



Medical Group
PLLC

Doctors Park, 104 Fulton Ave. • Poughkeepsie, N.Y. 12603 • (845)452-1700 • Fax (845) 452-1752

Infants, Children And Adolescents

Diplomates of
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STRANGER ANXIETY

Between the ages of 5 to 8 months, most babies begin to realize that all adults are not the same. “Mommy” and to a lesser extent “Daddy” become very important, while other adults are viewed with either mistrust, suspicion or frank terror.

The infant’s new awareness of strangers may be difficult to deal with at times. For the mother, it may be a suffocatingly clingy little “Denise” who must be pried off at times of separation, be it the bathroom or daycare. For the father, it may be the formerly very affectionate little “Larry” who does not tolerate being played with or even held. For the grandparents, it is a baby who no longer loves them and therefore is obviously totally spoiled. For the pediatrician, it is a terrified and screaming infant who makes the 8 month check up an exercise in futility.

As difficult as the stage may be, it is important to realize that this pronounced clinginess is not a permanent feature of the child’s personality. Rather it is a normal and temporary stage of development that disappears by 15 to 18 months.

From an evolutionary point of view, stranger anxiety was important for the very survival of the human infant. At the time that “cave baby” developed the ability to crawl (6 to 8 months), it was critical for their survival that they not wander too far or at least find there way back to the right “cave mommy”.

Developmental studies on babies reveal little or no stranger anxiety during the second half of the first year. These infants who were abandoned, abused or orphaned share one thing in common, namely the lack of consistent parenting during the first few months of life. In this example, stranger anxiety is the direct result of the normal loving and caring a newborn receives.

Between the ages of 5 to 18 months, the best way to approach any infant is gradually and slowly. Allow the child to get used to the new adult before any abrupt overtures are made. A calm and deliberate approach will be rewarded by an accepting and cooperative infant.

In summary, a baby’s fear of strangers may be annoying and at times exasperating. However it is a perfectly normal and thankfully temporary stage of every child’s development.