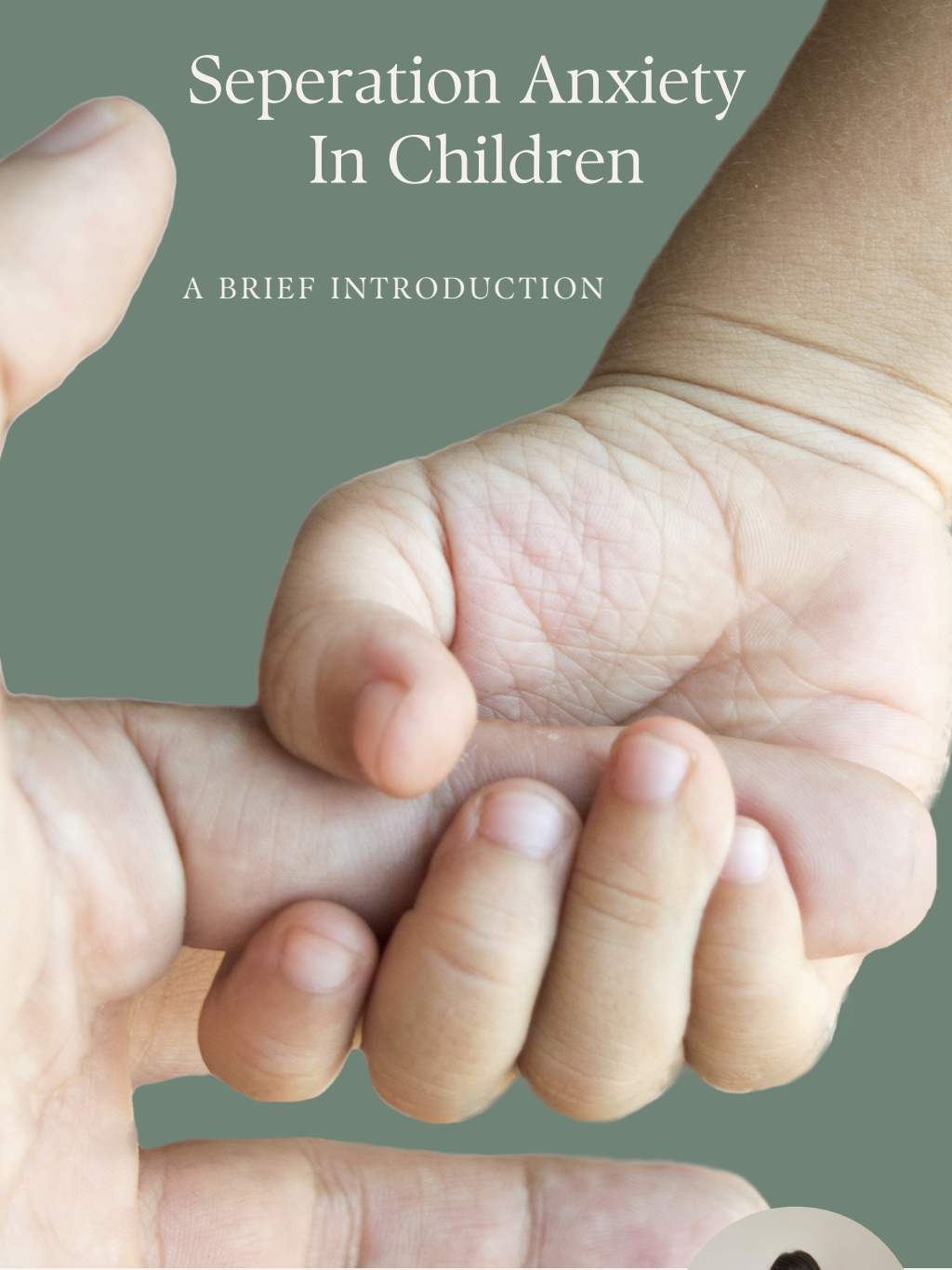


Seperation Anxiety In Children

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION



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What is Seperation Anxiety In Children

Separation anxiety is a normal developmental stage where children experience fear or distress when separated from primary caregivers. It typically emerges in early childhood and is a natural response as children learn about safety, attachment, and independence. Separation anxiety can manifest in various ways, from clinginess to tantrums, and can often be distressing for both children and caregivers.

What Age Do Children Experience It?

Separation anxiety is most common between 6 months and 3 years of age, though it can vary depending on the child's personality and experiences. Around 9 months, children begin to develop object permanence (understanding that people exist even when out of sight), which can heighten their awareness of being apart from caregivers. In some cases, separation anxiety can reappear or persist in older children, particularly in times of change or stress, such as starting school, moving homes, or experiencing family transitions.



Differences Between Normal Separation Fears and Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD)

1. Age Appropriateness

- Normal Fears: Common in children aged six months to three years and usually lessen as they mature.
- SAD: Anxiety persists or intensifies past age four or five, affecting even familiar situations.

2. Intensity of Anxiety

- Normal Fears: Temporary distress, relieved with comfort.
- SAD: Intense, overwhelming anxiety, potentially with physical symptoms like nausea or headaches, and difficult to soothe.

3. Impact on Daily Life

- Normal Fears: Manageable and brief; most children can engage in activities with some encouragement.
- SAD: Interferes with functioning, as children may refuse school or avoid social events, affecting routines and social development.

4. Duration

- Normal Fears: Short-lived, easing with time or familiar routines.
- SAD: Lasts six months or more, with anxiety increasing if unaddressed.

5. Broader Concerns

- Normal Fears: Focused on immediate separation discomfort, usually settling once apart.
- SAD: Children worry about the caregiver's safety or have persistent fears of harm, needing frequent reassurance.

When to Seek Help

If separation anxiety is intense, prolonged, or disruptive, seek help.



Understanding the Causes of Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety arises from a combination of genetic, environmental, and situational factors. Here's a quick overview of common causes:

1. Genetic and Biological Factors

Genetics can make some children more prone to anxiety, especially if family members also experience anxiety disorders. Biological factors, like brain chemistry, can further heighten stress responses.

2. Family Dynamics and Attachment

Early attachment to caregivers affects a child's response to separation. Secure bonds foster resilience, while overprotective parenting or family instability can increase anxiety. Family conflict, high parental stress, or inconsistent caregiving may create insecurities about separation.

3. Life Changes and Traumas

Life events such as moving, starting school, or family disruptions can trigger separation anxiety. Even seemingly small changes, like a parent traveling, can feel unsettling. Traumatic experiences, like losing a loved one, may also increase separation fears.

4. Common Triggers for Children and Teens

Common triggers include starting new environments (e.g., daycare or school) or worrying about the safety of themselves or loved ones. Older children may also feel heightened anxiety due to social or academic pressures.



Practical Techniques for Reducing Separation Anxiety

Here are some strategies parents and caregivers can use to ease separation anxiety and promote independence.

- **Gradual Exposure**
 - Start with brief separations where the caregiver is nearby, gradually increasing duration and distance to build tolerance over time.
- **Transitional Objects**
 - Give the child a comforting item, like a favourite toy or blanket, to keep with them during separations for a sense of security.
- **Avoid Sneaking Away**
 - Always say goodbye when leaving; sneaking away can increase anxiety. If nearby, move gradually within their sight to help them feel secure.
- **Encourage Sitting on the Floor**
 - If the child prefers sitting on your lap, encourage floor play with you close by, gradually increasing physical distance over time.
- **Set Up Independent Play**
 - Engage the child in play, then move a small distance away, such as reading a book while they play. Praise them for playing independently.
- **Squat-Level Cuddles**
 - Offer cuddles from a squatting position rather than picking them up to foster independence while still providing comfort.

Seeking Help

If your child's separation anxiety is affecting daily life, seeking professional help can make a big difference. Here's where to go and what to expect.

Diagnosing Separation Anxiety in Children

- **Paediatrician:** A paediatrician can assess anxiety, rule out other health issues, and refer you to specialists.
- **Child Psychologist:** Psychologists diagnose separation anxiety based on observed symptoms like excessive distress and physical symptoms during separation. Therapies like cognitive-behavioural therapy are commonly used.
- **Parental Input:** Parents provide valuable insights into their child's behaviour, which professionals use for a more personalised diagnosis.

Where to Go for Help in Australia

- **Paediatrician:** Provides initial assessment and referrals.
- **Child Psychologist:** Specialises in therapies to manage anxiety.
- **Occupational Therapist:** Focuses on sensory and coping skills.
- **School Counsellor/Psychologist:** Supports children within the school environment.

Key Australian Resources

- **Beyond Blue:** Resources and helpline for parents. Phone: 1300 22 4636
- **Raising Children Network:** Government-backed site with parenting guides on childhood anxiety.
- **Kids Helpline:** Immediate support for children and advice for parents. Phone: 1800 55 1800
- **Head to Health:** Connects families to mental health services.