



You and Your Foster Child

Stranger Anxiety

Stranger anxiety is said to occur when infants or children feel uncomfortable or frightened when approached by someone they do not know. Stranger anxiety occurs even though the child is with a trusted caregiver and in a safe environment.

On average, stranger anxiety begins when infants are about 8 months old and usually runs its course by the age of 18 months. But those are averages. Some children develop this behavior earlier, some later, and stranger anxiety may last longer than 18 months.

Stranger anxiety usually is seen in infants earlier than separation anxiety, which is when infants or toddlers get upset or frightened when you leave them with another caregiver.

Understanding and dealing with stranger anxiety

It is important for foster parents to know a little about stranger anxiety. The appearance of a stranger can remind foster children of being taken from their home, parents, or another familiar caregiver. Also, infants and children who have been severely neglected may show higher levels of stranger anxiety.

Signs of stranger anxiety

The signs of stranger anxiety can differ from child to child. For example:

- Some infants will suddenly go quiet and look fearfully at the stranger.
- Other children will become very emotional, cry loudly, and fuss.
- Still others may try to bury themselves in their caregiver's arms or place the caregiver between themselves and the stranger.

Stranger anxiety builds gradually

Stranger anxiety does not suddenly appear. It builds over time and is the result of developmental stages, a child's temperament, and the child's life experiences.

- As early as 4 months of age, some infants begin to react differently to their caregivers than they do with strangers. They begin to prefer their caregivers and become wary when strangers approach.
- Around 7–8 months of age, stranger anxiety occurs more often and is clearly displayed. This is because infants are more aware of their environment, the people in their surroundings, and the relationships they have with them. And infants prefer their primary caregivers.
- At about 1 year of age, infants develop more and better physical and cognitive skills. Their concerns about strangers can become more intense. They may run to their parent or caregiver and grab their legs or beg to be picked up.

- When children reach age 2, they interact more with their peers, and a new type of stranger anxiety may appear. Children may be apprehensive when they first try to join unfamiliar children in play.

Dealing with stranger anxiety

Stranger anxiety is part of a child's normal development. It is not a problem to be treated. But there are some strategies you can use to make it less severe.

- Instruct family, friends, and strangers on how to approach your child. Tell them to approach slowly and let the child warm up to them at a distance before getting closer or picking the child up. Speaking slowly and calmly also might help.
- Hold your children when introducing new people to them.
- Try to introduce more new people to your children. Take them to places where they can interact with new people, like the grocery store, zoo, or a park.
- Be patient. Learning how to interact with new people takes time. Rushing your child when learning this skill can make him or her more sensitive to new people.
- Respect your child's fear. The fear of strangers is very real to children. Ignoring or dismissing these feelings will only make the fear worse.
- Don't label your child. Don't describe your child as shy or frightened. Don't tell your child he or she is being ridiculous or childish.
- Don't worry about the stranger's feelings.
- Tell family members and other close friends about your child's fear of strangers. If they know, they might be less likely to feel hurt if the child is afraid of them.
- New babysitters or child care workers should be gradually brought into the child's life. For example, invite new babysitters over to play with the child while you are there a few times.

Stranger terror

Stranger terror is more intense than stranger anxiety. Children can become very agitated with a stranger and may avoid all strangers. Behaviors that suggest stranger terror include:

- Hiding when any unfamiliar person enters the home, even if the unfamiliar person is not trying to interact with the child.
- Facial expressions of worry that one would expect of an older child.
- Being extremely upset in the presence of a stranger even while in a familiar environment, such as the child's own home.
- Loud screaming and back arching when a stranger attempts to hold or comfort the child.
- Long periods of extreme stillness and wariness while in the presence of a stranger, along with facial expressions of great fear.

When to seek professional help

Although stranger anxiety is normal, you should seek advice from a pediatrician or other knowledgeable professional if your child's stranger anxiety interferes with normal everyday life.

- Foster children are particularly at risk of this happening. Severe stranger anxiety or stranger terror can develop if a child is badly neglected early in life and does not relate easily with a caregiver.
- Extreme stranger terror can affect an infant's development. Infants who avoid all contact with strangers don't explore their environment well, and that can limit their opportunities for learning.

