It is common for young children to feel anxious about separation from their caregivers. Separation anxiety is a normal developmental stage in early childhood and typically decreases by the time children enter kindergarten.

For some children, these anxious feelings may intensify or reappear once they enter school. If these anxieties become excessive or interfere with a child’s adjustment in school, the child may be experiencing separation anxiety disorder (SAD), one of the most common types of anxiety disorders.

SAD is characterized by excessive anxiety about separation from home or caregivers. To be classified as SAD, anxieties must last at least 4 weeks and interfere with children’s typical social or academic functioning. SAD is differentiated from more normative experiences of anxiety by the intensity of children’s worries and apprehension.

SAD typically affects about 4-5% of children aged 7 to 11 years and is more common among girls than boys. Often, SAD develops after children experience a significant stressor, such as the death of a parent, a change in schools, or relocating to a new city or country. These anxieties may also indicate difficulties in children’s relationships with their parents, such as over-protectiveness, or problems with peers, such as experiences of chronic bullying.

One childhood stressor that is commonly linked to SAD is child abandonment. Abandonment occurs when caregivers neglect, withdraw support, or leave a child alone in a dangerous environment. Abandonment may be voluntary, such as leaving the child unsupervised for extended periods, or involuntary, such as refugee experiences and divorce.

Abandonment can be emotional, such as when a parent withholds affection or physical, such as when a parent and child cease to have contact due to immigration or divorce.

While prevalence rates for abandonment are unclear, research suggests that the stress of poverty increases children’s risks for emotional maltreatment and neglect.
Physical Signs of Separation Anxiety
- Stomachaches
- Headaches
- Dizziness
- Shortness of breath
- Heart palpitations

Behavioural Signs of Separation Anxiety
- Sleep problems
- Refusal to go to school
- Chronic absenteeism
- Clinging to parents

Signs of Child Abandonment
- Low self-esteem
- Fear of loss
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Insecure attachment
- Shame

How Can You Help?

1. Encourage class discussion of fears and feelings to help children learn to share anxious thoughts and feelings and to help foster children’s feelings of trust and safety at school. Children who have experienced abandonment may find it especially difficult to vocalize their feelings. Reassure children that it is okay to feel anxious when they are in a new place with unfamiliar people.

2. Encourage parents to keep their child at school when their child feels anxious. Work with children and parents to develop a set of realistic strategies that children can use to help manage feelings of anxiety, such as the PEERS feelings strategies, deep breathing and muscle relaxation exercises.

3. Help parents establish a routine for leaving their child at school to ease both the child’s and the parents’ anxieties (e.g., showing up a few minutes before the bell rings and staying with the child until their friends arrive). Help parents use the same strategies each time they drop their child off at school.

4. Teach children coping statements that they can use when they start to feel their anxiety mounting. Parents can also create coping cards for their child to carry around with coping messages (e.g., Mom is fine. She will come get me when school is over.). For younger children, a cheerful picture depicting the coping statement works well.

5. Create a visual schedule that includes a “home time” card with a cheerful image of a home and parents. Tape a smaller version of this image to children’s desk.

6. Actively engage children in getting organized for the day, performing special jobs (e.g., handing out papers or collecting books), or in activities with other pro-social children.

7. Assign children a peer buddy who can help them at school and with whom they can play with at recess or lunchtime.

8. Help children feel safe at school. Encourage use of the PEERS problem solving strategies for resolving conflicts peacefully and reporting bullying. Create a quiet, safe area in the classroom where children can go if they feel overwhelmed or upset.

9. Provide specific and regular praise to encourage children’s positive social behaviors and emotions and to help build their confidence and ease anxieties.

10. Use consistent strategies with children and parents to provide them with a sense of stability, warmth and caring and to help nurture children’s independence.

Storybooks for Children

The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn
Will You Come Back for Me? By Ann Tompert
I Don't Want to Go to School: Helping Children Cope with Separation Anxiety by Nancy Pando

Resources

Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada.
http://www.anxietycanada.ca/english/index.php

Anxiety Disorders. Children’s Mental Health Ontario.
http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/children_youth/learn_more.php

http://www.child.alberta.ca/home/982.cfm