

Proximity Anxiety

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Call it proximity anxiety.

Proximity anxiety is a phenomenon well-known to psychologists and parents alike, even if it has never before had a name. It is as much a part of growing up and growing apart as puberty and as necessary and natural as toilet training. You'll recognize the symptoms of proximity anxiety in your (son or) daughter's new aversion to looking you in the eye, her smug laughter when you speak, her acute embarrassment in your presence, her sudden memory lapses including an odd inability to recognize previously familiar adults and in her sudden compulsion to walk many paces ahead of accompanying family members in public places.

"Oh my goodness!" you're exclaiming about now, coffee cup trembling in one hand.

"Ralph, come quick! I think Billy has proximity anxiety!"

Not to worry. Your patience and understanding, your calm, predictable parenting, replacing your taste in music, humor and entertainment and an entirely new wardrobe will get you through this ordeal. Probably.

Proximity anxiety is your child's completely natural, expectable and necessary wish to get as far away from you as possible. It's a fear associated with the irrational belief that uncool is catchy, that to be seen with a feeble, decrepit, lame old man or woman is to become one, at least in the eyes of the other kids.

"What? I'm not feeble, decrepit or lame! Not yet any way!"

"Sure, Dad." (Hear that condescending tone?) "I know that. You're cool. Just don't wear that shirt, okay? And don't sing. Or whistle. Or walk that way that you do, you know...."

Proximity anxiety is your kids' developmentally appropriate revulsion at the prospect of being seen with you in public. The bad news is that there's nothing you can do about it. The good news is that the worst of proximity anxiety is limited to a discrete developmental stage: childhood.

Proximity anxiety is normal. Its practice. Your kids are establishing an identity, discovering how to grow up and apart from you. They're working on how to be a separate person, likeable and successful and independent; how to fit into the peer

group and how to feel valuable and to value themselves even when you're not there.

Proximity anxiety is only practice because as much as your kids push you away, they're confident that you're still there in the background. They'd never admit it, but having you there as a safety net is what makes them bold enough to pretend that they can do without you, strong enough (or perhaps you see it as rude enough) to push you away.

And proximity anxiety is confusing. If you're confused how this morning's cuddly-clingy-neediness fits with this afternoon's all-grown-up, *duh* attitude, think how she must feel. She needs you there to refuel her so that she can push you away later, go out there and practice on her own and come back to get refueled again when her emotions are drained.

Good parent that you are, you understand all of this. Maybe you even remember what nerds your parents could be, how you pushed them away. You know that so long as she can be respectful, you'll try not to cramp her style. So you may have to change your shoes now and then? Such are the costs of parenthood.

Growing up is a dance. Growing up is a back and forth boogey, a terrifying, tantalizing tango and it goes like this: You say, "stay close by" and your daughter (or son) yells, "I'm out of here!" You say, "get out of here!" and she cries, "don't make me go!" She clings to you sometimes and you worry that you haven't given her enough freedom, that she's too dependent, that its separation anxiety. She'll push you away other times and you'll think she's reckless, she's too bold, what happened to my baby? Aha! Its proximity anxiety!

But then you step back, talk it through with your co-parents, with your own parents perhaps, and remember that its all just the normal, expectable, healthy push-pull dance of growing up. Its natural. Its part of how she's learning to become a person apart from you.

What's a good parent to do? So she won't let you hug her goodbye any more? So she won't say "I love you" in front of her friends? So she's always saying "*Daaaaahd!*" and "*Maaahm!*" in that tone that seems to say, "Why on earth are you walking around in your underwear in public again? Haven't I taught you anything since you gave birth to me?"

So? Are these really battles worth fighting?

Probably not. So long as she's at least moderately polite in expressing that you humiliate her, so long as she's not pushing for too much freedom too quickly, what's to be gained? Go ahead and walk ten paces behind her at the mall. Drop her a block away from school so that her friends won't see you. Never mention her favorite blanky or

stuffed animal or the time that she really did appear in public in her underwear and how cute she was to anyone ever again.

In some important ways, you represent her childhood. Proximity anxiety is her effort to put her childhood –that is, you- behind her. “Me?” she’s demanding of the world, “I was never a child!! I don’t need my parents!” and within the limits of safety and respect, its probably better that you not argue the point.

And your needs? Yeah, right. It hurts the first couple trillion times that your beloved cuddly little girl (or boy) shuns you in public. You know not to take it personally, that they’re not really embarrassed by your choice of music, your hair, your smile and the way that you chew. You know this is just how they begin to push away, to grow apart and you know that letting them push your buttons would only make matters worse. So you stay calm and, good parent that you are, you put their needs first. You get your own needs refueled elsewhere. Your co-parent? Significant other? Colleague, neighbor, friend? The guy on the treadmill next to you at the gym? A priest, minister or rabbi? A therapist of your own?

When does it end? It doesn’t really, but the intensity of their proximity anxiety will fade with time and maturity. Tell the truth: Don’t your parents still embarrass you in some ways? Don’t you find yourself telling your own mother to sit up straight? To please speak differently?

As your children grow into their own maturity, their need to prove to the world that they are separate from you will decrease, just as your need to prove that you are independent from your own parents has (mostly) faded. If you do this impossible, fantastic and challenging job of parenting good enough, by the time your kids are thirty or forty or fifty they may be secure and confident enough to let you hug them again and, maybe, just maybe, to walk through the mall with you, side by side.

----- Parenting Pointer -----

Separation anxiety and its newly coined cousin, proximity anxiety, can become serious concerns in the extreme. If, at any age, your children are consistently and highly resistant to leaving your side (separation anxiety) or being close to you (proximity anxiety), it may be time to think further:

1. When anxiety of any kind gets in the way of normal day-to-day functioning (going to and returning from school, for example) help may be needed. Start by consulting with your children’s pediatrician and consider whether consultation with a psychologist might be helpful.

2. Monitor media closely. Some young children develop serious anxiety symptoms in the face of the reality of the world in which we live. This is not to say that children should be overly sheltered from the world, but you do have a responsibility to censor their media intake and talk through anything that may be upsetting, misunderstood or controversial.

3. Some kids who resist separating have experienced traumatic loss or abuse. Help these children identify the real source of their fears and be sure that they have a safe place where they can begin to talk this all through.

4. Some kids who resist spending any time with parents are hiding something. Cigarettes, drugs and alcohol are the first suspects. No matter how mature and busy your kids may be, no matter how overwhelmed and overbooked you may be, find the time to be together. There probably is no nasty secret motivating their proximity anxiety, but why let these precious days pass apart?