



Coping Skills for Children and Families: Separation Anxiety

Children with separation anxiety disorder experience extreme distress when they are separated from parents or caregivers. Difficulty separating is normal in early childhood development; it becomes a disorder if the fear and anxiety interfere with age-appropriate behavior. Symptoms of separation anxiety disorder commonly become noticeable in preschool and early grammar school, but in rare cases it becomes problematic later, in early adolescence.



Dr. Theresa Vadala



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Coping Skills for Children and Families: Separation Anxiety

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<p align="center">PRESCHOOL Module 3</p> <p>CDA Subject Area 3: Supporting children’s social and emotional development</p> <p>Title: CDA SOC.EM 3.E Coping Skills for Children and Families: Separation</p>	<p align="center">2 Hours</p>	<p align="center">0.2 CEUs</p>
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Dr. Theresa Vadala
(Instructor & Curriculum Designer)





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Learning Assessment

Read the material provided, take the 5-10 quiz questions and
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Participants must receive 100% on individual courses to obtain a certificate of completion.

Questions?

We are happy to help.

Support Services:

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Child Care Training Consultants LLC., Goal

The goal is to empower educators as they take Child Development Associate (CDA) courses to make a powerful difference in the lives of young children!

Mission Statement

“Child Care Training Consultants, LLC’s is committed to provide research-based professional growth and development training courses primarily focused on the Child Development Associate. The CDA is the nation’s premier credential that is transferable, valid, competency-based and nationally recognized in all 50 states, territories, the District of Columbia, community colleges and the United State Military.

Vision

Child Care Training Consultants, LLC’s vision is to provide the early childhood community with courses based on CDA competency standards to obtain their CDA Credential and assist in reaching their goal as an exceptional early childhood educator to ultimately achieve higher child outcomes.



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About the Instructor

Theresa has over 30 years experience in the field of Early Childhood Education. During that time, she served as a Preschool Teacher, Disabilities Coordinator, Program Facilitator, and Director of an Early Childcare Program. She has a Doctoral Degree in Educational Leadership with Specialization in Curriculum and Instructional Design. Theresa is a Professional Growth & Development Trainer and Curriculum Designer and offers web-based courses internationally. She is the Executive Director/Owner of of the training organization Child Care Training Consultants, LLC., (CCTC).



Business Description

Child Care Training Consultants, LLC. (CCTC) is an accredited provider (AP) with the International Association for Continuing Education and Training (IACET) that provides Continuing Education Units (CEU) for adult education nationally. The business is also a recognized training organization with the Council for Professional Recognition, Child Development Associate Council (CDA), National Credentialing Program.



Learning Objectives & Outcomes

Participants will be able to:

- Identify coping skills for children and families who experience separation anxiety
- Identify separation anxiety symptoms and risk factors
- Identify how anxiety affects children in school

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Agenda

Part 1: Separation Anxiety

- Coping Skills for Children and Families

Part 2: Separation Anxiety Symptoms and Risk Factors

- Risk Factors
- Diagnosis
- What can I do?

Part 3: When Children are Anxious

- What to do, What not to do
- How does Anxiety Affects Children in School?
- How to Avoid Passing Anxiety to your Children

Review

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Part 1: Separation Anxiety





Coping Skills for Children and Families: Separation Anxiety

Children with separation anxiety disorder experience extreme distress when they are separated from parents or caregivers. Difficulty separating is normal in early childhood development; it becomes a disorder if the fear and anxiety interfere with age-appropriate behavior. Symptoms of separation anxiety disorder commonly become noticeable in preschool and early grammar school, but in rare cases it becomes problematic later, in early adolescence.



Separation Anxiety: What to Look For

Children with separation anxiety disorder experience extreme anxiety when they are separated from a caregiver to whom they are attached. While separation anxiety can be developmentally appropriate for young children, the anxiety that children with separation anxiety disorder experience is unusual for their age and development.



Part 2: Separation Anxiety Symptoms and Risk Factors





Separation Anxiety

Some symptoms parents might notice include:

- Difficulty saying goodbye to parents
- Fear that something bad will happen to a family member during separation
- Tantrums when faced with separation
- Overwhelming need to know where parents are, and be in touch with them by phone or texting
- Shadowing one parent constantly around the house
- Vivid nightmares about family tragedy
- Physical symptoms in anticipation of separation, like stomachaches, headaches and dizziness
- Extended absences from school and avoidance of playdates
- Younger children are mostly anxious at the time of separation, while older kids develop more anticipatory anxiety.



Separation Anxiety: Risk Factors

Separation anxiety disorder may be triggered by stress, trauma or changes in the environment, such as a move to a new home or school, or a death or divorce in the family. Some children may also be genetically predisposed to developing the disorder.



Separation Anxiety: Diagnosis

For a diagnosis of separation anxiety disorder, a clinician looks for distress in being separated from parents or caregivers that is excessive for a child's age and prevents him from participating in age-appropriate activities. To meet diagnostic criteria, the symptoms the child demonstrates must be persistent, lasting for at least four weeks, and cause impairment in his ability to function at school and with friends.



Separation Anxiety: What can I do?

Here are some tips to help separation anxiety in preschoolers:

Practice Brief Separations

Start with brief separations well before the first day of school approaches. This not only helps to give you an idea of your toddler's level of separation anxiety, but it also helps them get used to being apart. Try stepping out of the room and announcing when you return. As your child becomes more comfortable with brief separations, try leaving them with a family member or babysitter for small periods of time. This helps them practice being away from you and seeing you come back home, which can reduce their separation anxiety.



Separation Anxiety: What can I do?

Plan a Visit Before School Starts

If you suspect your child will display signs of separation anxiety, arrange a preschool visit and meeting with teachers before school starts. This way they'll know who will be greeting them in the morning, and they will be more comfortable in the building and classroom



Separation Anxiety: What can I do?

Make Sure Your Child Can See You Leave

Tell your child goodbye and make your exit without sneaking out of the room. Sneaking out may cause them more separation anxiety because they won't know whether you're still in the building or not. Make a quick, positive goodbye to let them know you are excited for them to have fun at school.



Separation Anxiety: What can I do?

No False Promises

If you know you won't be back to pick up your child for a few hours, don't tell them you will check in thirty minutes afterward or wait outside in the car. Being truthful will help build trust between you and your little one, so they can know when to expect you after preschool.



Separation Anxiety: What can I do?

Don't Sweat Regression

Your child may be absolutely fine separating from you one week and then have a meltdown the next. They may regress on something at home such as refusing to put on their own clothes or having an accident after they've already been potty trained. Occasional regression can happen with separation anxiety, especially when young children are exposed to a lot of change at once and they should adjust over time. If your child has these regressive slips constantly, it is best to talk with their teacher or pediatrician.



Separation Anxiety: What can I do?

Get Advice From the Teacher

Teachers are child experts. Your child's teacher may offer them a hug and be extra comforting if they're aware of separation anxiety over parents leaving. They may also have ideas for helping your toddler cope like giving them a job in the morning to keep them distracted, i.e. passing out toys or supplies. Don't hesitate about scheduling an appointment to talk to them about strategies for helping your little one with the separation.



Part 3: When Children are Anxious





What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

When children are chronically anxious, even the most well-meaning parents can fall into a negative cycle and, not wanting a child to suffer, still may cause a child's anxiety. It happens when parents, anticipating a child's fears, try to protect them from them.



What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

1. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help a child manage it.

None of us wants to see a child unhappy, but the best way to help kids overcome anxiety isn't to try to remove stressors that trigger it. It's to help them learn to tolerate their anxiety and function as well as they can, even when they're anxious. And as a byproduct of that, the anxiety will decrease or fall away over time.



What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

2. Don't avoid things just because they make a child anxious.

Helping children avoid the things they are afraid of will make them feel better in the short term, but it reinforces the anxiety over the long run. If a child in an uncomfortable situation gets upset, starts to cry—not to be manipulative, but just because that's how she feels—and her parents whisk her out of there, or remove the thing she's afraid of, she's learned that coping mechanism, and that cycle has the potential to repeat itself.



What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

3. Express positive—but realistic—expectations.

You can't promise a child that his fears are unrealistic—that he won't fail a test, that he'll have fun ice skating, or that another child won't laugh at him during show & tell. But you can express confidence that he's going to be okay, he will be able to manage it, and that, as he faces his fears, the anxiety level will drop over time. This gives him confidence that your expectations are realistic, and that you're not going to ask him to do something he can't handle.



What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

4. Respect her feelings, but don't empower them.

It's important to understand that validation doesn't always mean agreement. So if a child is afraid to go to the doctor because she's due for a shot, you don't want to belittle her fears, but you also don't want to amplify them. You want to listen and be empathetic, help her understand what she's anxious about, and encourage her to feel that she can face her fears. The message you want to send is, "I know you're scared, and that's okay, and I'm here, and I'm going to help you get through this."



What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

5. Don't ask leading questions.

Encourage your child to talk about his feelings, but try not to ask leading questions— “Are you anxious about the big test? Are you worried about the science fair?” To avoid feeding the cycle of anxiety, just ask open-ended questions: “How are you feeling about the science fair?”



What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

6. Don't reinforce the child's fears.

What you don't want to do is be saying, with your tone of voice or body language: "Maybe this *is* something that you should be afraid of." Let's say a child has had a negative experience with a dog. Next time the child is around a dog, he/she may be anxious about their respond, and as a teacher, an unintentional message may be sent to the child.



What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

7. Encourage the child to tolerate her anxiety.

Let your child know that you appreciate the work it takes to tolerate anxiety in order to do what he wants or needs to do. It's really encouraging him to engage in life and to let the anxiety take its natural curve. We call it the "habituation curve"—it will drop over time as he continues to have contact with the stressor. It might not drop to zero, it might not drop as quickly as you would like, but that's how we get over our fears.



What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

8. Try to keep the anticipatory period short.

When we're afraid of something, the hardest time is really *before* we do it. Another rule of thumb for parents is to really try to eliminate or reduce the anticipatory period. If a child is nervous about going to the doctor, you don't want to launch into a discussion about it two hours before you go; that's likely to get your child more keyed up. So just try to shorten that period to a minimum.



What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

9. Think things through with the child.

Sometimes it helps to talk through what would happen if a child's fear came true—how would she handle it? A child who's anxious about separating from their parents might worry about what would happen if they didn't come to pick her up. If your parent doesn't come at the end of soccer practice, what would you do? "Well, I would tell the coach my mom's not here." And what do you think the coach would do? "Well, he would call my mom. Or he would wait with me." A child who's afraid that a stranger might be sent to pick her up can have a code word from her parents that anyone they sent would know. Having a plan, can reduce the uncertainty in a healthy, effective way.



What to Do (and Not Do) When Children Are Anxious

10. Try to model healthy ways of handling anxiety.

There are multiple ways you can help kids handle anxiety by letting them see how you cope with anxiety yourself. Children are perceptive, and they're going to take it in if you keep complaining on the phone to a friend that you can't handle the stress or the anxiety. I'm not saying to pretend that you don't have stress and anxiety, but let children hear or see you managing it calmly, tolerating it, feeling good about getting through it.



How Does Anxiety Affect Kids in School?

Acting out is another thing we might not associate with anxiety. But when a student is compulsively kicking the chair of the student in front of him or her, or throws a tantrum whenever the schedule is ignored or a classmate isn't following the rules, anxiety may well be the cause. Similarly, children who are feeling anxious might ask a lot of questions, including repetitive ones, because they are feeling worried and want reassurance.



How Does Anxiety Affect Kids in School?

Anxiety can also make children aggressive. When children are feeling upset or threatened and don't know how to handle their feelings, their fight or flight response to protect themselves can kick in — and some children are more likely to fight. They might attack another child or a teacher, throw things, or push over a desk because they're feeling out of control. If they do get called on, sometimes kids get so anxious that they freeze. They might have been paying attention to the lesson and they might even know the answer, but when they're called on their anxiety level becomes so heightened that they can't respond.



How to Avoid Passing Anxiety on to Your Kids

Help yourself, and them, by learning techniques to manage stress in a healthy way.

Witnessing a parent in a state of anxiety can be more than just momentarily unsettling for children. Children look to their parents for information about how to interpret ambiguous situations; if a parent seems consistently anxious and fearful, the child will determine that a variety of scenarios are unsafe. And there is evidence that children of anxious parents are more likely to exhibit anxiety themselves, a probable combination of genetic risk factors and learned behaviors.

If you are dealing with anxiety and start to notice your child exhibiting anxious behaviors, the first thing is not to feel guilty. The transmission of anxiety from parent to child is not inevitable. The second important thing to do is implement strategies to help ensure that you do not pass your anxiety on to your kids. That means managing your own stress as effectively as possible, and helping your kids manage theirs.



How to Avoid Passing Anxiety on to Your Kids

It can be very difficult to communicate a sense of calm to your child when you are struggling to cope with your own anxiety.

When we are feeling anxious, we start worrying about what might happen in the future — all those “what ifs.” To avoid getting caught up in worries about the future, try practicing mindfulness, which is a technique for focusing on the present. Here are two common mindfulness techniques to try:

- **Squeeze Muscles:** Starting at your toes, pick one muscle and squeeze it tight. Count to five. Release and notice how your body changes. Repeat exercise moving up your body.
- **Belly Breathing:** Put one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest. Slowly breathe in from your stomach (expand like a balloon) and slowly breathe out (deflate).

You can try to practice mindfulness in the moment when you’re feeling anxious, but it is also a good idea to set aside time to be mindful every day. Regular practice will help you use the techniques more effectively when you really need them, and it can also make you feel calmer in general.



How to Avoid Passing Anxiety on to Your Kids

While you don't want your child to witness every anxious moment you experience, you do not have to constantly suppress your emotions. It's okay — and even healthy — for children to see their parents cope with stress every now and then, but you want to explain why you reacted in the way that you did.

Let's say, for example, you lost your temper because you were worried about getting your child to school on time. Later, when things are calm, say to her: "Do you remember when I got really frustrated in the morning? I was feeling anxious because you were late for school, and the way I managed my anxiety was by yelling. But there are other ways you can manage it too. Maybe we can come up with a better way of leaving the house each morning."

Talking about anxiety in this way gives children permission to feel stress, explains Dr. Kirmayer, and sends the message that stress is manageable. "If we feel like we have to constantly protect our children from seeing us sad, or angry, or anxious, we're subtly giving our children the message that they don't have permission to feel those feelings, or express them, or manage them," she adds. "Then we're also, in a way, giving them an indication that there isn't a way to manage them when they happen."



How to Avoid Passing Anxiety on to Your Kids

Make a plan

Come up with strategies in advance for managing specific situations that trigger your stress. You may even involve your child in the plan. If, for example, you find yourself feeling anxious about getting your son ready for bed by a reasonable hour, talk to him about how you can work together to better handle this stressful transition in the future. Maybe you can come up with a plan wherein he earns points toward a privilege whenever he goes through his evening routine without protesting his bedtime.

These strategies should be used sparingly: You don't want to put the responsibility on your child to manage your anxiety if it permeates many aspects of your life. But seeing you implement a plan to curb specific anxious moments lets him know that stress can be tolerated and managed.

Know when to disengage

If you know that a situation causes you undue stress, you might want to plan ahead to absent yourself from that situation so your children will not interpret it as unsafe. Let's say, for example, that school drop-offs fill you with anxiety. Eventually you want to be able to take your child to school, but if you are still in treatment, you can ask a co-parent or another trusted adult to handle the drop off. "You don't want to model this very worried, concerned expression upon separating from your children," says Dr. Howard. "You don't want them to think that there's anything dangerous about dropping them off at school."



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How to Avoid Passing Anxiety on to Your Kids

In general, if you feel yourself becoming overwhelmed with anxiety in the presence of your child, try to take a break. Find a support system. Trying to parent while struggling with your own mental health can be a challenge, but you don't have to do it alone. There is a lot of support online, on blogs, forums and social media.



Review

Part 1: Separation Anxiety

Part 2: Separation Anxiety Symptoms and Risk Factors

Part 3: When Children are Anxious



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