

## Fear of strangers: babies and young children

**Fear of strangers is a normal part of young children's development. Although fear of strangers usually passes by around 18 months of age, it can go on for longer. Our practical strategies can help your child feel less upset while he goes through this phase.**

### Fear of strangers: the basics

Fear of strangers is a **normal stage** in a child's development.

It happens as your baby gets to know and develops a healthy [attachment](#) to familiar people – like you. Because babies prefer familiar adults, they might react to strangers by crying or fussing, going very quiet, looking fearful or hiding.

Fear of strangers usually becomes more intense at around 7-10 months of age. It can last a few months or continue for much longer. It usually passes somewhere between 18 months and 2 years.

For example, a 10-month old baby who has been going to child care since she was 6 months old might get upset if there's a new carer at the centre. She might cry, bury her head in her mother's neck or scream when the carer tries to take her from her mum or dad.



### did you know ?

Around 80% of babies show a fear of strangers at 8-12 months.



[Separation anxiety](#) also often starts at 8-10 months and usually peaks at 14-18 months.

Separation anxiety is when children fear being parted from their parents or guardians, even if they're left with someone they know, like a grandparent or family friend.

### Helping with fear of strangers: what you can do

Although fear of strangers is part of normal development for babies and young children, there are things you can do to help your child feel less upset.

#### Helping your child feel comfortable

- Give your child the chance to meet new people in a safe and comfortable environment. For example, hold your child when you introduce him to strangers. Your child will also feel more comfortable with a stranger if he's at home.
- If your child gets very upset with a new person, comfort her and try a different approach – for example, all playing together – or moving your child slightly away from the new person until she calms down. Then you can try again.
- Take your child's comfort item (toy or blanket) with you to new situations and when you're spending time with new people.
- Don't ignore or dismiss your child's fear of strangers. This could make the fear worse. Also avoid calling your child anxious or shy.

#### Taking it slowly

- Be patient. Don't push your child to go to new people before he's ready. Rushing your child when he's learning this skill can make him more sensitive to new people.
- Ask unfamiliar adults, such as extended family or adult friends, to give your child time to feel comfortable before they pick her up. Babies are less anxious when strangers approach them calmly and slowly, and don't try to pick them up.

- Give your child the chance to get to know an unfamiliar person while you're around. Stay close to your child. This will help reassure him that you're not going to immediately leave him with the unfamiliar adult.

### Letting your child know what's happening

- If you have to leave your child with an unfamiliar person such as a carer at child care, let your child know that you're leaving before you go. If you leave without telling her, next time she might cling to you more because she's afraid you'll disappear.
- For slightly older children, explain to your child who the new person is and what's happening. For example, explain that a new babysitter is someone you trust. Also say when you'll be back. Give your child time to get to know the person while you're still there.

### Meeting new people

- Show your child that you're not scared of new people. Greet them warmly with positive body language – smiles, relaxed posture, eye contact and a happy voice. You are your child's guide to reacting to new people.
- Keep introducing your child to new people. The more chances your child has to meet new people and discover that they're safe, the more likely his fear will reduce.
- Don't worry about the stranger's feelings. Just tell them that your child is going through a phase of learning to be around strangers.

### Fear of strangers in children over two years

Most children's fear of strangers starts to pass by about two years.

If your child's fear of strangers continues after this time, you could try working on building your child's independence. If your child feels more independent, she might also feel more confident around strangers.

Here are some tips to help with independence:

- Let your child do things for himself, like feeding himself, exploring new play environments and entertaining himself with toys.
- Give your child lots of new experiences and introduce her to new faces. With time, she'll realise that nothing bad will happen.
- Try not to rush in to solve problems, and give your child a chance to work out solutions for himself.
- Help your child learn to [settle independently for sleep](#). This will help if you need to leave your child over a naptime, such as at child care.

### Getting help for fear of strangers

Extreme fear of strangers might lead to [social anxiety](#) when your child is older. So it's worth talking to a health professional if your young child's fear of strangers is really intense, or if it doesn't reduce even when there are no unfamiliar adults around.

Also, if your child's fear of strangers isn't getting any better by the time she's two years old, or it's getting worse, you might want to think about seeking professional help in addition to encouraging your child's independence.

And it might also be a good idea to seek help if there's a family history of anxiety, because your child might be showing early signs of anxiety.

You know your child best. If you're worried about his fear of strangers, you could talk to the following professionals:

- your child's GP or paediatrician
- your child and family health nurse
- your child's school counsellor
- a specialist anxiety clinic (available in most states).



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