

Fearing Strangers

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Helen's lunch invitation was a ruse. Showing off her eight-month-old daughter was her real motive. But when her friends greeted baby Emily, the child wailed hysterically.

Helen was shocked. Until then, Emily was calm around strangers. In fact, she had a smile for anybody who talked to her. Now, she responded with wide-eyed fear and tears.

The change in Helen's baby daughter is a common one.

Most infants seem to love people during the first few months of life. At four months, for example, they may smile at anyone, especially anyone who smiles at them. But at six to eight months of age, many babies may show signs of social fears – they may grow wary or cry when approached by a stranger, or get upset when their parents leave them. Such fears may become most intense between eight and 12 months. Not long after, these reactions diminish, and they usually disappear by 24 to 30 months of age.

These are natural and common reactions. They can be bothersome or embarrassing to you, but they are nothing to worry about.

It is not clear why infants have these fears or why they develop when they do. But around six to eight months, infants' understanding of the world around them starts to deepen. For one thing, they begin to understand that the world consists of more than themselves and their parents. Babies realize, for example, they need to do something to deal with strangers or to prevent you from leaving.

Even though they know they need to do something, they often don't know what to do. This new uncertainty may be the root of the fear of strangers. An infant, for example, may not become upset if a stranger comes to the door, talks quietly with a parent, smiles at the baby from a distance, walks slowly and casually, and does things that are familiar. This doesn't require a response from the infant. But a stranger who walks right up to the baby requires action, and the baby can only cry for help and often will.

Around two years of age, when children are more mobile and socially skilled, social fears tend to disappear.

In the meantime, if a stranger comes into the house and your baby gets upset and wants comfort, go ahead and provide it. This phase will pass when your baby learns when and how to deal with the strangers.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.