

“Mommy, I don’t want to go to camp...I’m scared!”

*Is Separation Anxiety Normal?*

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Suzy, a seven year old girl, is going to her first overnight summer camp. She plans to be there for seven days. As she and her mother are packing her suitcase she begins to cry. “Honey, what is the matter?” her mother replies in a soft, soothing voice. “Mommy, I am scared to be gone that long.”

What is separation anxiety? What is normal age appropriate anxiety? Is there a difference? The answer is YES there is a difference. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) Fourth Edition, anxiety is the apprehensive anticipation of future danger or misfortune accompanied by a feeling of dysphoria or somatic symptoms of tension. According to the DSM Fourth Edition, separation anxiety is characterized as developmentally inappropriate and excessive anxiety concerning separation from home or from those to whom the individual is attached.

Separation anxiety is normal during different periods of a child’s life. The first of which usually occurs between the ages of eight months and twelve months and again anywhere between 18 months up to three years. A child may cry and clings to their parent when they leave and cry again when they return. Separation anxiety should decrease between two and three years of age. Some anxiety shows a natural, healthy level of attachment to their parents.

Suzy is expressing normal anxiety. Children will exhibit mild to moderate anxiety symptoms when traveling away from their family or attending school for the first time. Normal anxiety will resolve itself. A hard question that parents ask, “How do I know when normal anxiety has become separation anxiety?”

Separation anxiety will become noticeable when there is a change in your child’s temperament or daily functioning. When anxiety feelings begin to interfere in your child’s daily living, a parent should begin monitoring their level of anxiety.

Some of the most common symptoms of separation anxiety a parent might witness are:

- Refusal or fear to sleep alone
- Excessive distress when separated from home or family
- Excessive worry about becoming lost from family
- Refusing to go to school
- Fearfulness about being left alone
- Distress or impairment in social or academic functioning
- Frequent stomachaches, headaches or other physical symptoms

What should a parent do if these warning signs are observed in their child? Parents have a few options regarding diagnosis and treatment. A parent may contact their child’s Pediatrician or a licensed professional, such as a counselor or psychiatrist.

There is treatment for separation anxiety. The treatments are tailored to each individual child and their specific area of need. Treatment is based on your child’s age, health, and extent of your child’s symptoms. The good news for parents:

Anxiety disorders are treatable! If you feel your child may be suffering from excessive anxiety please do not hesitate in seeking a comprehensive assessment from a physician or counselor.

Jennifer Leister, M.A., LPC, is a licensed professional counselor. She specializes in children and adolescent assessments and therapy. Family therapy and couple counseling are also available. To schedule an assessment for your child or teen please call (469) 828-4603.

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