

What Does Separation Anxiety Disorder Look Like?

At Home

Children with separation anxiety disorder may become agitated at just the *thought* of being away from home or parent. Common symptoms a parent might notice include:¹

- Intense fear that something terrible will happen to a loved one
- Persistent worry that the child will be permanently separated from the parent
- Refusal to attend school
- Nightmares about separation
- Difficulty sleeping alone and reluctance to go to sleep
- Frequent complaints of physical illness at time of separation

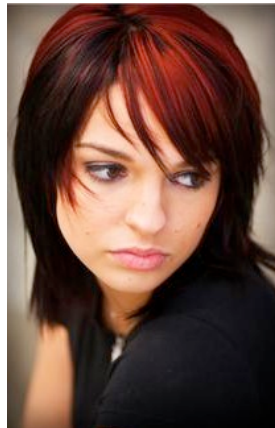
At School

Children with separation anxiety disorder may seem to be shy, quiet students whose emotional distress is overshadowed by those with disruptive behaviors. Other common symptoms an educator might notice include:

- Poor school attendance
- Difficulty transitioning from home to school
- Frequent trips to the school nurse
- Avoidance of activities with peers
- Difficulty concentrating
- Learning disabilities and cognitive problems

1. American Psychiatric Association (2000). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Fourth Edition, Text Revision). Washington, DC: Author.
2. Mychailyszyn, M.P. (2010). School functioning in youth with and without anxiety disorders. *School Psychology Review, 39* (1), p. 108.
3. Foley, D. et al (2004). Informant disagreement for separation anxiety disorder. *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 43:4*, 452-459.
4. Albano, A.M. & Kendall, P. C. (2002). Cognitive behavioural therapy for children and adolescents with anxiety disorders: clinical research advances. *International Review of Psychiatry, 14*, 129-134.

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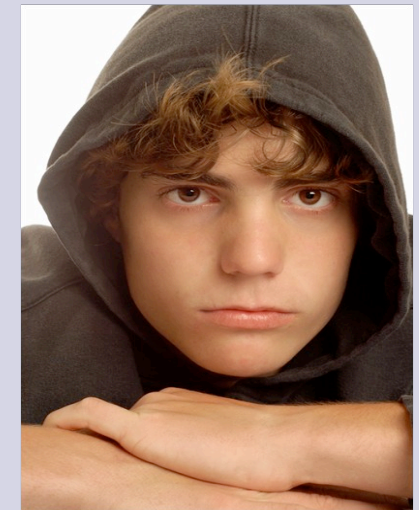
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Separation Anxiety Disorder

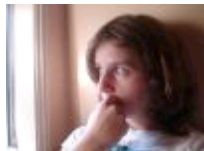


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What is Separation Anxiety Disorder?

It is normal for both children and adolescents to occasionally experience some anxiety when we say goodbye. This is a normal part of growing up. When worries and fears about being separated from home or family become severe and developmentally inappropriate, Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD) may be present.

SAD is a serious emotional problem that limits a child's ability to participate in ordinary life. If anxiety is excessive enough to interfere with normal activities like school and friendships, and lasts for weeks rather than days, it may be a sign of separation anxiety disorder. If left untreated, peer relationships, school achievement, and family functioning may suffer – or depression may develop.



How Does Separation Anxiety Disorder Affect School Functioning?

School can be the most anxiety-producing environment in a child's life. Children with SAD have more difficulty with learning and memory than children without anxiety. They are also rated as less popular and less likeable than their peers. Teachers report that students with SAD have significant problems with adjustment throughout their school years.

Research shows that children with SAD are eight times more likely to be in the lowest quartile of reading achievement and two and a half times more likely to be in the lowest math achievement

What Do I Need to Know about Separation Anxiety Disorder?

- Separation Anxiety Disorder is one of the most common childhood anxiety disorders in both boys and girls; it affects 4-15% of school-age children.
- Separation Anxiety Disorder may occur at any time before age 18 and typically occurs around age 7.
- SAD is the most common cause of school refusal in children ages 5 to 12 years. In adolescents, one-third to one-half of all SAD cases are associated with more severe school phobia.
- Separation Anxiety Disorder may develop after a major stress, such as the death of a relative or pet, a severe illness of the child or relative, a change of schools, a move, or after a holiday break.
- Nearly 80% of children with SAD also have additional disorders such as panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or generalized anxiety disorder.
- Children diagnosed with Separation Anxiety Disorder frequently have parents with anxiety disorders.
- Parents and children perceive anxiety very differently. Most children diagnosed with SAD were rated as having no symptoms of separation anxiety by their parents!³

How is Separation Anxiety Disorder Treated?

Separation anxiety disorder is treatable through interventions that are provided collaboratively by a child's medical doctor, therapist, school staff, and family. Psychological interventions (counseling), biological interventions (medicines), accommodations at school and at home can reduce sources of stress for the child and help everyone around them understand that their symptoms are not caused by a poor attitude.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is the type of counseling generally recommended. The goal of this empirically researched treatment is to teach youth to recognize the signs and symptoms of their unwanted anxiousness. They can use these signs to serve as cues to use anxiety management strategies and coping skills they have learned to reduce or eliminate their symptoms.



How Can I Help a Child with SAD?

Learn how the disorder is experienced by the child.

Anticipate transitions that cause apprehension.

Develop relaxation techniques with the child. What works at home can often be used at school.

Delegate "fun" activities and responsibilities to increase involvement in school and at home.

Encourage the child to return to school as quickly as possible.

Reward the child's efforts with praise.