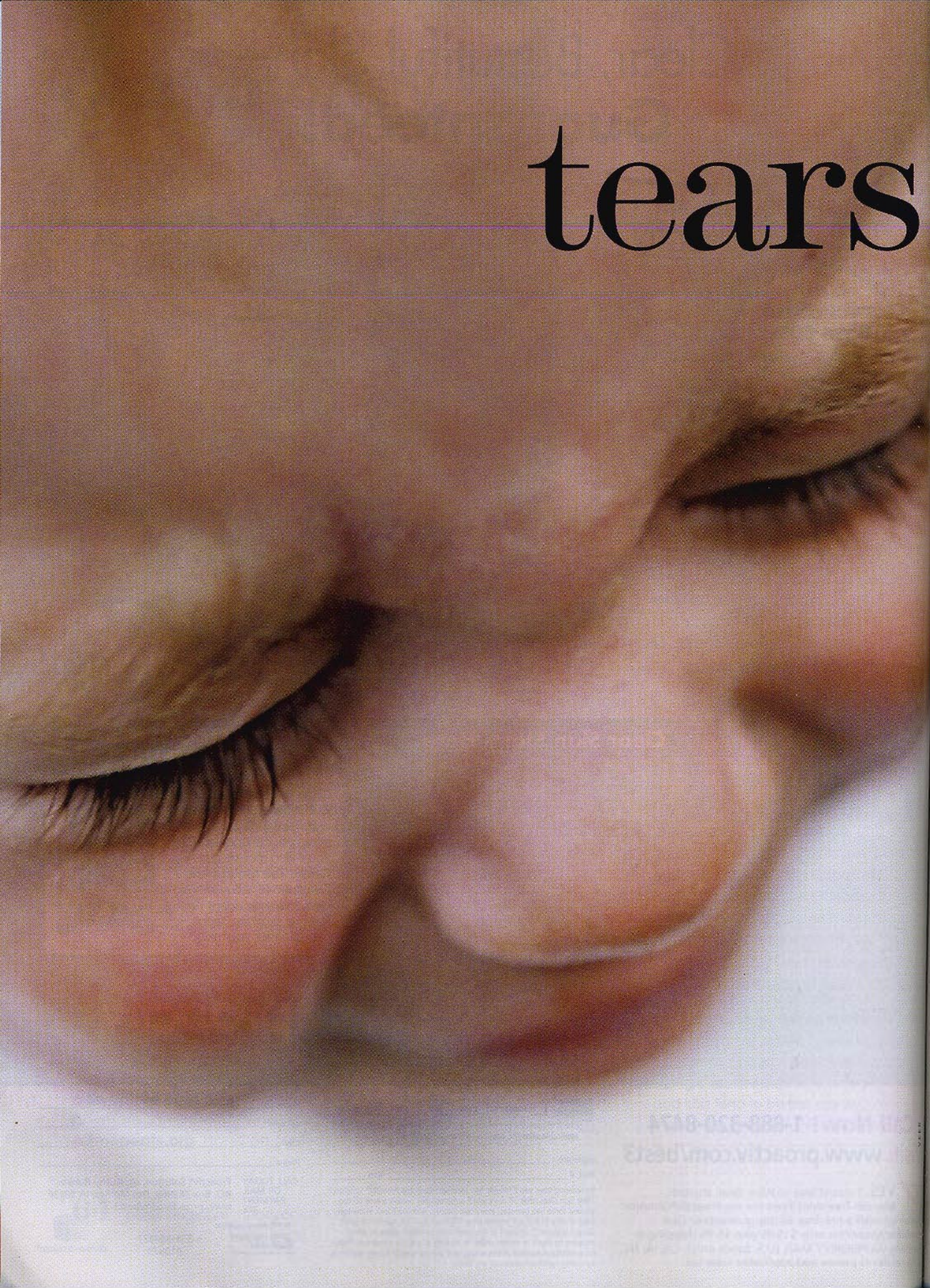


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for fears

Research shows (and moms know) that separation anxiety isn't just for babies—it hits again at 2, 3, and 4. How to help at every stage

By Suzanne Schlosberg

Until they were 11 months old, my twin boys were so nonchalant whenever I'd leave the room that they seemed like a couple of teenagers. As I'd head off to work, the boys would glance my way, then resume chewing on their barnyard animals or playing with their babysitter. They seemed to be thinking, "Eh, catch you later, Mom—whatever." I figured: *Phew!* We dodged all the separation-anxiety drama that had stressed out so many of my friends. (Hey, maybe we'd get lucky and bypass the terrible twos, too!)

But then one morning, reality struck big-time. As I opened the door to leave, Ian, the small, scrappy one, began rolling around the floor, wailing as if stricken by food poisoning. Toby, his chubby, gentle brother, clung to my leg, bawling so hard he could barely breathe. I was heartbroken, and totally flummoxed. I had no clue why it was happening or what approach would be easiest on the boys.

"Separation anxiety can happen almost overnight, which makes it shocking to parents," says Sara Abbot, associate director of the Family Resource Counseling Center in Los Angeles. What's more, it's often not just a one-time, babyhood phase for many kids. The tears and fears related to being apart from Mom or Dad can resurface in the toddler and preschool years, posing new challenges for parents and warranting different solutions. As disheartening as that may sound, it can be very helpful to remember that separation anxiety is completely normal, even healthy. "From the earliest years of life, we should want children to encounter ordinary adversity because it's practice for building resilience," says Aaron Cooper, Ph.D., coauthor of *I Just Want My Kids to Be Happy! Why You Shouldn't Say It...* Fortunately, there's plenty you can do to minimize your child's angst, as well as your own, along the way.

● the first strike: babyhood

Though the timing can vary from child to child, separation anxiety typically first hits around 8 months, when babies suddenly grasp that their parents exist apart from them, says

Abbot. "Literally, it's like, *boom!* They understand you can leave." They don't, however, understand that you're coming back. This anxiety may last several weeks, or even a few months, until your child realizes that you're not, in fact, abandoning him for life—you're just going to the bathroom.

how to get through it:

start early By 6 months, introduce your baby to other regular caregivers, such as relatives or a babysitter. "Your child needs practice being away from you, hopefully well before preschool," says Alex Barzvi, Ph.D., clinical director of the New York University Child Study Center's Institute for Anxiety and Mood Disorders. "You want someone else to hold and talk to your kid a little differently." These experiences may minimize her anxiety later on when you're not around.

keep your goodbye short A quick "Bye, James, see you this afternoon!" is ideal. "Prolonging the departure gives your child the idea that there's something to be afraid of," Barzvi says. But here's the really tough part: Try not to let the sobbing lure you back. Reappearing after you've left only gives your child incentive to cry harder and longer next time.

match your body language to your words "Your child can sense your confidence as you walk out the door," Cooper says. Flash a smile, give a cheerful wave. You'll be faking it, of course, but she won't know that yet. She'll just know that you feel good about who she's with—and she can, too.

avoid sneaking off Parents often dash out the door when the child isn't looking, hoping—understandably!—that this will preempt a meltdown. "But that's tricking your child, and it can break your child's trust in you," Barzvi says. Instead, first ask your caregiver to redirect your child's attention right after you leave with a favorite toy, a game of peekaboo, or some new music (whatever), then say your quick goodbye. >



● **the peak: toddlerhood**

For some kids, separation anxiety vanishes before toddlerhood; for others, that's when it starts, peaking sometime between 12 and 24 months and bringing a more potent dose of distress. "This is when children develop a strong sense of attachment to the parent," says Barzvi. "You'll see tantrums or screaming or hysterical crying." (Worried your child's reaction is extreme? Visit Parenting.com/SAD for more info.) What's also at play now is their desire to have some control over their lives, says Abbot. They know by now that you're coming back, but they would prefer that you stick around. And because they also know that wailing will usually get a reaction, they give it their best shot.

how to get through it:

develop a goodbye ritual For example, whenever you have to leave your toddler at daycare, give her two kisses and a high five. "The ritual creates order around the departure for both parent and child," says Abbot. And that provides security.

give your child a small job When Ilene Siringo's 23-month-old son, Luca, hit a particularly clingy phase, she started asking him to "shut the door for Mommy" when she left for work. This little responsibility made the transition a lot easier. "He likes to help, and he gets to have control of the door," says Siringo, an optometrist in New York City. This strategy can also work with kids who get anxious when you have to leave the room. For instance, if you need to get the laundry, give your child a sweater to "fold" until you get back.

provide an ETA "A child this age doesn't understand 'three hours,' but you can say, 'I'll be back after snack time,'" Abbot advises. And do your best to return when promised. It's tempting to think he won't know the difference if you're significantly late, but at some point he will—and you can't predict when. If you're heading out for a late night, tell him you'll see him in the morning.

remind your toddler that you always return When Anna Zirker's twin boys were 2, she put her own twist on this trick: "When they'd say, 'Mommy, don't go,' I'd ask, 'What does Mommy do when she leaves?' and they'd say, 'Mommy comes back,'" says Zirker, of Bend, OR. Still works every time.

● **the relapse: preschool age**

For parents, this may be the most exhausting form of separation anxiety. Just when you think your child's developed a little independence, the tantrums and tears come roaring back, usually thanks to a new stress such as a new sibling, going to school, an illness in the family, or moving to a different house. Fortunately, the anxiety relapse usually lasts only a few weeks, according to experts. "With a sibling, it's about attention," says Abbot. "They worry that they come second now, that their parents are going to forget about them." In the case of a new school,



the child knows that Mommy will come back but may nonetheless feel unsafe or uncertain without her. "Suddenly the child is in an unfamiliar place and isn't sure whom to trust. Plus, he has to share the attention of the teacher with all these other kids," says Abbot. No wonder some of them get overwhelmed!

how to get through it:

let your child know it's okay to feel nervous Catch yourself if you reflexively say, "Be a big boy." Instead, give your child a hug and say something like "I know that you're nervous. Let's think of another time you were scared but it was okay. Remember the first time in the pool?" You'll help show him that his feelings are normal—and that he'll be able to handle them. "We're often so proud of an autonomous child that we don't fully appreciate that the stepping-stone toward that autonomy involves a decent amount of dependence," says K. Mark Sossin, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Pace University.

plan some extra one-on-one time After Jennifer Lehr brought home her new baby, her 2½-year-old daughter, Jules, threw a fit whenever Lehr had to tend to little Hudson. So Lehr decided to make a point of giving Jules extra attention, especially when she'd fix her meals. "I'd slow down and let her be involved," says Lehr, who lives in Los Feliz, CA. "We'd make a smoothie, and Jules would drop in the fruit and pour in the milk and push the button." Experts say the additional one-on-one time makes the child feel confident in the parent's love and less threatened.

develop a predictable bedtime routine This is a good idea in general, but it can be especially helpful when your child is going through a tough time. It helps show him that there is order in his world. You can even make a posterboard listing the exact times of nighttime tasks. For example: 6:00, dinner; 6:20, bath; 6:40, pajamas; 6:45, brush teeth; 6:50, storytime; 7:00, bedtime.

do your best not to cave in A preschooler who is experiencing separation anxiety may also regress in other ways, such as asking for her pacifier back or insisting on sleeping with you. When you're exhausted or fed up, it's only natural to take the path of least resistance and ease up on the rules you've established. "But more than anything, a kid needs structure and routine," Barzvi says. "If you give her Binky back, it's going to make it a lot harder to take it away again. Instead of altering the routine, give your child extra hugs and kisses. Plus, by maintaining the sameness, you're sending the message that there's nothing wrong." Of course, we all give in sometimes. So if you find yourself being more flexible than you planned, cut yourself slack and try again. 🌱

Suzanne Schlosberg is coauthor of The Essential Breastfeeding Log, out next month.