

### *Building parent-school partnerships*

WORDS Lakshmi Singh

# Understanding separation anxiety

Although the average age range for developing an anxiety disorder is between six and 11 years, the typical age of onset varies between different disorders. Parentingideas writer Lakshmi Singh looks at one of the more common disorders that may start at any time: separation anxiety.

**A collection of fears and worries about being separated from loved ones can manifest anytime: in a child from as young as a few months old right through to a fully grown adult. It can happen after a traumatic event or seemingly for no apparent reason.**

To understand why your child is clingy, appears worried or obsesses with thoughts depicting doom, a lesson in identifying the important factors at play is in order.

#### THE UNDERLYING FEAR:

"Children with separation anxiety disorder feel constantly worried or fearful about separation," says Rebecca Swinbourne, a child and adolescent psychologist at Sydney South Child Psychology. She describes a chain of thoughts that involves one or more of the following:

- Fear that something terrible will happen to a loved one.
- Worry that an unpredicted event will lead to permanent separation.
- Nightmares about separation.

Cindy Russell, a life skills educator who coaches children and adults to manage their anxiety, suffered from separation anxiety herself while in primary school.

"I used to describe separation anxiety as the most intense fear you can imagine. Like hearing over a loud speaker the world will be ending in 60 seconds," she says.

Over the years, Russell recognised that her fear was brought on by the unconscious mind feeding on irrational thoughts – thoughts that in fact posed no real threat. But her mind would react with severe panic, as if there was a detrimental threat, including symptoms such as a lack of oxygen.

#### DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE

Although only about three to four per cent of children will be diagnosed with separation anxiety, it is not uncommon for a child to feel anxious at the thought of being physically separated from a primary caregiver, says Swinbourne.

"It is developmentally appropriate for 'stranger anxiety' to appear between eight and 10 months of age, and separation anxiety between 14 and 18 months. Usually stranger anxiety tapers off around age two. Separation anxiety tapers off more slowly and may last until the child is five years old."

Though less commonly seen in adolescents, Swinbourne explains that anxiety around separation may be 'carried' into the later years and may manifest as other disorders, particularly if there has been no intervention.

#### THE TRIGGERS

Like any other type of anxiety, separation anxiety is caused by the interplay of biological, cognitive, genetic, environmental, temperament and behavioural factors, says Swinbourne.

Stressful or traumatic events like a stay in hospital, the death of a loved one or a change in environment could all trigger the condition.

Russell believes that her curious nature and habit of questioning as well as analysing life and death contributed to her developing a "fear of the unknown".

"I would get thoughts about bad things happening to my parents. I felt safe when I was with them," she says.

She also believes that her anxiety played a part in her own daughter displaying signs and symptoms of the condition.

This link is not uncommon, says Swinbourne.

"In fact, it may not necessarily be a disease of the child but a manifestation of parental separation anxiety as well – parent and child can feed each other's anxiety. In addition, the fact that children with separation anxiety often have family members with anxiety or other mental disorders suggests that a vulnerability to the disorder may be inherited."

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#### MANAGING IT

It is important for parents to remember that many fears are a normal part of development, says Swinbourne.

"But children and adolescents who develop anxiety disorders do not seem to have the resources and coping mechanisms available to them at the time (internally and externally) to overcome these fears, hence they manifest into disorders," she explains.

Swinbourne advises parents to help their children understand the 'fight or flight' state that their body and brain can go into as a result by offering a two-step management process.

"First parents can help their children to recognise when they begin to feel the physical signs of anxiety and teach them to relax their body and slow their breathing and heart rate down."

"Secondly, once the body is relaxed, it gives the brain the opportunity to rationally assess the situation and challenge their default response (the anxious behaviour)."

For younger children, it is more appropriate to calm them down by holding them, distracting them or engaging in a fun activity and then reassuring them that they are safe in the company of their caregiver, she says.

Lakshmi Singh

## » Experts' tips to minimise a child's anxiety «

- Talk to the child about what they are feeling. Bringing awareness to their thoughts will not make it worse.
- Ask the child how they would like to feel in the same situation and if they can think of a time they have felt that way. This gives them an example of where they are already doing this.
- With your child, think up some steps that the child can take to get them one step closer to the way they want to feel when separating from you.
- Talk everyday about how they applied one of these steps, what worked and what didn't.
- Celebrate their successes, no matter how small.
- Be patient and be a role model by showing them how you successfully cope with your own anxieties.
- Do not stop when things are okay: continue to focus on helping the child be clear about what they want and what steps they can take to get it.



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