

Fear of strangers

By Talaris Research Institute

Most babies begin to show fear of strangers by around seven to nine months. They also don't like being apart from their parents. Don't worry – this is normal. In most cases, it will pass as your baby gets older.

I don't know you

Kari is eight months old, and she's been a cheerful and outgoing baby. She's always smiled at people and delighted in experiencing the world around her.

But not today.

When her mother brings in a new babysitter, she's surprised by Kari's reaction. Not only does Kari fail to smile and respond to her but, as the sitter reaches out to touch her, Kari clings closely to her mummy and begins to whimper.

A few minutes later, Mum tries to leave the room. Kari's distress turns into full-blown sobs. What has happened to her happy, outgoing baby?

I'm scared

Kari's reactions to the new babysitter are normal. By around 7-9 months, most babies begin to show fear. Often this fear shows up when babies see unfamiliar people, like a new babysitter or a family member they haven't seen for a while. This fear is called 'stranger anxiety'.

Babies also begin to show fear when their parents or caregivers leave them with others, even if it is at home or some other familiar place. This fear is called 'separation anxiety'.

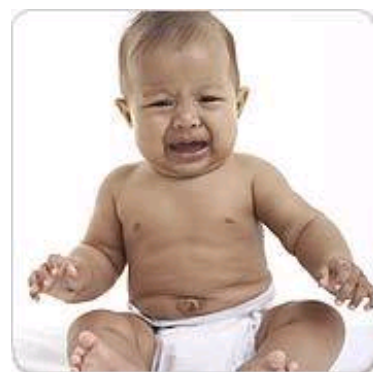


Although separation anxiety and stranger anxiety can seem troubling, don't worry. Children all around the world develop these fears at about the same age.

Why she's frightened now

Why does fear develop around 7-9 months? Some researchers believe children begin to show fear when they are able to compare something they know and remember, with something they don't recognise. They think stranger anxiety is a result of children's increasing ability to remember and recognise familiar faces and places.

In other words, as children get better at knowing the difference between familiar and unfamiliar faces, they may become more fearful of faces they don't know.



Others believe that fear is more biologically 'programmed'. For these researchers, an unfamiliar face or situation is a natural clue to danger. They believe infants may be programmed to fear strange faces and settings as part of a survival strategy. This is because any strange or unfamiliar creature could be potentially threatening.

What we know

Whatever the reason, stranger anxiety is a normal part of a child's [development](#) that begins around 7-9 months. For example, one study observed a group of babies as they grew from age four months through to 12 months. Here's how it worked.

Each month, researchers watched the babies' reactions as they were approached by someone they didn't know. These 'strangers' walked up to the babies, greeted them, picked them up and held them. Even with the mother present, many children began frowning, whimpering, or crying with the stranger at eight months.

By nine months, 79% of the babies showed fearful reactions.

In other studies, researchers have found that how the stranger acts makes a difference. When the strangers approached more slowly and didn't try to touch or pick up the baby, babies showed less stranger anxiety. The same was true when the mother or a familiar caregiver was present.

Please don't leave me

But why does my 11-month-old start crying and fussing when I leave her with a familiar babysitter? There's nothing strange about the person or the place, yet her reaction is very different from just a few months ago.

This is separation anxiety. It usually appears somewhere between 6-8 months, and gets stronger up to 14-18 months. It gradually becomes less frequent and less intense as the baby gets older.



Research has shown that most young children get upset when their mothers or other familiar caregivers leave them alone, even for brief periods of time.

Once again, there are different opinions about why this happens. Most researchers believe that children grow to feel a strong [attachment](#) to their parents or caregivers. Seeing them leave is scary.

Helpful parenting tips

How can you help your child through stranger anxiety and separation anxiety?

- Stay close to your child when new people are around. Infants react more fearfully to strangers when their mothers or caregivers are not close by.
- Show your child that new people are OK. When you greet a stranger in a friendly way, with smiles and a positive tone of voice, children are less likely to feel afraid.
- Give your child time to get used to new surroundings before meeting a stranger.
- Try bringing a familiar toy or stuffed animal for comfort.
- Encourage new people to approach slowly and gently, without immediately touching your child.
- Pay close attention to your baby's reactions, and respond.
- If your baby cries or looks afraid with a new person, it's OK to comfort her and try again

later.

- Avoid sneaking out on your child when leaving. Although it might seem easier at the time, children may feel confused or betrayed when they realise you're gone. When leaving your child with someone, tell your child that he will be safe and that you will be back soon.
- Earlier in the day, let your child know that a sitter is coming, who it will be, and how long you will be gone.
- Give your child some time with the babysitter so your child has a chance to get more comfortable before you leave.
- Let your child know that the sitter will keep them safe.
- Tell her how much you love her, where you are going, and when you'll be back.
- Give your child something to look forward to when you return, like reading a book together.

Children are unique. They will respond in different ways to strangers and to being separated from you. Fear is a very normal reaction – just another part of growing older. Be open to trying different things as your baby develops and trusts your instincts.



As your child grows, remember that these powerful fears (and the tears) will begin to fade over time.

Rated ★★★★★ (45 ratings)

GLOSSARY

secure attachment

A strong bond between child and primary caregiver, which the child uses as a model for forming relationships with other people. Attachment also gives the child a sense of security, resilience and the ability to handle emotions. It develops from touch and eye contact, a strong emotional connection and a consistent, predictable and safe environment.

More to explore

- ▶ Anxiety and fears
- ▶ Separation anxiety
- ▶ Social anxiety
- ▶ Feelings: babies
- ▶ Settling your child into care

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