

# The Children's Doctor



**My granddaughter is 9 months old and will not come to me, even for a cuddle. She screams as soon as she is out of her parents arms, even if her parents are still in sight. If she cannot see her parents, she screams until they return. What can we do to make her more comfortable with us?**

Separation anxiety is when a child gets upset when removed from a parent or loved one. It is a normal stage of early childhood development. Separation anxiety usually begins at 6 to 8 months of age. It progresses until 18 months of age when it gradually starts to improve as children gain confidence. Children need to adjust to separation as it is a normal and ongoing situation in their lives. It is important that your granddaughter gets used to separating from her parents as this is likely to be necessary for daycare / school, as well as being a normal part of life. The way a parent reacts to her anxiety can affect her development and her own sense of security.

There are many things a parent can do to minimise separation anxiety. Simple hiding games are a great way to show your child that you disappear and then return. Some examples of these games are peek-a-boo and hide-and-seek. Don't disappear too long and make sure you come back into view before your child has had time to worry. Parents should regularly go out of the room then come back again so that she gets used to them leaving and then returning. Each time the parent leaves, she should be told where the parent is going and when to expect the parent to return. Parents should never sneak out without saying goodbye or the child will worry and not understand where the parent has gone and whether they will return. This increases a child's level of anxiety.

If a child is being left in the care of someone other than a parent, allow the child to have her comforter (eg dummy / pillow / blanket / familiar toy). This may give her a sense of security. Similarly, you may allow her to have something of yours (eg a bag / keys / shirt to cuddle). This may reassure her that you will return. Parents should always be reliable and return when they say they will. It should be explained to the child in terms of daily activities (eg "I will be back right after your sleep").

If you have your granddaughter and she is distressed, reassure her that her parent will be returning. Remind her where her parent has gone and when they are due to return. Distract her with fun games / songs / toys. Take her for a walk in the stroller. Allow the parent to return at the stated time - don't be tempted to call the parent home earlier. She may cry for a while (a long while for the first few times) but then she should feel safer with you and begin to trust you.