

Developmental Milestone: Separation and Independence

By [Nancy Montgomery](#); Medically reviewed by [KT Park, M.D.](#), gastroenterologist

Separation and independence: What to expect when

When your child was a baby, she was completely unaware that the two of you were separate beings. But over time, she develops various physical, mental, and emotional skills.

And as she grows more confident, she starts to figure out that she's her own person (with her own body, thoughts, and feelings), and she'll increasingly want to do things her way.

Of course, as a parent of a 2-year-old, you're probably painfully aware of this. It's a bittersweet realization that your baby's growing up – sad, but also cause for celebration.

What you'll see

When your child hits age 2, the adventure of self-discovery truly begins. This is a time of astounding transformation from infancy to independence. As a result, it's also a period of challenging behaviors. But understanding the reasons behind your child's actions can help you get through this tumultuous and exciting time.

Once completely dependent on you, your child now has the physical and mental capacity to wander off on his own. He embarks on this whirlwind voyage of mobility believing he rules his world.

All too quickly, though, he learns the limits of his powers as he tries new experiences, whether it's climbing up on the couch and then not knowing how to get down, or trying to put on his coat and getting hopelessly tangled in it. When he realizes he doesn't have everything figured out just yet, he becomes frustrated and frightened.

And while he's painstakingly developing his own identity, separation anxiety can pop up to tug him in the opposite direction, making him clingy and fearful.

This common fear of abandonment, which usually peaks between 10 and 18 months, is probably fading by this age, but may still appear from time to time. Separation anxiety is most common in preschoolers when they're out of their normal routine, in a new environment, or when they're just not in the mood to be away from mom or dad, maybe because they're ill or sleepy.

"Separation anxiety is an absolutely normal stage of development," says Donald K. Freedheim, a child psychologist and director of the Schubert Center for Child Development at Case Western Reserve University. "All children go through it; it's just more visible in some than in others."

Your child may get upset when you leave him at daycare or with a sitter, but he'll recover more quickly now because he's more secure. Experience has taught him that you always return.

Of course, knowing you'll come back and accepting your departure are two different issues. So although he's well aware that you will return, he may put on a bigger show when you leave. Be sure to give your child the attention and reassurance he needs along with a kiss and a promise that you'll return.

Between the ages of 2 and 3, he'll continue to struggle for independence. He tests his limits any chance he can (coloring on the walls, for example, even if you tell him not to). "I can do it myself" is probably his most common refrain.

His newly discovered autonomy is linked to his sense of self, and he flaunts it in many ways. He may insist on wearing his purple pajamas for the fifth night in a row, eating only certain foods, and climbing into his car seat by himself. This is normal behavior and it may be heightened when he's craving attention.

What you can do

Despite the temptation to rush in and rescue your "baby" when she gets into a bind, try to encourage your child's growing independence. Let her struggle a little bit and figure things out on her own.

Don't jump in to help if she's having trouble doing something. Instead, give her the reassurance she needs to try again.

Let her ask for help first before you give it to her. And when she does ask, give her a hand without taking over.

At the same time, be sure she knows you'll be there when she needs you. Your 2-year-old's trust in you is growing now, and this feeling of trust gives her the confidence to venture out on her own.

Be consistent in setting reasonable limits that let her explore safely, but discourage aggressive or dangerous behavior. Let her know it's fine to climb on the monkey bars, but pushing others out of the way is not okay. Soon she'll learn what's acceptable and what's not.

What to watch out for

If he's like most kids, your child will conquer separation anxiety long before his third birthday. If he doesn't and his anxiety away from you causes him to be severely distressed, bring it up with his doctor.

But don't be surprised if, once he's cleared that hurdle, temporary episodes of clinginess continue to recur from time to time. The road to maturity is riddled with separations: The first day of preschool, the first time at sleepaway camp, and even the first year of college. But helping your child cope with separation now will make future separations easier.

What comes next

With age comes greater independence and self-confidence. Each year will bring more things that your child will want to do on her own. As she gets older, she'll get to know herself better and will be more aware of her limitations.

Future developments include the ability to help prepare simple snacks and meals, make friends, and go to school. Before you know it, your clingy 2-year-old will grow into an audacious preschooler.