

# Separation Anxiety

*Professor Matt Sanders*

New parents can be surprised when their six-month-old baby suddenly screams in protest instead of putting on a beaming smile for a kiss and cuddle from grandma.

Your baby is in fact exhibiting a natural stage in their social development. Termed 'separation anxiety', about 75 per cent of children go through a stage where they suddenly react with hesitation and fear to strangers or people they do not see everyday.

They may show behaviours such as fretting, crying, screaming protesting, and clinging which reach their peak soon after a child's first birthday and disappear by the time they are 2 years old.

For parents who need to leave their young children with caregivers, separation anxiety can be upsetting.

When infants lose sight of their parents, they often become upset because they don't know how long the separation will be. They can't yet form a picture of their

mum or dad in their mind and are therefore unlikely to wait calmly and confidently for their parent's return.

As they grow older, children learn that objects and people continue to exist even though they can't see them and so eventually understand that wherever their parents have gone, they will always return.

To help your child cope better with separation anxiety it's important to spend quality time with them — talking, smiling, holding your child, and sharing enjoyable experiences. While at home, try to keep your child close by as you go about your usual routine. Talk or sing to them as you work. If you need to leave the room, wait for them to follow if they are able, or talk to them so they know you are nearby.

Let your family and friends know your child is going through a shy stage to avoid incidents that may cause anxious feelings. If your child does get upset when being held or spoken to by another

adult, hold them yourself until they're calm. Infants become more anxious when parents ignore their distress.

You should not criticise your child for not wanting to go to another adult. Comments such as "Don't be silly", can make the problem worse.

When you need to leave your child, always use the same phrase such as "Bye, bye for now". This will help them learn that you are going away, but that you will return. Similarly, a regular greeting such as "Here I am again", indicates to your child that the separation is over.

Of course it's not always possible for parents to prevent their child protesting when being left in the care of others, but if you allow time for them to become familiar with a responsible caregiver and you are sure yourself that they will be well looked after in a safe environment, your child will eventually develop confidence and mix with others.

**Find more parenting tips at: [manitoba.ca/triplep](http://manitoba.ca/triplep) or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.**

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.

