

Clingy behaviour

About clingy behaviour and separation anxiety

Separation anxiety is the distress that a child feels when their carer leaves them alone or in the care of another for a period of time. Most parents and carers deal with this distressing, but normal, developmental stage with little or no problem. However, some have more serious problems because the child or young person displays such severe and prolonged distress that it is difficult to leave them. The child or young person will commonly show the normal signs of distress and anxiety, for example crying, calling for their carer, running after them and clinging to them as if they were being abandoned in a dangerous place. Some youngsters can become so distressed that they will scream, throw tantrums and even vomit.

In such a case, the parent/carer may choose not to send the child to nursery, school or social events in order to avoid the distress and separation anxiety. Thus clingy behaviour can become a much more troublesome complaint requiring the outside support of, for example, teachers or specialist mental health workers.

Separation anxiety can also re-occur in older children in response to changing life events such as bullying at school, a bereavement of a loved one, a change of school, parental illness or marital disharmony. This often presents as the child or young person showing distress or fear when they go to school or they may insist that they are with their parent at all times, even to the point of sleeping in the parent's bed.

As a worker it is important to consider separation anxiety and clingy behaviour as normal in toddlers and common in older children. Clingy behaviour and separation anxiety are a normal developmental stage starting around 9 months old and continuing to around age 4 years but many children continue to experience bouts of separation anxiety well beyond this age.

Things to think about

In trying to understand why a child or young person may be clingy or displaying separation anxiety, ask yourself the following:

- Is this the continuation of normal clingy behaviour or is this a sudden change in behaviour? If the former, it is important to look at how the parent or carer manages separation. If the latter, it is important to think about what may be happening for the child.
- How are the parents or carers reacting to the child or young person's distress? Are they dealing with it in a reassuring manner or are they making the child's distress worse by their own response, for example being too harsh, showing distress themselves, being too protective or not being firm enough?
- Could their behaviour be the result of a specific anxiety about a particular subject or activity that they feel they are failing in or likely to become embarrassed by (such as reading, maths, physical education, etc)?
- If they are adolescents, are they aware of not keeping up with peers or do they worry about teasing, embarrassment and not feeling confident?

- Do you know if there have been any significant life changes or stresses affecting the young person, for example has there been significant loss or bereavement, such as parental separation, the death of a close family member or friend, a change of school or move of house?
- Is the young person confident and socially integrated with strong friendships and alliances?
- Is the young person different from the majority of other young people, for example from a different ethnic or religious group?
- Does the child have an obvious or hidden disability?
- Is the child or young person suffering from a physical illness?
- Could the child be a victim of bullying, teasing or another form of abuse?

Think about yourself

Separation anxiety is something that we all have experienced at some time in our lives. We all have the ability to empathise with young people who are experiencing this and it is sometimes difficult to separate our own feelings and thoughts from the situation we are dealing with.

It is important to consider your own emotional response to the situation. If you are finding yourself becoming very distressed, anxious, angry or protective towards the child then it is important to reflect upon where these feelings come from in order to stop them from inhibiting your ability to help the young person and their carer.

What you can do

- Ask the young person if there is anything worrying them, for example bullying, illness, bereavement, etc.
- Talk to the parents or carers of the young person to find out if this is a new response to separation, or if there is a previous pattern; and are they aware of any worries that the young person may have.
- Discuss with the parent or carer their own response to the young person's anxiety and if possible observe them to see whether the carer is confident and reassuring with the young person or whether they are becoming anxious themselves and over-protective.
- Listen to the young person and their parents/carers and try to address any concerns or worries they have.
- Sensitively explain to the parents/carers or young person the normal symptoms of anxiety.
- Think about using stories, drawings and other creative approaches, appropriate to the child's age, to explain how they are feeling when they leave their parents.
- With the parents' support, develop a plan for gradual separation whereby the parent will gradually shorten the period of time they spend leaving the child and increase the amount of time apart.

- Be encouraging and future-orientated, e.g. talk encouragingly about your expectation that the child and parents will manage the separation more confidently.
- With a child of school age, recruit the young person's friends or classmates to support them, for example, to go to the house, to walk them to school.
- Encourage the parent and carer to be reassuring. However be aware that reassurance can sometimes become a problem if the child becomes too dependent on it and doesn't learn to feel confident that they can handle the separation without the constant need for reassurance.
- Try to keep separations fairly short but allow the child or young person to adjust to the fact they are leaving their parent or carer.
- Discourage the parent or carer from disappearing or sneaking away without telling the young person they are going.
- Encourage the parent or carer to smile during the separation as this can mask their own distress.
- Encourage the parent or carer to plan brief periods away from the child, gradually extending the time as the child becomes more settled (e.g. leaving them more often with grandparents or a neighbour).
- When the parent is leaving, be supportive and encouraging and try to distract the young person with other activities.
- When the parent or carer is leaving, encourage them not to return to the young person but to calmly and confidently leave.

When to contact a mental health specialist

- If you have tried all the above and a child or young person continually fails to settle after the parent or carer has left.
- If the parent or carer finds it impossible to separate themselves, they may need some counselling and specific advice.
- If the child or young person displays separation anxiety in combination with other worrying or psychological problems, for example depression or sleep disturbance.
- If your attempts to help uncover issues that you are inexperienced in dealing with, for example, sexual abuse.

How to contact a mental health specialist

You should get in touch with your local health centre or hospital to obtain a contact number for the appropriate children and young people's mental health specialists.

Remember - you can contact your local mental health specialists for a number of reasons, for example:

- For advice on how to make a referral about a named child.

- For advice about whether or not to make a referral (it is normal practice to seek this advice without naming the child in the first instance).
- For advice about what to do (once again there should be no necessity to name the child).

By not naming the child you are protecting their right to confidentiality. This method of seeking advice also has the advantage that you do not need to get anyone's consent in advance of your contact phone call.