FACT FILE

SEPARATION ANXIETY

WHAT IS SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Separation anxiety occurs when a child experiences extreme distress when separated from home or an attachment figure (e.g., parent or sibling).

Anxiety during periods of separation is a normal part of child development, as children come to learn that their attachment figure will return even after leaving them. Naturally this tends to ease off after the age of 2 years old. However, this may become a cause for concern when a child displays distress that is incongruent with his or her developmental age.

Separation anxiety may flare up in new situations such as starting school, but it should decrease once a child becomes familiar with the new surroundings.

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

Psychological Symptoms:

- Child clinging to his or her attachment figure at point of separation
- Withdrawn or sad
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares

Physical Symptoms:

- Headaches
- Stomachache
- Pale or flushed skin

STRATEGIES

Graded Exposure

Slowly increase the amount of time a child is separated from his or her home/caregiver. This could be a few minutes at a time, gradually increasing to hours (the starting point being dependent on the severity of anxiety). With each increased period of separation, the child will come to learn that despite the absence of the caregiver, the child can trust that the caregiver will return.

Relaxation Techniques

These could include encouraging the child to self-soothe by using deep breathing, playing with a fidget toy, listening to soothing music, or looking at a happy photo.

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