

Separation anxiety in autistic children

Separation anxiety results from a fear of being separated from a main caregiver and can lead to high levels of anxiety after separation from a person or place that provides security. Although separation anxiety can be a common thing which all children may experience at some point in their lives, autistic children can experience separation anxiety more intensely or differently to other children and can take longer to come out of this stage.

This increased level of separation anxiety in autistic children is often due to the transitions and changes that occur during the separation and due to differences autistic children have in managing their own emotional regulation.

Examples of when separation anxiety can occur include; when leaving a child to go into another room, to go the shops, to go to work or when dropping them off at nursery or school.

Autistic children may express their anxiety in different ways because of this. Examples include; meltdowns, shutdowns and sleep difficulties.

Tips for managing separation anxiety

- Try not to create an over reliance on you. A healthy level of separation anxiety is a typical part of development, however spending almost all your time with your child and limiting their interaction with others can potentially worsen their separation anxiety, this is because they are not getting any opportunities to practice being apart from you.
- Begin with short separations, such as leaving the room for a few minutes, and gradually build on this as your child becomes more comfortable. Do not completely stop periods of separation altogether as this will create an unnatural routine and will increase your child's dependence on you.

- Create predictable routines- Some autistic children thrive from routines as they provide a feeling of safety and security for them. Helping your child recognise that separation is part of their daily routines can help with building resilience to periods of separation.
- Games like hide and seek or peekaboo can help to reinforce the idea of object permanence in children and their understanding that when something or someone leaves, they will come back.
- Acknowledge and praise your child when they successfully navigate through periods of separation. This strategy may not be suitable for those presenting with a demand avoidant profile.
- Introduce a comfort item or a transitional object that your child can hold onto during separation. This could be something that reminds them of you or an item of your clothing for example.
- Use visual supports or social stories to reduce uncertainties and outline separation times.
- Practice calming techniques like deep breathing or using a fidget toy. You could also create a “calm down kit” with items they can use when they feel overwhelmed.
- Establish a consistent and special goodbye routine. This could involve a specific phrase, action or gesture that signifies your departure. Try and make any goodbyes as quick and as fuss free as possible. Some children may cope better without a goodbye so not to draw attention to your departure however for others this may make the situation worse and break trust.
- Create opportunities for independence or simple tasks that your child can do on their own. This can reduce reliance on you.
- Consider the language you use- Instead of saying ‘I’m leaving’ try and say, ‘I’ll see you soon’. Talking about what you are going to do later may also be helpful and give the child something to look forward to.