by a quick hug and a kiss can do wonders for an anxious child. Your actions show your baby that leaving is no big deal and that you'll be home again soon.