



Separation Anxiety: Guide Summary

— Your Strategy Guide —

Understanding Separation Anxiety

- Separation anxiety isn't a sign that something has gone wrong. Young children are biologically wired to want to stay close to their caregivers, so feeling frightened by separation at certain stages makes complete sense.
- It can come and go. A child who has managed nursery drop-offs happily for months might suddenly start clinging at the door, and a child who has always slept independently might suddenly want you beside them.
- It often becomes stronger around changes such as starting nursery or school, moving house, a new sibling, illness, other family changes, or a period of being together more than usual. Sometimes there's no obvious reason at all.

A Different Question to Ask

- Instead of “How do I stop my child feeling anxious when I leave?”, try “How do I help my child learn that they can cope with the separation?”
- If the goal is to prevent anxiety altogether, it's easy to end up reorganising life around avoiding it - staying in the room, skipping the party, lingering longer and longer at the door. Anxiety learns through experience: if leaving keeps getting delayed, a child's brain can quietly learn that the anxiety was necessary. What we want them to experience instead is: I was frightened, they still left, I was looked after, I was safe, and they came back. Confidence tends to follow doing the difficult thing, not precede it.

Responding to the Feeling

- Validate the feeling without validating the danger. There's a real difference between “There's nothing to worry about, don't be silly” and “I know you really don't want me to go. Saying goodbye feels hard today.”
- The second response doesn't argue with your child's nervous system - it tells them you believe the feeling is real, while still holding confidence in their ability to cope. Words like “and” or “also” let two things be true at once: “I know you're scared, and I know you're safe.”

Making Separation Predictable

- Young children have a very different sense of time to adults. "I'll be back later" could mean 10 minutes or next Thursday. Give the separation a predictable shape: what will happen, in what order, and roughly when you'll return.
- A short, warm, predictable goodbye ritual helps enormously. Use the same phrase, a special handshake, or a kiss they "keep in their pocket". What matters isn't the ritual itself, it's that your child knows this is how goodbye happens, and then you go.

Avoiding the "Elastic Band" Goodbye

- This is the pattern where you say goodbye, your child becomes distressed, you return for one more cuddle, try to leave again, they become more distressed still and everyone ends up more upset than when you started.
- Your child isn't manipulating you; they're learning that escalating distress postpones the separation. The alternative is to become lovingly predictable: acknowledge the wish for another cuddle, confirm the goodbye ritual is already done, hand over to a trusted adult, and go.

Working With Other Trusted Adults

- If your child is at nursery or school, working with the staff around them helps. A familiar adult meeting them at the door, or being given something to do straight away, can ease the transition. Many children settle within a minute or two of you leaving because their distress at the moment of goodbye doesn't necessarily mean they stayed distressed.

Breaking the Reassurance Cycle

- Reassurance can feel like it reduces anxiety, and in the short term it often does, but it can also become a cycle: a question, an answer, brief relief, and then the question returns. Once you've answered reasonably, you don't need to keep finding new ways to prove it.
- You might say: "You've already asked me that, and I think I've answered you. I think your worry is asking again because it wants to feel completely sure that I'm coming back after lunch, just like we planned."

Building a Regulation Toolbox

- One of the most useful things you can give a young child is a set of ways to help their body when it feels overwhelmed and these are best practised in calm moments, not introduced for the first time mid-meltdown.
- Your Breathing Shapes download covers playful breathing activities. Alongside these, your Calm-Body Toolbox download covers movement, pressure and grounding activities for children who regulate better through their body than their breath.

Noticing Their Capacity

- When your child manages a separation, notice what they did rather than telling them there was nothing to worry about. Instead of "See, you were fine", try "You really didn't want me to leave, and you managed it".
- You're not praising the absence of anxiety rather you're noticing their capacity to do something hard while anxiety was present.

Managing Your Own Reactions

- Children constantly read us for information about whether something is safe. If your face, voice or repeated checking-back suggest worry, they may reasonably conclude there's something to worry about. Before a difficult separation, it can help to regulate yourself too and remember that you're allowed to feel sad or guilty, and to have a cry in the car afterwards if you need to.

Reconnecting Well

- Make coming back predictable too. You don't need a big reunion every time – warm and present is enough: "There you are. I said I'd come back after story time, and here I am." Over time, this repeated pattern of goodbye, separation and reconnection helps your child build an internal understanding that the people they love come back.

When to Seek Extra Support

- Most separation anxiety is a normal part of development. If it's stopping your child from attending school or nursery, sleeping, seeing friends, or being apart from you at all, particularly if it's getting more restrictive rather than gradually easing, it's worth seeking professional support. Full detail is in your "When to Get More Help" download.

A Note on Neurodivergent Children

- Some neurodivergent children may continue to find transitions and separation genuinely distressing even after years of the same routine, and that needs a different approach. This is covered separately in another video.

Downloads in this guide:



Script Card



When to
Get More
Help



This
Summary



Breathing
Exercises



Calm Body
Toolbox