

KIDS FIRST Swim School

Separation Anxiety

By Michele Block Morse

One day your baby can be passed to and left with just about anyone.....the next day your usual sitter arrives and without warning, your baby wails inconsolably as you put your coat on. Separation anxiety and its close cousin, stranger wariness, generally kick in between the ages of six months and one year. They are essential milestones that play a major role in a child's emotional development. For most parents, this is a difficult phase.

Nevertheless, your baby's overwhelming desire to be close to you does serve a critical purpose. Experts agree that it is the basis of your child's ability to form close personal relationships for the rest of his/her life.

During the second half of your child's first year, babies make a major emotional leap. They realize first that their mother is a separate individual from him or herself, and second that they value her presence far more than anybody else's. Sometimes this special person can be a father, sibling or grandparent. By age two, most children can cope with routine separations. However, over the years the intense yearning to be with that special person will be transformed into an ability and desire to forge friendships with peers and ultimately mature adult relationships.

"Developing a secure emotional attachment early in life is one of the most important ingredients in a person's long term emotional well being", says Charles H. Zeanah, M.D. and Professor of Psychiatry at Louisiana State University. "Many children in foster homes or institutions with constantly changing caregivers miss the opportunity to develop these close relationships early in childhood. As a result, studies have shown that when these children enter adulthood, they often have difficulty feeling close to other people and in some cases exhibit antisocial behavior".

So, separation anxiety is a positive sign of a baby's healthy development. BUT, you don't have to stay tethered to your infant until he or she gives you permission to go, notes Leila Beckwith, PhD and Professor of Pediatrics at UCLA. What's as important as a baby's need to feel close to his/her mother is an awareness that while you can't always be by their side, you will always return.

Happy reunions lead to less stressful departures. "If an infant gets comfort from reunions, it makes future separations more tolerable", says Beckwith. Your baby gradually learns that he can manage without you, but also that he'll have a terrific cuddle when you return. If the reunion goes wrong (say you had a rotten day), your infant may become more distressed at the next separation.

Many experts maintain that, ironically, an infant's reaction upon being reunited with his mother is a better indicator of how healthy he is attached than whether he screams bloody murder when you leave. If your baby is clearly happy to see you when you return, then he is using you as a secure base and reconnecting just fine, says Zeanah. "But, if your baby is mad or ignores you when you return and stays that way for ten minutes or so, you may need to spend more time together".

Babies who have been left with a caregiver many times prior to their six-month birthday might be used to separation. An older baby who has rarely, if ever, been left with a baby sitter is more likely to make a fuss. A sensitive caregiver will know this and try to distract him after you leave. Once a baby realizes that you can depend upon to return, will be able to cope better.

Though it may be tough on you, try to keep your emotions in check. Your baby will sense any anxiety you show when you leave. So keep a smile on your face and keep good-byes loving but brief. Then close the door and go, knowing that in learning to cope with your absence, your youngster is taking steps towards a lifetime of loving relationships.