

Helping children with separation anxiety

If your child is suffering from separation anxiety, there are lots of things you can do to help her.

Read about the [stepladder approach](#), a gentle behavioural technique used to help children who suffer from separation anxiety.

- Tell your child when you're leaving and when you'll be back. This is a helpful thing to do, even with babies. Some parents feel it will be easier to sneak out when their child is settled, but this can make things worse – your child might feel confused or upset when he realises you're not around, and might then be more difficult to settle the next time you leave him.
- Say goodbye to your child briefly – don't drag it out.
- Settle your child in an enjoyable activity before leaving.
- If you're leaving your child in a new setting (child care centre, preschool, friend's house, babysitter), spend time at the new place with your child before the separation occurs. She needs to know she's being left in a safe place with a person you can both trust, and she'll be less distressed if she's left in a familiar place with familiar people.
- To increase your child's feelings of safety, let him take something he loves from home, such as a teddy bear, pillow or blanket. These objects can be gradually phased out as he becomes more settled.
- Keep a relaxed and happy expression on your face when you're leaving your child. If you seem worried or sad, your child might think the place isn't safe and can get upset too.
- It can be useful to tell your child's child care centre, preschool or school about her anxiety, and let them know about anything you're doing to help your child. This way, other people in your child's environment can give her consistent support.
- Gently encourage your child to separate from you by giving him practice. It's important to give him positive experiences of separations and reunions. Avoiding separations from your child can make the problem worse.
- No matter how frustrated you feel, avoid criticising or being negative about your child's difficulty with separation. For example, avoid saying things like, 'She's such a mummy's girl' or 'Don't be such a baby'.
- Read books or make up stories with your child about separation fears. (For example, 'Once upon a time, there was a little bunny who didn't want to leave her mummy in the hutch. She was afraid of what she might find outside ...'.) This might help your child feel he's not alone in being afraid of separating from his parents.
- Make a conscious effort to foster your child's [self-esteem](#) by complimenting her and giving her lots of [positive attention](#).

The stepladder approach is a step-by-step way of helping children cope with anxiety.

It's based on the principle of 'graded exposure'. This means starting off small, tackling the little things before you face the really scary things.

- [Using the stepladder approach](#)
- [Stepladder 1: a four-year-old with social anxiety](#)
- [Stepladder 2: a seven-year-old with separation anxiety](#)
- [Stepladder 3: an eight-year-old with generalised anxiety](#)

Using the stepladder approach

The stepladder approach works like this:

- Start with a situation or thing that causes your child the least anxiety. Sometimes you might need to put your child in this situation a few times until he feels comfortable with it.
- Move on to another situation that makes him feel a bit more anxious. Again, go through it a few times until he can handle it.
- Gradually move through more and more challenging situations.

When using the stepladder approach, it's important to **encourage your child** by giving lots of **praise** for achieving each step on the ladder.

You can also use **rewards** as incentives for your child to move forward. Rewards might include an extra book in the evening, more cuddle time with you, a trip to the park. Make sure the reward matches the degree of difficulty (for example, don't give a small reward for the most difficult step).

Note: the stepladder approach can be used with children of all ages. Grown-ups can use it too.

Coping in difficult situations

You can help your child develop some tricks and strategies for coping in anxious situations:

- **Younger children** (3-6 years): help your child to come up with a phrase she can say when she's in an anxious situation. For example, 'I can be brave', 'This is a friendly dog' or 'Mummy will come back'.
- **Older children** (seven or older): your child might learn more quickly during the steps on his ladder if you help her to think realistically. For example, encourage your child to ask herself questions such as, 'What happened last time?' and 'How likely is it that it will happen?'

Being a role model

Children learn how to cope with difficult situations by watching other people (their role models) and listening to what those people say. So think about how you act and what you say in situations that you find stressful. For example, you might want to avoid saying things like, 'A spider! You should stay away from spiders. They can kill you, you know'.

Benefits of the stepladder approach

- Children get used to facing the situations that make them anxious. This is better than avoiding them.
- Children face their fears and find out that they might not be so bad after all.
- Children get to use and practise the skills and techniques that they've developed for coping.
- Children get a great sense of achievement as they progress 'up' the stepladder.

Below you can read through some sample stepladders. The idea is for you to adapt them to your child's age and particular fear or anxiety. If you're unsure about how to do this, consider talking to a professional – perhaps a child health nurse, GP, school counsellor or child psychologist.

Stepladder 1: a four-year-old with social anxiety

This child is afraid of meeting and talking to new people. Here is a stepladder that might help him overcome his anxiety.

This child could be encouraged and rewarded to:

1. Say 'hello' to one friend that he has met a few times.
2. Say 'hello' to a child he doesn't know at the park.
3. Say 'hello' to the person at the supermarket checkout.
4. Say 'hello' to an adult he has just met.
5. Say 'hello' to an unfamiliar child at preschool.
6. Say 'Hello – can I play with you?' to a child he doesn't know at the park.

7. Talk to a child he doesn't know very well at preschool about what they did on the weekend.
8. Visit a new group or class and say 'hello' and 'goodbye' to one of the children in the class.
9. Visit the new group or class and talk with one of the children in the class.
10. Visit the new group or class and talk with two of the children in the class.

Stepladder 2: a seven-year-old with separation anxiety

This child is fearful of leaving her mother, even for a short time. At the start of the stepladder, this child is unable to sleep alone and sleeps in her parents' bed.

This child could be encouraged and rewarded to:

1. Stay inside and play while Mum puts the washing on the line.
2. Stay in her bedroom and play for half an hour while Mum is in a different room.
3. Stay at home with Dad while Mum visits the next-door neighbour for 10 minutes.
4. Sleep on a mattress on the floor (next to Mum and Dad's bed).
5. Stay at home with Dad while Mum goes shopping for half an hour.
6. Stay at home with Dad while Mum goes out to lunch.
7. Sleep on the mattress on the floor but move it closer to the door (away from Mum and Dad's bed).
8. Stay at home with an aunty while Mum and Dad go out for lunch.
9. Stay at home with Dad while Mum goes out for the night.
10. Stay at home with an aunty while Mum and Dad go out for the night.
11. Sleep in her own bedroom.
12. Stay at home with an aunty (and sleep in her own bedroom) while Mum and Dad go out for the night.

Stepladder 3: an eight-year-old with generalised anxiety

This child fears being late, especially for school. He also constantly asks questions such as, 'What's the time?', 'Are we going to be late?' and 'What will happen if I'm late?'

This child could be encouraged and rewarded to:

1. Arrive only five minutes early to music class (and ask only two questions about being late).
2. Arrive on time to a friend's house (and ask only two questions about being late).
3. Arrive five minutes late to another friend's house (and ask only two questions about being late).
4. Arrive at school five minutes before the bell goes (and ask only one question about being late).
5. Be late to a music lesson by one minute (and ask only one question about being late).
6. Arrive at school one minute before the bell goes (and ask only one question about being late).
7. Be 15 minutes late to visit a friend's house (and ask no questions about being late).
8. Arrive at school as the bell goes (and ask no questions about being late).
9. Arrive five minutes late to music (and ask no questions about being late).
10. Arrive at school 10 minutes after the bell (and ask no questions about being late).