



Anxiety About Leaving Parents

Many children develop worries around leaving their parents or carers. They become very upset when parents leave, or at points of separation such as going into school or childcare. The behaviour often starts following a change such as starting a new school or moving house or sometimes a loss or bereavement.

At first, parents often respond to this behaviour by providing comfort or avoiding leaving the child for fear of causing more distress. Sometimes, the problem resolves, but for some the behaviour becomes worse and can lead to issues at home including the child needing constant reassurance that the parent is near or refusing to sleep alone.

Things that might help:

- Set times for talking about worries, and don't discuss them at other times.
- Offer praise for coping without reassurance, even if it's for really short periods
- At separation points, behave exactly how you would if your child wasn't distressed (e.g. say goodbye, smile and leave).
- Use picture planners to provide visual cues for your child, include pictures of leaving followed by the activity, followed by you returning.
- Do not punish, talk excessively or ask for explanations for the behaviour.
- Plan a graded programme of leaving your child, start with 10 minutes and build from there.
- If there are bedtime issues, start working on these. Support your child to be able to go to bed and settle themselves to sleep without you being there.
- Be aware that television can sometimes contribute to this behaviour. Watching news stories or programmes about people hurting others can fuel worries about parents being harmed.
- Recognise that your child may use other means to check you are there such as asking for drinks or to use the toilet at bedtimes.
- Remember anxiety has physical symptoms. Feeling sick, tired or dizzy are common anxiety symptoms so when your child says they are feeling ill they might not be making it up.
- Get support. Dealing with an anxious child can be very stressful, seek support from professionals, other parents or family members.
- Don't feel guilty, many children experience this issue and many parents experience feelings of frustration in relation to it.