

9-1-2023

Chronic Illness Education 2023: Separation anxiety in young school-aged children post-COVID-19: prevention and management

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Recommended Citation

Bauer, Abbie; Fitzgerald, Parker; Martin, Peter; Rowell, Anna; Walsworth, Kiersten; and Wun, Joseph, "Chronic Illness Education 2023: Separation anxiety in young school-aged children post-COVID-19: prevention and management" (2023). *Patient Education Projects*. 670.

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Separation anxiety in young school-aged children post-COVID-19: prevention and management

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Learning Community: Green 24

Age Group: Young, school-aged children

Topic: PEDS/Anxiety

Curriculum Tie-In: Mental Health / Neuroscience



Background

The prevalence of separation anxiety in young school-aged children in the United States has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Return to school may increase the prevalence further as well as intensify symptoms in children with an existing diagnosis of separation anxiety disorder.

Objectives

This infographic will help attune parents of young, school-aged children to potential signs and symptoms of pathological anxiety during moments of normal and/or expected separation from their children (e.g. the school day).

Through increased awareness, empower parents to apply appropriate prevention and management strategies for separation anxiety disorder, and engage community support, especially teachers and pediatric medical professionals, in this process.

Considerations of the Expanded Chronic Care Model:

-Self-Management/Develop Personal Skills

Enhance skills of parents and caregivers to promote health and wellness of their children, especially to prevent or mitigate separation anxiety

-Decision Support

Encourage and advocate for community level –school, in this case – ability to promote health of children and prevent or mitigate separation anxiety

Link to larger view of infographic: [Separation Anxiety and your Child](#)



Separation Anxiety and your Child:

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on your child's mental health, and what you should know about it



Bauer A, Fitzgerald P, Martin P, Rowell A, Walsworth K, Wun J

Children may experience heightened challenges adjusting from the general social disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in situations, such as going to school, that require **routine separation from their parents**.

recognize

If you notice your child has experienced excessive fear or worry of at least 3 of the following concerns for 4 weeks or more:

- Fear of being apart from their parent(s)
- Worry that harm will come to them or their parent(s) during separation
- Refusal to go to school because it means separation
- Refusal or reluctance to sleep away from home due to separation
- Bodily symptoms like headache, nausea, vomiting, or stomachache during or before separation

they may be experiencing symptoms of **separation anxiety disorder (SAD)**:

Recognizing and intervening in the development of SAD may help prevent future problems with sleep, social distress, and mental health in adulthood.

respond

If your child is starting to exhibit any of these symptoms:

- Find a non-stressful situation and listen to them.
- Learn what they are feeling about being apart.
- Acknowledge their fears and respond truthfully.
- Be sure to model calm.

routine

You can develop a routine to help your child learn that separation is okay.

- **Short and sweet:** when you are leaving, make it clear and clean. Perhaps try, "I am leaving now. I will be back to get you. I love you!"
- **Depart directly:** Once you leave, do not return despite your child's protests. Establishing this action as a safe one can be important to their developing brains, which may have overdeveloped a certain pattern to separation as dangerously fearful.¹ Accommodation of your child's separation anxiety may lead to maintenance of this condition instead of improved long-term outcomes.²
- **Be consistent:** To best reorient you and your child to normal separation, it is very important to be consistent. Times that are "just this once" exceptions to the routine can cause significant setbacks.
- **Same page:** Make sure you and the adult(s) caring for your child while you are separated have an understanding about your procedures for pickup/drop off.

reach out

Separation Anxiety Disorder is common, but it can often go unnoticed. Seek support in how you can recognize, respond, and develop routines:

- **Confer with school staff:** if your child is experiencing symptoms of or diagnosed with SAD, develop a plan with your child's school and teacher(s) to help maintain consistent management.
- **Collaborate:** work with other school parents to promote an environment for healthy, normal separation and social and emotional learning.
- **Talk with your doc:** ask your child's pediatrician to consider screening for anxiety disorders if and when symptoms worsen or do not abate.
- **Help is out there:** cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is the recommended treatment for anxiety disorders. A mental health professional will help your child and you develop positive strategies to cope with the stress of separation. There are also approved medications, often combined with CBT, that can help you manage your child's separation anxiety disorder.

References

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Professional Identity Formation: considerations

As physicians, it will be important to have a breadth of knowledge and understanding for patients at diverse stages of the life course. Working to gather information and study the current literature regarding pediatric separation anxiety, a generally underdiagnosed and preventable condition, sharpens this service and scholarly aspect of practicing medicine. Regardless of our chosen specialties, we have a duty to provide our patients (and their caregivers) clear, compassionate, and up-to-date information. Furthermore, this project helps inform practice with the expanded chronic care model, particularly by focusing on decision support and developing the skills of patients and the community to prevent and manage chronic illness.

