



# Helping your child

## Separation anxiety

Separation anxiety is the fear of being away from caregivers or loved ones. Separation anxiety is a typical phase of development for many babies and toddlers. It is also common after a child has experienced injury/illness and spent time in hospital. However, for some children separation anxiety can continue and start to interfere with relationships and normal activities.

During a scary or overwhelming time, it's normal for children to seek connection and comfort by crying or clinging to their caregiver. But as time goes on, it's important to restore their confidence so they can go back to exploring their environment, spending time with family and friends, and continuing normal activities like going to early learning or school.

### Signs of separation anxiety

- Crying, tantrums or panic when separating from caregivers.
- Clinging to caregivers (e.g. wanting to be picked up, needing to be in close proximity or physically touching them, seeking more verbal or physical affection).
- Fearful of sleeping alone.
- Refusal to go to another caregiver (e.g. another parent, grandparents, teacher).
- Physical complaints before or during separation (e.g. stomach aches, headaches or muscle pain).
- Unable to be soothed after separation.
- Unable to stop worrying about something bad happening to loved ones or themselves.

### Five key support areas

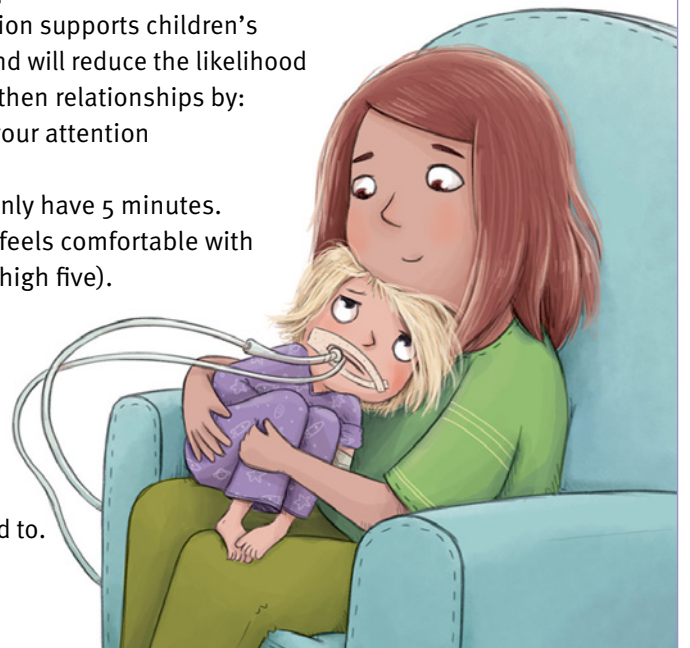
There are five key areas you can focus on to support your child to overcome separation anxiety. This includes focusing on ways you can strengthen connection in their important relationships, re-establishing family routines and expectations, helping your child to identify and communicate their emotions, teaching positive coping strategies and seeking extra support.



**Connection:** Strengthen relationships to help your child feel safe, secure and loved

This is the most important area that caregivers can focus on to protect their child's mental health and wellbeing. A positive, consistent, nurturing connection supports children's emotional resilience, helps them cope during stressful times, and will reduce the likelihood that separation anxiety will continue over time. You can strengthen relationships by:

- responding warmly and consistently when your child seeks your attention or expresses a need.
- finding chances to connect throughout the day, even if you only have 5 minutes.
- giving lots of physical comfort in ways your child enjoys and feels comfortable with (e.g. hugs, kisses, hand holding, massage, pat on the back, high five).
- spending special time together including exploration, play and quiet time (e.g. reading books, singing nursery rhymes, doing craft, watching a movie).
- engaging in fun activities regularly as a family (e.g. exploring nature, board games, walking the dog).
- incorporating special time into your routine helps your child know what to expect and gives them something to look forward to.
- providing extra support and connection at bedtime, before and after time apart, and during times of stress.



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Disclaimer: This information has been produced by healthcare professionals as a guideline only and is intended to support, not replace, discussion with your child's doctor or healthcare professionals. Information is updated regularly, so please check you are referring to the most recent version. Seek medical advice, as appropriate, for concerns regarding your child's health.



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## Routine: Maintain or create family routines and clear expectations

'Soft routines' (not rigid, but reasonably predictable) are particularly important for children and adults during stressful times. Children feel safer, more secure and cope best when:

- caregivers encourage regular healthy routines that include good-quality sleep, eating well, physical activity, play and family rituals.
- the order of daily activities is fairly consistent.
- there are clear rules and expectations for behaviour.
- routines are flexible when circumstances change.
- children are prepared for transitions or separations.

When children are in hospital or recovering from sickness or injury, it can be hard to stick with established routines or set up new ones. It's okay to adjust or simplify the usual routine during this time. Return to normal family routines when possible. See recommended resources on the last page of this tipsheet for more detailed information about how to create routines for different ages.



## Identify emotions: Help your child to name their feelings

Pay attention to when your child is showing signs of separation distress and also tune into what emotions this is bringing up for you.

It can also be very difficult for caregivers to separate from their child, especially after medical trauma. When children become distressed during separations, caregivers can also experience difficult feelings like fear, anxiety and guilt. Separation anxiety can also be frustrating and exhausting for caregivers to manage. Try to avoid becoming angry or impatient if your child is struggling to separate. Focus on responding in a warm, calm and consistent way. Let your child know that you can see how hard it is for them, but you trust their carer (another parent, grandparent, teacher) to look after them while you are away, and that you will return.

Teaching children how to recognise and name feelings can help them build emotional literacy skills, identify body cues, communicate their feelings and needs to others, and learn how to remain calm. Even babies benefit from caregivers talking to them about feelings.

Try books or feelings cards to help your child learn names for different emotions. See our recommended list of books about *Anxiety and other emotions* ([Children's picture books](#)) or try the free [Frankie's feelings cards](#) and [poster](#).

Talk with your child about how anxiety might feel and look in their body (e.g. butterflies in their tummy, sweaty palms, feeling irritable, blushing). If they are old enough, encourage them to talk with you if they notice these body cues.







## Targeted strategies: Teach your child skills to help them cope with emotional distress and encourage positive behaviour

### Teach emotion regulation strategies

Young children learn emotion regulation (i.e. the ability to understand and manage feelings in an effective way) through their relationships with caregivers and modelling behaviours they observe from adults around them. They need to be taught and shown different skills and techniques so they can build their own toolbox of coping strategies for managing complex emotions.



Regularly provide opportunities for your child to learn and practice different emotion regulation strategies. The [Relaxation and mindfulness strategies for children](#) tipsheet provides information about how to introduce and practice relaxation and mindfulness and provides links to child-friendly activities.

Check out the [Frankie coping cards](#) and [Frankie coping poster](#) for some helpful ideas for dealing with big feelings. Encourage your child to come up with their own coping strategies, “What would help you feel better right now?”, “What usually helps you calm down?”, “Let’s look at Frankie’s coping poster for some ideas”.

Be aware of what you are modelling to your child during separations and aim to keep them as positive as possible. Children have an amazing ‘radar’ for their caregivers’ emotions. If you’re feeling a bit anxious about a separation, it is likely your child will sense at least a little of it. Be as calm, relaxed, and reassuring as you can be.

### Start with practising small separations

Following a stepladder approach is an effective way to support your child to gently face their fears in a gradual step-by-step way. For more guidance, scan the QR code on the last page of this tip sheet.

Read books or make up stories with your child about separation fears. See [Anxiety and other emotions](#) for recommendations.

Gently help your child practise separating from you. Their experiences of positive separations and reunions will build their confidence. Encourage age-appropriate independence by engaging them in an activity and quietly withdrawing to let them play by themselves. Start small. Collect the mail, hang out the washing, make a cup of tea while encouraging your child to continue playing independently. Build up to longer separations as their confidence increases.

Organise friends and relatives to visit so your child gets used to other people again. Greet strangers with

smiles and a friendly tone of voice. If your child cries or looks afraid with a new person, it’s okay to comfort them and try again later.

Offer lots of praise and encouragement for small (and large) successes.





**Targeted strategies:** Teach your child skills to help them cope with emotional distress and encourage positive behaviour

## Gradually help your child practise larger separations

Tell your child in advance (a day or two) when you are going to be apart from them.

Leave your child with familiar people in familiar environments where possible. If starting somewhere new, visit the place together first before leaving your child. If possible, try a short separation first before gradually increasing the time they're there.

Always explain where you're going and why, who will be looking after them and when you'll be back, in ways they can understand (e.g. "Mummy has to go to the doctors, but Poppy will take care of you. I'll be back before the your movie finishes."). Tell your child what you'll be doing when you see them next (e.g. "We'll have pasta for dinner later," "After I pick you up, we can watch Bluey together."). This gives your child something to look forward to.

Try different ways to maintain a physical connection while you are gone. Draw a heart on their arm, spray some of your perfume or aftershave on their wrist or leave them something of yours and tell them they can return it when you see them later. Encourage them to take a transition object such as a comfort toy, special blanket, photo or favourite toy.

It's always important to say goodbye. Create a short predictable positive goodbye routine to help build trust

and so your child knows what to expect. A goodbye routine might look like: sing a song, squeezey cuddle and kiss, say "I love you", wave goodbye, show heart hands as walking away.

Encourage your child to come up with their own coping strategies, "What usually helps you feel better when I leave?", "What could Frankie do to feel better?" Check out the [Frankie coping cards](#) and [poster](#) for some helpful ideas for dealing with big feelings.

Keep your promises. Your child's trust and independence will increase as they learn that you always return when you said you would.



**Seek extra support:** Sometimes no matter how well parents support their child, professional advice is needed to help

You know your child best. If you're concerned, you can seek advice from your child's health care team, early childcare educator or teacher, GP or paediatrician, child health nurse or community health centre, community mental health service, or a specialist mental health professional (e.g. psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, occupational therapists).

For further support, visit [Frankie's Clubhouse](#) or scan the QR code for our recommended list of resources for coping with anxiety.



Your child might need extra help if their separation anxiety is:

- continuing or getting worse
- different to their normal behaviour or uncommon behaviours for their age
- impacting their medical care
- affecting their daily activities (e.g. playing, having a shower or bath, sleeping and eating, going to daycare, kindy or school)
- affecting their relationship with you or others (siblings, family, friends etc).