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Separation Anxiety Disorder

Does your child hover around you like a shadow? Does he or she refuse to let you go out without her? Does she get upset or refuse to go to school or a friend's house without you? Your child may suffer from Separation Anxiety.

Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) is the most common anxiety disorder among children and affects 2-3% of grade-school children. It involves excessive distress over day-to-day separation from parents, home or other familiar situations, and unrealistic fears of harm to loved ones. Seventy-five to eighty percent of the children who refuse to go to school have separation anxiety. Whereas normal separation fears are outgrown by age 5 or 6, SAD usually begins between the ages of 7 and 11. It often occurs fairly abruptly among children who previously had no problems with separation. SAD is diagnosed only if fears persist, with very extreme reactions, beyond that expected for the age of the child. A ten-year-old who cries and clings to a parent, refuses to go to school, or is afraid to stay at a friend's house may be showing signs of SAD. Children with SAD may beg for reassurance when a parent is away even briefly, cower from any opportunity to be separated, and sometimes even follow them from room to room. When questioned, they may disclose worries about parents or other family members getting hurt or killed, and may feel responsible for protecting them from harm.

Signs and symptoms of Separation Anxiety Disorder

- Extreme, disproportionate distress over separation from loved ones
- Unwillingness to leave home, attend school, or go on outings
- Unrealistic worry about harm to self or loved ones
- Frequent seeking of reassurance regarding safety of self and loved ones
- Crying, clinging, nausea, vomiting or tantrums in anticipation of separation
- Reluctance to be alone, especially at night
- Nightmares about harm and danger
- Symptoms for at least four weeks

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Indications of SAD in school:

School refusal and tardiness are common indicators of SAD. Once in school, a child with SAD may be agitated, restless and nervous, and complain of stomachaches, headaches or nausea. The child may make frequent trips to the nurse's office, and ask to call her parent or to go home. The child may not eat or drink in school, and may ask for repeated reassurance about safety. Phone calls to "check in" with parents may bring reprieve. Usually, the child experiences tremendous relief when the parent takes her home.

Helping your child overcome Separation Anxiety

- Remain calm, matter of fact and firm during routine separations.
- Don't hover, question or reassure excessively.
- Limit reassurance to one or two times.
- Use the *Parent-Teacher Log* to communicate between home and school.
- Limit check-in visits or phone calls when the child is in school.
- Allow a transitional object for comfort until the child masters anxiety.
- Limit the child's ability to leave school and return home.
- Remove the comforts of staying home or returning home from school.
- Use the *Feeling Thermometer* as an index of intensity and change in emotions.
- Teach calming self-talk when upset.
- For the child who has been out of school, plan a gradual return to school.
- Seek opportunities to separate from the child for increasing lengths of time.
- Create opportunities for repetition and practice.
- Encourage independent activities and self-reliance.
- Reward independence and initiative.
- Set a positive example; role model the behavior the child is expected to learn.
- Make *You and Me Alone* (YAMA) time to increase positive interactions.
- Praise any efforts in the direction of separation.
- Use tangible rewards for any effort in the right direction.
- Be consistent in the child management approach at home and at school.

If your child's separation fears persist despite your interventions, seek consultation with a qualified mental health professional.

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