



National Day Nurseries Association

★Brighter thinking  
for early years

# Factsheet

A photograph of a young child with light hair hugging an adult from behind. The child's face is pressed against the adult's shoulder, and their hands are resting on the adult's back. The background is blurred, showing other people in a nursery or classroom setting.

## Separation Anxiety and Transitions

Parent Guidance

# Coronavirus support: Separation anxiety and transitions

This factsheet has been developed to support you as parents or carers during and following the coronavirus pandemic.

During lockdown children that usually attend nursery will be having different experiences. Some will have stayed in their nursery with a reduced staff team. They may not have had their usual key person to support them and they may be missing their favourite friends to play with.

Children who are in lockdown at home will be experiencing a change to their regular routines and may also be missing the relationships and adventures they have at nursery. Regardless of how children have spent lockdown they will need supporting to make the transition back into their regular routines and patterns, re-establishing friendships and relationships.

The information and advice in this factsheet is aimed to assist parents and children during this time and help a smooth transition back to nursery when they fully reopen.

## What is separation anxiety?

The National Health Service describe separation anxiety as a fear, in young children, of being separated from their primary carers and is most common between the ages of six months and three years. They state that it is a normal part of a child's development and children usually grow out of it. This is often displayed by tearful goodbyes when you as a primary carer may try to leave the room or leave them to be cared for by a relative or at a childcare setting. Although unsettling, with a few support strategies many children will soon settle. You may have already gone through these stages when your child first started at nursery.

However, separation anxiety can affect anyone at any time and is especially common after significant events for example transitions, divorce, moving house and/or traumas including a death of a close family member or abuse.

The coronavirus lockdown and changes in most children's day to day lives may see an increase in the amount of children experiencing separation anxiety. This may include some children displaying separation anxiety behaviour during the pandemic and/or when they return back to their childcare setting.

Separation anxiety and transitions  
V0.1 - 11<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Separation anxiety can be displayed through children's feelings and behaviours. These may include:

- Clinginess to primary carer e.g. Mum and Dad
- Tears, upset, extreme tantrums
- Sickness
- Withdrawal e.g. not wanting to join in with activities
- Disruptions around sleep, nightmares
- Food refusal
- Inappropriate behaviour
- Regression, for example toilet accidents

### Separation anxiety disorder (SAD)

The main difference between normal separation anxiety and separation anxiety disorder is the intensity of the child's fears, which can often prevent them from participating in normal activities. This is usually more associated with teenagers and is diagnosed by a doctor. If you have any concerns about your child displaying a lot of distress and upset for more than a few weeks, seek further advice and support from your health visitor or doctor.

### How to support children through separation anxiety?

During this lockdown period, for those children that haven't attended nursery many childcare settings will have still tried to keep in contact with you and your children to continue the great relationships you have. They might have shared online stories, photos, activity ideas and kept in touch via emails and newsletters. These will all provide a great foundation on which to build when children fully return to nursery.

It is expected that the Government will provide some notice of when childcare providers can fully re-open, so that time can be spent gradually reintegrating both staff and children. This will provide the emotional support you and your child may need rather than having all the children return on the same day.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic you may have experienced difficult times such as being a key worker and still going out to work, having to balance working from home along with home schooling, uncertainty around future work, financial worries, personal illness or having to self-isolate. You may also have experienced bereavement or loss of a loved one. Try to have a one-to-one meeting (this could be a telephone call or an online meeting using platforms such as Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams) with your child's nursery to discuss these issues and to help ease the transition for both you and your child.

Separation anxiety and transitions

V0.1 - 11<sup>th</sup> May 2020

In an ideal world it would be nice if you could have settling visits with your child at nursery again - just as you will have done when they first started. However, in order to follow government guidance, this may not be possible. You know your child and your individual circumstances best, so share these with your child's nursery. Try to find the right balance and express your views and feelings about what you would like. Your child may be really excited about returning back to nursery and may not require any specific support.

If you feel your child would benefit from additional support prior to restarting nursery, talk to staff at nursery. You may be able to have a video call with your child's key person to re-establish those connections and to fill them in on what your child has been doing during lockdown. Ask for information or photos from nursery that you could share with your child in advance, for example their learning journey or photos of what the nursery will look like on return.

Other ideas to help smooth the transition between home and setting, helping to support any separation anxiety include:

- Always saying goodbye to your child when you leave them at nursery again, rather than just going (however hard it may be). Tell your child when you will be back
- If your child takes a comforter from home, choose something together that can be easily cleaned to prevent any cross contamination
- Try to have a couple of shorter days to begin with, if at all possible, and build up again to the full session
- Share key milestones and photos with nursery of what your child has achieved during lockdown. For example, they may have learnt to walk, be saying new words, learnt a new song. All of these can be celebrated at nursery and used to help your child feel safe and secure at nursery again.

It is expected that nurseries will be offering lots of safe and open ended experiences during this transition period as well as lots of stories, songs and relaxing times to help ease the transition. Time outdoors will also be really important to help children feel safe and secure through this transitional period.

There are lots of activities around relieving anxiety that you may also like to try at home including mind jars, rain shakers and sensory tubes, which may also be helpful. Activities or stories where children can talk about and express their feelings will all help too. There are lots of ideas available online.



A mind jar is a meditation tool to use whenever a child feels stressed, overwhelmed or upset. Imagine the glitter as your thoughts. When you shake the jar, imagine your head full of whirling thoughts, then watch them slowly settle while you calm down. All you need is a jar, glitter glue, food colouring and warm water. Mix them all together and use with children to help them feel calm.

## Transitions

Your child may have been ready to transition to another room during the lockdown period. Childcare settings will need to decide what is the best option for each individual child. Initially, to smooth the transition, it may be better for your child to return back to the original room they were in, with the key person they know well. However, this will depend on your child's age and stage of development, where their peers will be and any government guidance that nursery settings must implement. Talk to your child's setting about any questions or concerns you may have.

Depending on when childcare settings fully reopen, if your child is due to start school in September, they may only return to nursery for a short period. Some children may unfortunately not return to nursery at all.

**For those children starting school please see our parent factsheet – C19 starting school - at [www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets](http://www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets)**

## Preparing for the first day back at nursery

The lockdown restrictions have meant changes for all of us and no doubt it will have changed everyone's usual routine for work, nursery and school. Once you have a date for the return it would be good to try and re-establish routines including bed times and meal times, in preparation for returning to nursery.

Talk with your child about the transition back to nursery. Ask them how they are feeling and try to offer lots of reassurance. Talk about all the things they used to enjoy and what they will be able to do again, including playing with their friends and spending time with their key person.

## Summary

The lockdown time has been an unprecedented time for everyone. Try not to worry about gaps in your child's learning and assessment records during this period. Your child will have developed and learnt lots of new skills at home with you. Share as much information as you can with your child's nursery or school about your child's interests and key milestones, so that they can continue to support your child.

The coronavirus has caused change and uncertainty for many of us, however the work the childcare sector has done to support the key worker children and maintain the relationships with children staying at home has been outstanding.

It is going to take time for children to settle again but we know that nursery practitioners and teachers across the country will achieve this challenge through the love they provide for the children and the amazing activities and experiences they offer.

Thank you for taking the time to read this factsheet. It is hoped you have gained some new ideas to further support you and your child.

### Further support

BBC, Bitesize videos and games (online) UK, 2020, Last accessed 22.4.20  
[www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/collections/starting-primary-school/1](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/collections/starting-primary-school/1)

HM Government, Hungry Little Minds (Online) UK, 2010, Last accessed 24.4.20  
<https://hungrylittleminds.campaign.gov.uk/>

NHS, Separation Anxiety (online) UK, 31.8.18, Last accessed 17.4.20  
[www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/separation-anxiety/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/separation-anxiety/)

**Disclaimer - Legislation and policy guidance change regularly. It is the responsibility of the parent to review the latest COVID-19 guidance from the Government when undertaking these activities.**

**The information is relevant as of 11 May 2020. Should changes in legislation or policy guidance emerge after this date, this factsheet may not fully reflect these. It is advised that you continue to review the latest COVID-19 guidance from the Government.**

Separation anxiety and transitions  
V0.1 - 11<sup>th</sup> May 2020



National Day Nurseries Association

★Brighter thinking  
for early years

# Factsheet

Our factsheets are written by early years experts for the early years workforce. Most NDNA factsheets are free to our members.

NDNA is the national charity and membership association representing children's nurseries across the UK. We are a charity that believes in quality and sustainability, so we put our members' businesses at the very heart of ours.

We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

See the full range of NDNA factsheets at [www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets](http://www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets)

*The information provided in this factsheet is for use by early years practitioners only. It has been written by early years experts but is not intended to be, and should not be relied upon, as a substitute for professional advice. NDNA has endeavoured to ensure the accuracy of the information presented in this factsheet. NDNA assumes no legal liability or responsibility for your interpretation or use of the information contained within it.*

## National Day Nurseries Association

National Early Years Enterprise Centre, Longbow Close, Huddersfield HD2 1GQ  
tel: 01484 407070 fax: 01484 407060 [info@ndna.org.uk](mailto:info@ndna.org.uk) [www.ndna.org.uk](http://www.ndna.org.uk)