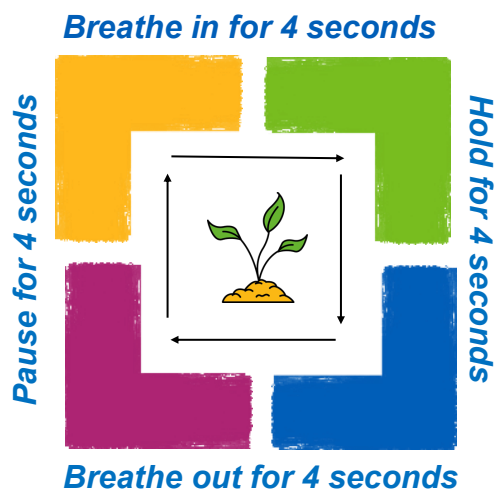


Managing separation anxiety

A Guide for parents and carers



With **all of us** in mind.

What is separation anxiety?

A feeling of anxiety that occurs when leaving home and saying goodbye to important people, such as parents and carers. This can also be called feeling **homesick**. It can be experienced by children of any age, though is more common in younger children.



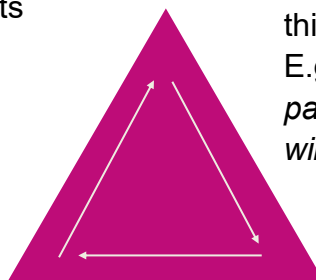
Your child might get this feeling when going to school, to a friend's house or when you leave to go to work.

The anxiety cycle

1. Thoughts...

Behaviour impacts thoughts which keeps the cycle going

Your child might think about worries, **bad, scary thoughts**, or things going wrong. E.g. *If I say bye to my parents something bad will happen.*



3. Behaviour...

These feelings can impact your **child's behaviour**. They might run away, refuse to go to school, hide, pace up and down, talk quickly, become withdrawn, cry, shout, do things to push others away, **avoid leaving and saying goodbye**.

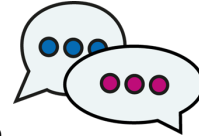
2. Feelings...

Anxious thoughts can lead to **anxious feelings** - sick, shaky, worried, dizzy, frightened, unsettled, sad or tired.



What can I do to help?

It's important to **address anxiety early on** to stop the thoughts - feelings - behaviour cycle from spiralling. The longer anxiety is left unresolved the bigger the fears, feelings and the situation can become.



Talk...

Talking to your child about how they are feeling helps them to understand their emotions.

1. Talk about anxiety. Explain that **anxiety is a normal feeling** that everyone experiences. It is our body's way of coping with difficult situations. Explain that anxiety will pass and does not last forever.
2. **Challenge your child's anxious thoughts**. What are they worried will happen? How likely is this to actually happen? Remind them of times when they have felt anxious before and things have been okay.
3. Help your child to **replace irrational worry thoughts** with rational positive thoughts to try to break the anxiety cycle. Positive thoughts -> happier feelings -> calmer behaviours.

E.g. Negative thought - If I say goodbye to my parents something bad will happen to them.

Positive thought - I have said bye to my parents before and they have been okay. I can say bye to them again. I will see them later.

Plan...

Knowing what is going to happen and when can help your child to feel calmer. **Regular routines can reduce anxiety.**



1. Sit down with your child and **write out a timetable** of their week.
2. Ask your child to circle the times they will feel most **anxious** e.g. going to school
3. Write down a list of things that might **help your child to prepare** for these situations e.g. practising saying goodbye, taking something with them to remind them of you.
4. **Make a plan with your child of what they can do if they feel anxious** in the situation e.g. slow breathing (breathe in through the nose for three seconds and out through the mouth for three seconds), distraction techniques, asking a friend or teacher for help.
5. Add in things to the timetable that your child can **look forward to doing** once the anxious situations are over e.g. spending time with family, baking, going on a trip out.



The more your child is involved in their plan, the more likely they will be to stick to it!

Create...

Talking about anxiety can be difficult sometimes. **Encourage your child to express their feelings creatively.**



Worry box

1. Decorate an old shoe box and cut a hole in the lid
2. Ask your child to write or draw their worries and post them into the box.
3. Tell your child the worries don't need to be thought about when they are in the box.
4. Plan a time to go back to the box with you child and ask them if they still feel worried about the things they posted. If they don't they can tear up the worries. If they do the worries can be given more time in the box.

Safe place

1. Ask your child to draw a picture of a place that makes them feel happy.
2. Encourage your child to think about this place in their mind when they feel anxious.



Feelings stick

1. Decorate a stick gathered from the garden or a walk.
2. Pass the stick around the table at meal times.
3. The person holding the stick shares how they are feeling while everyone else listens.

Involve...

Problems are always harder to manage alone.

Involve other members of the family in the activities and discussions you have with your child around anxiety.

Involve your child in **local groups or clubs** to help them to meet other people. You could stay for the first few full sessions, then for half a session, then a quarter, until your child feels able to manage staying completely on their own.



Ask...


Ask school for help. Letting your child's teachers know they are struggling with separation anxiety helps them to support your child better at school. Ask your child's teachers what things are like for your child at school - do they manage during the day?

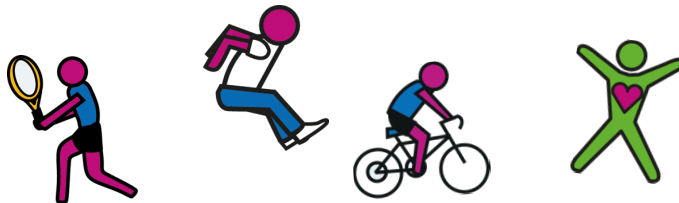
Ask your GP for help. If you are worried about your child's anxiety, or don't see any improvements after trying the exercises in this booklet for a couple of weeks, you can make an appointment with your GP.



Consider...

Consider if there are any other things that could be contributing to your child's anxiety. **A healthy lifestyle is just as important as mental wellbeing.** Ask yourself:

1. What time does my child go to bed? Do they have a routine? Are they getting **enough sleep**?
2. Do they do at least one hour of **exercise** each day? Endorphins released by the brain in exercise can improve mood. 
3. Do they have a **balanced diet**? Are they eating too much sugar? Do they have breakfast?
4. What do they do for fun? Do they play outside? Do they have too much **screen time**? Or use screens in bed? Too much screen time can impact sleep.
5. Do they have **good relationships** with others? What are their friendships like at school? Are there adults they can trust?



Resources...

For parents/carers:

CAMHS Single Point of Access

Call: 01977 735865

9am-5pm

NHS

Talking to children about their feelings

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/talking-to-children-about-feelings/>

Young Minds

Helping your child with anxiety

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help-for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-anxiety/>

Helping your child with school anxiety

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help-for-parents/parents-guide-to-support-a-z/parents-guide-to-support-school-anxiety/>

For Children:

Childline

www.childline.org.uk

A free service (email, online 1-2-1 counsellor chat or phone) for help with any problems or worries for under 19 year-olds)

About anxiety

<https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/your-feelings/anxiety-stress-panic/about-anxiety/>

Calm Zone

<https://www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone/>

Young Minds

www.youngminds.org.uk

Make a self-soothe box

<https://youngminds.org.uk/blog/how-to-make-a-self-soothe-box/>



www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk/services/camhs-wakefield/