

Case Study on Separation Anxiety in an Early Childhood Who Refuses to Go to School

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ABSTRACT

Separation anxiety is a typical emotional response in early childhood, particularly during the initial transition to formal schooling. This study aims to explore the forms, contributing factors, and practical mentoring approaches related to separation anxiety in a 4-year-old child who refused to go to school. Using a qualitative approach with a case study design, data were collected through participatory observation during the separation process and classroom activities, semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers, play-based interviews with the child, and supporting documentation. The findings indicate that the child's separation anxiety manifested specifically during the moment of separation from the mother, characterized by crying, clinging behavior, verbal refusal, and expressions of fear. However, the anxiety gradually subsided after the child engaged in play and felt secure in the classroom. The main contributing factors included a strong attachment to the mother, overprotective parenting practices, limited prior social experience, parental anxiety, and a history of early caregiving trauma that influenced the child's internal working model. Importantly, the anxiety observed was situational, adaptive, and temporary rather than a clinical disorder. Empathic, consistent, and play-based approaches implemented by teachers were effective in supporting emotional regulation and facilitating adaptation. These findings underscore the importance of collaborative efforts between parents and educators in providing emotionally supportive and developmentally appropriate transition strategies for young children entering school.

Keywords:

separation anxiety; early childhood; school transition

INTRODUCTION

Separation anxiety is a form of anxiety that is commonly experienced by children in the early stages of school, especially when they have to be separated from their parents. This phenomenon is a natural emotional reaction and indicates the existence of a strong bond of attachment between the child and the parent. However, in some children, this reaction can become excessive, characterized by behavior of refusing to go to school, prolonged crying, and fear that is difficult to control. This can hinder children's learning processes and affect their social-emotional development in the school environment (Choiriyah et al., 2023).

Some studies have found that separation anxiety can be influenced by factors such as the parenting style that parents apply and the quality of attachment that is established. Muris et al. (2011) suggest that overprotective parenting and ambivalent attachment relationships can increase the risk of separation anxiety (Hardiningrum et al., 2023). Recent research has also shown that 4-5-year-olds who are not accustomed to being separated from their parents tend to exhibit negative emotional reactions, such as crying and refusing to attend class at the beginning of school

(Hardianti et al., 2025). Thus, the child's inability to be separated from the parent calmly reflects the challenges that need to be overcome in early education.

However, most of the existing literature focuses more on separation anxiety experienced by elementary school-age children, while research on this anxiety in the context of preschool is still limited. This study seeks to make a new contribution by delving into the emotional experiences of 4-year-olds who experience separation anxiety, especially when leaving for school (Utami et al., 2025). This approach is important to understand the context in which these children are trying to adjust to their new environment.

In this context, separation anxiety is recognized as a situational phenomenon and can be adaptive; It appears in moments of separation but usually subsides after the child has adapted to a new environment, such as when they are already in the play area. This research has practical urgency to assist educators and parents in understanding children's emotional dynamics during the initial transition to school and designing effective and empathetic mentoring strategies (Prasanti, 2022). Through this approach, it is hoped that children can learn to overcome their anxiety and adapt better at school.

In this study, there are several goals to be achieved. First, to describe the form of separation anxiety experienced by 4-year-old children. Second, to identify the factors that influence the appearance of anxiety. Third, to find a mentoring approach that can help children adapt emotionally when separated from their parents to go to school. By identifying the various dimensions of separation anxiety, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive picture of the child's support needs during this transition period (Fatah et al., 2025).

Theoretical Study

1. Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is a psychological condition that arises when a child has to separate from his or her main close figure, such as parents or caregivers. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), Separation Anxiety Disorder is characterized by excessive fear or anxiety about separation from home or individuals who have emotional closeness (Anugrahwati & Silitonga, 2023). Common symptoms include excessive crying during separation, refusing to go to school, concerns about parental safety, and physical complaints such as abdominal pain or dizziness (Anugrahwati & Silitonga, 2023).

In a developmental perspective, Papalia and Feldman (2017) explain that separation anxiety is a normal reaction in early childhood, especially in the age range of 2–5 years (Xiao et al., 2025). This reaction is generally temporary and will decrease as the child's sense of security and independence develops. However, if it lasts intensely and for a long time, separation anxiety can hinder the process of social adaptation and children's learning readiness at school (Huang, 2023; Xiao et al., 2025). There is evidence that consistent parenting patterns can play a role in reducing these symptoms of separation anxiety (Best & Gibbons, 2022).

2. Early Childhood Emotional Development

At the age of 4, children are at a stage of emotional development that still depends heavily on attachment figures. Erikson (1963) states that early childhood is at the stage of initiative versus guilt, where the child begins to show initiative by trying

new things but still needs emotional support from adults (Heeman et al., 2024). When this sense of security is disturbed, children can experience anxiety and fear in facing a new environment (Xiao et al., 2025)(Heeman et al., 2024). Santrock (2018) also asserts that the ability to regulate early childhood emotions is still limited, and they are not yet fully able to manage negative emotions such as fear or anxiety, so emotional reactions such as crying and rejection are often natural responses to situational stress (Heeman et al., 2024).

For example, research shows that preschoolers who experience a sudden separation from their primary caregiver often experience anxiety that can interfere with their daily activities (Xiao et al., 2025). Therefore, educators and parents need to understand the emotional dynamics that children experience at this stage of development (Heeman et al., 2024).

3. Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, as put forward by Bowlby (1969), emphasizes that the emotional bond between the child and the primary caregiver serves as a secure base for children's social-emotional development (Zvara et al., 2025). Children with secure attachments tend to be more adaptable when separated because they have the belief that their parents will return (Choi, 2023). In contrast, children with insecure attachment patterns, particularly ambivalent attachment, tend to show excessive emotional reactions to separation (Zvara et al., 2025).

Ainsworth (1978) through the Strange Situation Test showed that children with ambivalent attachment have difficulty calming down during separation and show higher levels of anxiety (Zwönitzer et al., 2023; Zvara et al., 2025). Research by Amalia et al. (2024) also shows how attachment patterns can have a significant effect on children's emotional responses in stressful situations (Zvara et al., 2025). This suggests that building positive attachment relationships is key to supporting healthy emotional development in children (Zwönitzer et al., 2023; Zvara et al., 2025).

4. Factors Affecting Separation Anxiety

Muris et al. (2011) and Essau et al. (2013) suggest that separation anxiety is influenced by internal and external factors (Kaswan, 2025)(Gunarti et al., 2023). Internal factors include the child's level of attachment, temperament, and previous emotional experiences. External factors include parental parenting, first experience in school, school environment, and teachers' responses during the adaptation period (Kaswan, 2025)(Gunarti et al., 2023). Overprotective parenting can strengthen children's emotional dependence, while warm and consistent parenting helps children build a sense of security during separation (Ly, 2025).

A study by (Gunarti et al., 2023) reinforces these findings by showing that a responsive and supportive parenting approach can reduce children's anxiety during the transition to a new environment (Gunarti et al., 2023). Cooperation between parents and teachers is also very important in creating an environment conducive to children's emotional adaptation (Kaswan, 2025).

5. Emergency Handling Separation

Handling separation anxiety requires collaboration between parents and teachers. McLeod et al. (2017) recommend strategies such as establishing a consistent separation routine, providing soothing verbal support, and training children to perform independent activities gradually (Vertel, 2023; Jeong et al., 2024). A child-friendly, play-based school environment also plays a vital role in helping children

adapt emotionally (Fuentes et al., 2023). With the right strategy, support from parents and teachers can greatly reduce the negative impact of separation anxiety (Tadros, 2024).

From existing research, good collaboration between parents and schools in creating a sense of security for children is key to helping children overcome separation anxiety (Tüner, 2024). This approach not only helps the child, but also provides peace of mind for parents, who often feel anxious when their child has difficulty transitioning (Chen, 2023; (Filho et al., 2022; .

6. Conceptual Framework

This study is based on Bowlby's theory of attachment and the concept of separation anxiety according to the DSM-5. 4-year-old children who refuse to go to school are understood to experience separation anxiety as an emotional response to environmental transitions, which are influenced by attachment relationships with parents and readiness to adapt at school (Filho et al., 2022; (George & Aikins, 2023). This framework is used to analyze the dynamics of anxiety and the adjustment process of children after separation (Quince et al., 2025). By understanding where this anxiety is coming from, it is hoped that appropriate interventions can be formulated to help support children through this transition period (George & Aikins, 2023).

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experience of a 4-year-old child who experiences separation anxiety while leaving for school. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore the meanings of children's behaviors, emotions, and social interactions in natural contexts (Dyson et al., 2023). The research subjects were determined through *purposive sampling*, namely a child who showed the behavior of refusing to go to school and crying when separated from their parents (Kusmaryono & Wijayanti, 2023). The research was carried out at one of the PAUD institutions in Tangerang City with consideration of the accessibility of the researcher to the subject, parents, and classroom teachers (Ratna et al., 2023). Data collection was carried out through participatory observation in the separation phase and after the child was in the school environment, semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers, and play-based *interviews* with children (Yamaguchi et al., 2023). In addition, documentation in the form of teacher records, attendance, and photos of activities is used as supporting data to enrich and corroborate research findings (Kazantsev et al., 2025).

Data analysis was carried out in a qualitative descriptive manner using the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994) which includes the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification (Cengiz & Bal, 2023; Page et al., 2024; Tobiassen et al., 2022). The analysis process is complemented by thematic coding to identify behavioral patterns, anxiety-causing factors, and coping strategies that emerge from observation and interview results (Barrett et al., 2022). The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation of sources and methods as well as *member checking* with parents and teachers to ensure the suitability of data interpretation with actual conditions (Barquete et al., 2023). All stages of the research are carried out by paying attention to the ethical

principles of research in children, including written consent from parents and schools, protection of the confidentiality of the subject's identity, and prioritizing the comfort and well-being of children (Boote & Lotfi, 2023; Aliyyah et al., 2023). With a systematic and ethical methodology, this study is expected to be able to provide a comprehensive overview of the dynamics of separation anxiety in early childhood and become a reference for educators, parents, and researchers in supporting the child's adaptation process during the early transition period of school (Banerjee & Quinn, 2022; Reinecke et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2025; Wei et al., 2022).

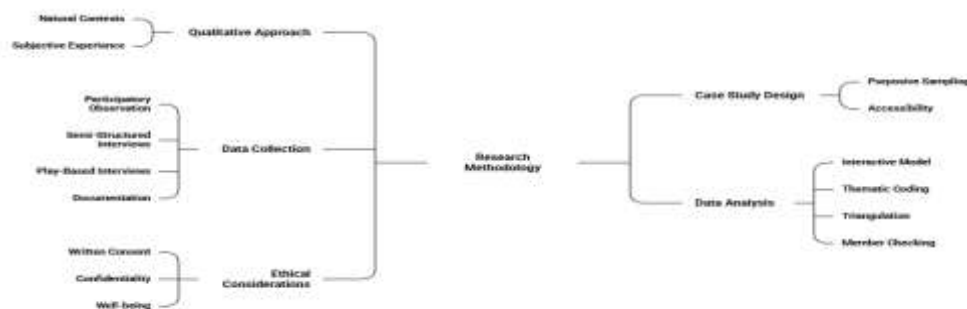


Figure 1. Research Methodology for Understanding Separation Anxiety

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Overview of Research Subjects

The subject of the study was a 4-year-old boy with the initials E who attended one of the PAUD institutions in Tangerang City. E is an only child who lives with both parents and is attending preschool for the first time. Based on his parents' statement, E has a very strong emotional closeness to his mother. At the beginning of the school period, E's mother took a work permit to drop off and pick up the child, so E showed enthusiasm and readiness to go to school. However, when the mother began to return to work and the pick-up process was carried out by other family members, E showed a behavior of refusing to leave for school which was characterized by crying, hugging the mother, and expressing the fear of being left behind and the desire to stay at home.

The class teacher explained that although E had difficulty in the separation phase, he showed good adaptability after being in the classroom. E is classified as a cheerful child, easy to get along with, and quickly involved in play activities with peers. This phenomenon occurs consistently during the first two weeks of the school period, where anxiety appears in the transition phase from home to school, but subsides after the child feels safe in the classroom environment.

2. Observation Results

The results of observations for six consecutive days showed a relatively consistent pattern of behavior. Before leaving for school, E showed signs of anxiety such as refusing to wear a uniform, crying, and repeatedly asking for certainty if his mother would pick him up. When she arrives at school, E cries loudly, hugs her mother, and tries to prevent the separation. However, after the teacher invited E into the classroom and engaged in play activities, within about 10–15 minutes E began to show calmness, actively participate, and display positive emotional expressions. During the pick-up time, E seemed happy and enthusiastic about his school experience. This pattern shows that the anxiety experienced is specific to the moment of separation, not during the child's presence at school.

3. Interview Results

The results of interviews with parents revealed that E had unpleasant parenting experiences in the past when being cared for by a caregiver, which caused the child to take longer to trust others outside of his mother figure. Parents also admit that they apply a parenting style that tends to be protective and rarely provides opportunities for children to do independent activities without assistance. Mrs. E stated that she also experienced anxiety when she had to leave her child at school, thus indirectly strengthening the child's emotional response.

Interviews with teachers showed that the approach strategies used were empathic and gradual, such as approaching the child slowly, inviting them to play, involving E's favorite peers, and providing positive reinforcement when E successfully passed the separation phase. This approach has proven to be effective in helping E calm down and adjust to the school environment.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The results of the study showed that the separation anxiety experienced by E was mild and situational, not a pathological disorder. The main symptoms of crying, verbal rejection, and attachment behavior to the mother appear at the time of separation in the morning but gradually disappear after the child feels safe in the school environment. These findings are in line with Papalia and Feldman (2017) who stated that separation anxiety is a normal part of the emotional development of children aged 3–5 years, especially in the early phase of learning independence.

This finding can also be explained through Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment, which states that children with strong attachment attachments will show emotional reactions when separated from the main attachment figure. In the case of E, anxiety is amplified by the presence of traumatic experiences in early parenting, which has the potential to form *an internal working model* that is less secure. This trauma increases children's emotional sensitivity to adult figures other than mothers, so that the school environment filled with foreign figures triggers self-defense responses in the form of crying and rejection.

However, E's adaptability after the separation phase showed that the child had good potential for emotional resilience. This supports the view of Santrock (2018) that early childhood with separation anxiety is generally able to adapt effectively if they receive consistent emotional support. A teacher's warm, play-based, and peer-involved strategy has been proven to help children build a new sense of security at school. Thus, the separation anxiety experienced by E can be understood as a reasonable and adaptive developmental response, although it requires sensitive and collaborative mentoring.

Discussion

The results of the study showed that separation anxiety in early childhood appeared specifically at the moment of separation from parents, not while the child was in the school environment. These findings confirm that the separation anxiety experienced is situational and contextual, so it cannot be directly categorized as a pathological disorder Lanjekar et al. (2022). This condition is in line with the view of Papalia and Feldman (2017) who stated that separation anxiety is part of the emotional development process of children aged 3–5 years, especially in the early phase of learning independence (Kong, 2024). The emotional reactions that arise

during separation reflect the need for a sense of security that has not been fully internalized in the child when facing a new environment (Toh, 2025).

The main triggering factors for separation anxiety in this study are related to a very strong attachment relationship between children and parents, parenting styles that tend to be protective, and the presence of traumatic experiences during early parenting (Torres et al., 2025). These findings reinforce Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment, which states that children with intense attachment attachments will show stronger emotional responses when separated from the main attachment figure (Fitri & Sriati, 2025). Protective parenting that limits children's opportunities to practice independence also has the potential to strengthen emotional dependence, so that children have difficulty coping with transitions (Aluğan, 2024). In addition, early traumatic experiences can affect the child's internal working model, causing children to be more sensitive to situations involving adult figures outside of their parents (Canoy, 2025).

However, the results of the study show that separation anxiety is temporary and decreases as children's sense of security in the school environment increases (Parekh, 2024). An empathetic, consistent, and play-activity-based approach to teachers has been shown to be effective in helping children calm down and adapt emotionally (Speranza et al., 2024). These findings are in line with the opinion of Santrock (2018) and McLeod et al. (2017) who emphasize the importance of emotional support, consistent routines, and a pleasant learning environment in helping children cope with separation anxiety (Crumb et al., 2023; , Ginalska & Cichopek, 2024). Play activities act as a transitional medium that allows children to build a new sense of security and expand their social relationships (Burlakova et al., 2024).

The practical implications of these findings underscore the importance of collaboration between teachers and parents in dealing with separation anxiety in early childhood. PAUD/Kindergarten teachers need to implement transition strategies that are gentle, structured, and focused on children's emotional needs, while parents are expected to gradually train children's independence and avoid overprotective parenting (Lee et al., 2022). With a consistent and empathetic approach from the surrounding environment, separation anxiety can be managed adaptively and be part of the child's healthy emotional development process (Santos et al., 2025).

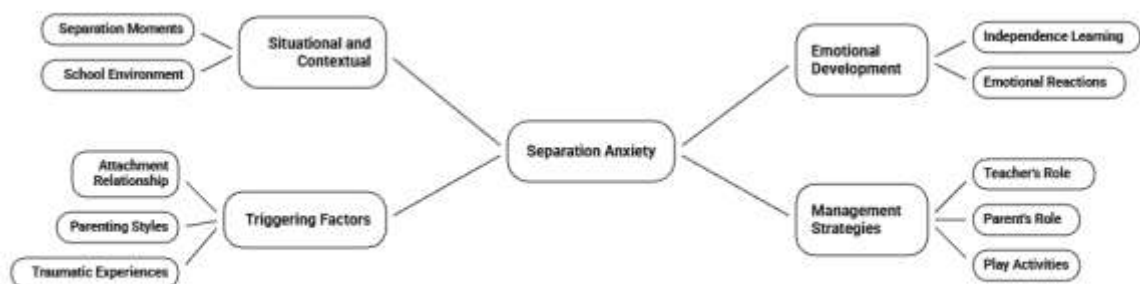


Figure 2. Understanding and Managing Separation Anxiety in Early Childhood

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of research and discussion of a *Case Study on Separation Anxiety in a 4-Year-Old Child Who Refuses to Go to School*, it can be concluded that separation anxiety experienced by children appears specifically in the phase of leaving for school, especially when they have to separate from their mother. Manifestations of anxiety are shown through crying behavior, refusing to go to class, hugging parents, and verbally expressing fear. However, after the child is in the school environment and is involved in play activities, anxiety gradually subsides and the child is able to interact normally with peers.

The main factors that affect the appearance of separation anxiety include a very strong attachment relationship between the child and the mother, a parenting style that tends to be protective, and the limitations of the child's social experience before entering the school environment. This condition is reinforced by parents' anxiety when leaving their children at school, which indirectly strengthens children's emotional responses. In addition, the findings of the study showed that the history of trauma of early parenting with previous caregiver figures contributed to the formation of an *insecure internal working model*, so that children had difficulty trusting adult figures outside of parents and viewed the school environment as a threatening situation.

Although the initial rejection of leaving school is intense, the results of the study show that separation anxiety is adaptive, situational, and temporary, not a clinical disorder. The role of teachers has proven to be very important in helping children's emotional regulation processes through an empathetic approach, engaging play activities, and a consistent welcoming routine. Interventions carried out continuously show positive behavioral changes in children, indicating that separation anxiety can be effectively managed through responsive environmental support and parenting modifications that are more supportive of children's independence.

1. Advice for Teachers

PAUD/Kindergarten teachers are advised to implement child-friendly transition strategies, such as a warm welcome, flexible adaptation time, and the use of play activities to help regulate children's emotions. In addition, teachers need to establish intensive and continuous communication with parents in order to gain a complete understanding of the emotional state of children at home and harmonize mentoring strategies.

2. For Parents

Parents are expected to provide consistent but not excessive emotional support, as well as gradually train children's independence in daily activities. Implementing a positive separation routine, such as a brief goodbye with a calming, confident expression, can help children build a sense of security and confidence as they face separation.

3. For Schools

Schools are advised to provide adaptation or orientation programs for new children that involve parents on a limited and gradual basis. This program is important to help children get to know the school environment safely and comfortably without excessive emotional pressure, so that the transition process can take place more optimally.

4. For the Next Researcher

Further research is recommended to involve a more diverse number of subjects to obtain a picture of the variation in separation anxiety in early childhood. In addition, longitudinal studies of longer duration are needed to examine the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as play therapy or school transition programs, as well as to monitor changes and internal stability of *children's working models*, not just short-term behavioral changes.

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