

# Separation Anxiety Disorder

SAD



By: Mr. Resh

## Associated Symptoms

Separation anxiety manifests itself in a variety of physical and behavioral ways, including:

-Physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches, particularly when they occur persistently in anticipation of separation from parents

-Not wanting parents to be out of sight: following them around the house, requests to sleep in the parents' bed at night

-Nightmares about parents being gone or leaving

-Excessive worry about family members' safety or the child's own safety

-Excessive worry or panic when anticipating or experiencing a separation from home

-Refusal to go to school or other activities away from home



## What is Separation Anxiety Disorder?

Separation anxiety is normal in very young children (those between 8 and 14 months old). Kids often go through a phase when they are "clingy" and afraid of unfamiliar people and places. When this fear occurs in a child over age 6 years, is excessive, and lasts longer than four weeks, the child may have separation anxiety disorder.

Separation anxiety disorder is a condition in which a child becomes fearful and nervous when away from home or separated from a loved one -- usually a parent or other caregiver -- to whom the child is attached. Some children also develop physical symptoms, such as headaches or stomachaches, at the thought of being separated. Their fear is sometimes based in the belief that harm will come to the attachment figure in their absence. The child's persistent worry about this is often seen in attempts to avoid separation situations such as: being left with babysitters, going to bed, or attending school or preschool.

There is a close relationship between "School Phobia" or school refusal, and separation anxiety in younger children. Children will sometimes report feeling fearful of attending school. However, on close questioning it often becomes apparent that their fear of attending is related to a fear of being separated from their caregiver rather than a fear of what will occur in the school environment. Not wanting to go to school may occur at anytime, but is most common in children 5-7 and 11-14, times when children are dealing with the new challenges of elementary and middle school. Refusal to go to school often begins following a period at home in which the child has become closer to the parent, such as a summer vacation, a holiday break, or a brief illness. It also may follow a stressful occurrence, such as the death of a pet or relative, a change in schools, or a move to a new neighborhood.

## What Causes Separation Anxiety?

The cause of separation anxiety disorder is not known, although some risk factors have been identified. Affected children tend to come from families that are very close-knit and also anxious parents -- particularly if their parenting style tends to be overprotective. The disorder might develop after a stress such as death or illness in the family or a move. Traumatic incidents, especially physical or sexual assault might also bring on the disorder. For example, it is not uncommon for a child to develop separation fears after the child or one of their parents is involved in a serious motor vehicle accident. The disorder sometimes runs in families, but the precise role of genetic and environmental factors has not been established.

## Prevalence

Prevalence estimates of separation anxiety disorder are 4–5% of the population. Gender differences have not been observed, although girls do present more often with anxiety disorders in general. Of those diagnosed with separation anxiety disorder, approximately 75% experience school refusal. The disorder may be over-diagnosed in children and teenagers who live in dangerous neighborhoods and have reasonable fears of leaving home.

# Useful Websites



## HelpGuide.org

[http://www.helpguide.org/mental/separation\\_anxiety\\_causes\\_prevention\\_treatment.htm](http://www.helpguide.org/mental/separation_anxiety_causes_prevention_treatment.htm)

This site offers both counselors and parents a wealth of information pertaining to separation anxiety. Some of the topics discussed on this site include causes, prevention, and treatment of SAD, as well as related links and other resources that can be utilized for gaining more information about separation anxiety and separation anxiety disorder.

## The Encyclopedia of Mental Disorders

<http://www.minddisorders.com/Py-Z/Separation-anxiety-disorder.html>

This site contains comprehensive medical articles on over 150 mental disorders, including SAD. Separation Anxiety Disorder information presented on this site includes causes, symptoms, demographics, diagnostic criteria (DSM-IV), treatments, and external resources (books, periodicals, and organizations) that can be used to obtain additional information about this disorder.

## AnxietyBC (The Anxiety Disorder Association of British Columbia)

<http://www.anxietybc.com/parent/separation.php>

AnxietyBC provides a rich resource of self-help information and programs, as well as resources for parents, caregivers, and professionals pertaining to Separation Anxiety Disorder as well as many other anxiety disorders found in children. This site provides evidence-based resources and treatments for dealing with SAD. It also embodies this disorder and increases general awareness and recognition by providing users with videos and parent stories describing cases of SAD.

## The Child Anxiety Network

<http://www.childanxiety.net/index.htm>

The Child Anxiety Network is designed to provide thorough, user-friendly information about child anxiety. It is also designed to provide direction for those who are not sure where to turn when they think their child or a child they know may need professional help to cope with anxiety. This site provides users with a brief overview of SAD, a list of frequently asked questions, and a list of resources for both parents and professionals (including books for parents & children, coping cards, relaxation techniques/guides, a directory of specialists listed by state, & a list of specialized programs).

## Psych Central

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/2006/treatment-of-separation-anxiety-disorder/>

This site offers parents and counselors a list of Do's and Don'ts of dealing with SAD in children. It also explains ways to help children, gives a detailed list of symptoms, lists frequently asked questions, and supplies users with useful forums in which parents and practitioners can discuss/hear issues pertaining to SAD and many other childhood disorders/issues.

## American Family Physician

<http://www.aafp.org/afp/20031015/1555.html>

This site links to a detailed article written by physicians about the problem of school age children refusing to go to school. It includes questions for parents to consider about fears and motivations of child and explains the difference between school phobia/refusal and truancy. It also goes into great depth describing more specifically what school phobia (a type of SAD) is, how it is assessed for, and types of treatments utilized.

## Kids Health

[http://kidshealth.org/parent/pregnancy\\_newborn/home/separation\\_anxiety.html](http://kidshealth.org/parent/pregnancy_newborn/home/separation_anxiety.html)

This site offers practical suggestions for parents and other caregivers dealing with separation anxiety disorder, as well as books to read to children. Some of the topics discussed include how SAD develops, what children may be feeling, and how to make goodbyes easier. There are also links for parents, kids, and teens to explore that offer advice, games, and other interesting activities for a variety of different childhood issues.



# Helpful Books on SAD

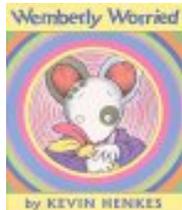
## Children's Bibliotherapy



### ***The Kissing Hand***

By: Audrey Penn

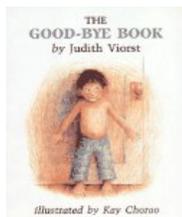
Publisher: Tanglewood Press  
June 25, 2006  
ISBN-10: 1933718005  
Ages 3-8



### ***Wemberly Worried***

By: Kevin Henkes

Publisher: Live Oak Media  
November 2001  
ISBN-10: 0874998077  
Ages 4-8



### ***The Good-Bye Book***

By: Judith Viorst

Publisher: Aladdin  
March 31, 1992  
ISBN-10: 0689715811  
Ages 4-8



### ***Into the Great Forest***

By: Irene Marcus

Publisher: Magination Press  
May 2000  
ISBN-10: 0945354398  
Ages 4-8

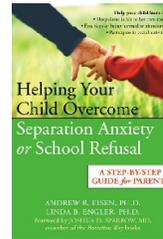


### ***What to Do When You Worry Too Much***

By: Dawn Huebner

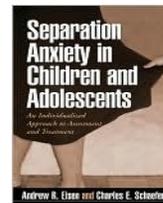
Publisher: Magination Press  
September 2005  
ISBN-10: 1591473144  
Ages 9-12

## Parent/Professional Guides



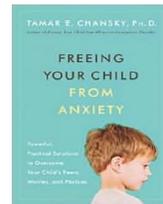
### ***Helping Your Child Overcome Separation Anxiety or School Phobia***

By: Andrew Eisen & Linda Engler  
Publisher: New Harbinger  
June 6, 2006  
ISBN-10: 1572244313



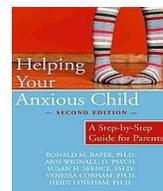
### ***Separation Anxiety in Children and Adolescents***

By: Andrew Eisen & Charles Schaefer  
Publisher: The Guilford Press  
February 13, 2007  
ISBN-10: 159385482X



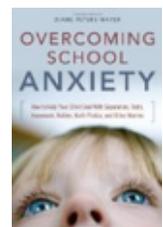
### ***Freeing Your Children from Anxiety***

By: Tamar Chanksy  
Publisher: Broadway  
March 30, 2004  
ISBN-10: 0767914929



### ***Helping Your Anxious Child***

By: Ronald Rapee & Ann Wignall  
Publisher: New Harbinger  
December 3, 2008  
ISBN-10: 1572245751

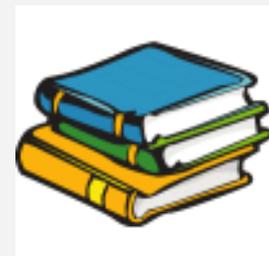


### ***Overcoming School Anxiety***

By: Diane Mayer  
Publisher: Amacon  
2008  
ISBN-10: 0814474462

## SAD in Stories

A number of children's books address the topic of Separation Anxiety. Counselors can recommend these books to parents to read to their children or they can use them as part of classroom guidance lessons within the school system to model healthy separation behaviors.



## 10 Helpful Hints to Ease Separation Anxiety

Here are some great ideas counselors can utilize and/or recommend to parents/teachers.

1. **Practice:** Practice separation for brief periods and short distances, increasing as the child can tolerate it. Praise the child for managing well. **The "Magic Number"** technique can also be used in practicing separation. Tell your child that he/she will need to separate from you for a magic number of minutes. For example, have your child go alone to his/her room for an agreed upon time period. Make sure your child has some control in terms of how many minutes. This "magic number" only may be one or two minutes for starters. The magic number grows steadily until separation from you is reasonably comfortable. When the magic number reaches ten to fifteen minutes, usually the battle has been won!
2. **Bibliotherapy:** Read stories and role-play with your child. A number of children's books incorporate the theme of separation anxiety. Talk about how a fictional character might handle separation. Prepare your child for school by role-playing and pretending that they are about to go on a voyage or quest similar to stories read. With this idea, remind the child of previous times when he or she was brave or did something independent
3. **Make new surroundings familiar:** Let your child become comfortable with new surroundings with you present. The first time you leave a child with a relative, for example, should not be the first time you and the child have visited that relative's house. Contact the child's school the summer prior to entry and see if you can come in for a tour or maybe take periodic trips to the school's playground and look around the outside of the school.
4. **Plan and Explain the Routine:** Days or weeks prior to a separation, start talking to your child. Explain to your child that the separation will only be temporary and that you will be with your child again. The sooner the child knows, the better, giving the child time to get used to the separation. Oftentimes, parents think that the more they keep the separation a secret, the better it is for the child. Quite the contrary, for the child will be unhappy because it is abrupt. Explain the daily routine so the child will know what to expect. For example, "Tomorrow when you go to school, you can play with the other children when you arrive. You will then have classes where your teacher will do fun activities with you, you will have lunch, and then play outside. I will come for you when the little hand on the clock points to the "3." Most importantly when planning a routine, be honest!
5. **Adjusting to the Environment:** Help the child become familiar with new surroundings and people before actually leaving the child there. Consider introducing him or her to some of the children who are to be in the class and arranging play dates in advance. Upon arriving at the classroom, have a classmate meet and greet the student at the door and walk into class together. The teacher should introduce him/her self to the child and invite the child to play with toys or engage in some other highly stimulating/attractive and interactive activity following separation as a means of refocusing attention.
6. **Develop a "goodbye" ritual:** Rituals are reassuring and can be as simple as a special wave through the window or a special kiss and hug. Be calm and consistent.
7. **Don't Prolong the Exit or Sneak Out:** When it is time to leave, don't stall or repeat goodbyes; that will just make your child more anxious and clingy. Tell the child where you're going and when you'll be back in terms s/he can understand. Conversely, don't sneak away without saying goodbye; that will undermine the child's sense that s/he can rely on you. There should be no tricks or surprises. It is important to tell the child exactly what s/he is to expect.
8. **Comfort Toy:** Allow the student to bring a comfort toy or item from home, preferably something that can be placed in the pocket and touched when anxious. This helps them feel safer in a strange place.
9. **Secret Picture/Note:** Leave a note to your child and put it in your child's lunch box. Tell your child not to open the note unless it is lunchtime. This gives your child something to look forward to each day. Prepare several notes for several days with different messages each time. Make the note fun so that your child will always be happy. A **Brag Book** can also be used for the same purpose. A small plastic photo album can be filled with pictures of the child's family. When the child is dropped off at school, the child can show the pictures to his peers or teacher.
10. **Listen to your child's feelings:** Do not deny the child's anxiety or worries, but acknowledge them and reassure him/her. For example: "I know you're worried I won't be there to pick you up, but there's no reason to worry. I'll be there." Never make fun of a child's separation distress. Do not scold the child for it. Punishment does not work, but kind, consistent, rational pressure and encouragement do.