

An Overview of Separation Anxiety in Early Childhood During the Initial School Adjustment Period at Bunga Teratai Islamic Kindergarten, Semarang

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Abstract

The initial school adjustment period represents an important transitional phase for young children. During this period, some children exhibit emotional responses such as refusing to separate from their parents, crying, and showing reluctance to participate in classroom activities. These behaviors are manifestations of separation anxiety, which may affect children's adjustment to the school environment. This study aims to describe the characteristics of separation anxiety among young children at Bunga Teratai Islamic Kindergarten, Semarang. A qualitative case study approach was employed in this research. The participants consisted of children who exhibited crying behavior, classroom teachers, and parents selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The data were analyzed by organizing the interview and observation findings, categorizing them into themes, and drawing conclusions based on the research findings. The results indicate that children's crying behavior during the initial school adjustment period is influenced by their still-developing emotional regulation abilities, adaptation to a new environment, and attachment to their parents. The study concludes that separation anxiety is a common response during the initial school adjustment period and requires support from both the school and parents to facilitate children's successful adaptation.

Keywords: separation anxiety, early childhood, school adjustment, developmental psychology, qualitative research

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a critical period in the process of human growth and development, encompassing both physical and psychological aspects. According to Article 28, Paragraph (1) of Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System of Indonesia, early childhood refers to



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children aged 0–6 years who receive educational services through various forms of stimulation designed to support their optimal development as preparation for the next level of education. Meanwhile, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines early childhood as the period from birth to eight years of age. This definition indicates that children aged 0–8 years require appropriate and continuous stimulation to promote their physical, cognitive, social, emotional, language, and communication development, enabling them to achieve balanced growth and develop well-rounded personalities.

At the beginning of a new academic year, children enter the school environment for the first time. During this transition, they are required to adapt to a new environment and separate from their parents or primary attachment figures. Early childhood is characterized by rapid growth and development across physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional domains. Consequently, children may experience difficulties in adjusting to the people and routines within the school environment. However, teachers can provide appropriate support to help children overcome these adjustment difficulties more easily (Mahfuzh, 2001). The adaptation process often evokes various emotional responses, including crying, fear, anxiety, refusal to enter the classroom, and reluctance to be separated from their parents (Santrock, 2021).

Crying behavior during the initial days of school is a common emotional response among young children. This condition is known as separation anxiety, which refers to the anxiety experienced when children are separated from their primary attachment figures, particularly their parents (Bowlby, 1982). This anxiety may occur even when parents leave the child in a different room within the same house. A previous study by Last and Strauss (as cited in Davison, John, & Ann, 2006) reported that approximately 75% of children who refuse to attend school do so because of separation anxiety from their primary attachment figure, usually their mother. The quality of the attachment relationship influences children's emotional responses. Consequently, children who have not yet developed adequate emotional regulation skills are more likely to exhibit fear, cry, or refuse to participate in school activities.

According to Rifai (as cited in Manurung, 2012), separation anxiety may hinder children's ability to interact and socialize with others in their surrounding environment. This condition may also negatively affect their learning abilities, as children tend to become overly dependent on their mothers or other primary attachment figures. In addition to attachment, children's emotional regulation skills and their first experience of adapting to the school environment also influence their adjustment process. The social and emotional development of young children is still evolving; therefore, they require support from their environment, particularly from their families and schools (Papalia & Martorell, 2021). Teachers play a crucial role in creating a learning environment that is safe, comfortable, and enjoyable, enabling children to participate in school activities successfully.

Several studies conducted recently have shown that separation anxiety remains a common issue during children's transition into the school environment. A study by Nurfitriyane and

Kurniawati (2023) reported that separation anxiety may negatively affect children's learning comfort and school adjustment if it is not addressed appropriately. Similarly, Fakhriyah, Karyamah, and Mulyaniapi (2026) found that teachers' warm and supportive approaches, positive communication, and active parental involvement play significant roles in helping children reduce anxiety during the school adjustment process.

Based on preliminary observations and interviews conducted at Bunga Teratai Islamic Kindergarten, Semarang, several children were found to cry when separated from their parents upon arriving at school. Some children were reluctant to enter the classroom, clung tightly to their parents, and experienced difficulty participating in classroom activities. These findings indicate that each child's adjustment process is unique and influenced by various psychological and environmental factors.

Based on the observation, this research focused on the research questions: (1) What behaviours of anxiety are exhibited by children during the initial adjustment period at school? (2) What factors contribute to separation anxiety in children? (3) How does separation anxiety affect a child's participation in learning activities? (4) What efforts are made by teachers and parents to help children reduce separation anxiety?

This study aims to describe the characteristics of separation anxiety among young children during the initial school adjustment period at Bunga Teratai Islamic Kindergarten, Semarang. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for teachers and parents regarding the factors that contribute to separation anxiety and to serve as a basis for developing effective intervention strategies to support children's social and emotional development during the transition to school.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of separation anxiety experienced by children during their initial enrollment at Bunga Teratai Islamic Kindergarten. Specifically, the study explored the manifestations and levels of separation anxiety, the factors contributing to the condition, and the efforts made by parents and teachers to help children cope with it. A case study design was adopted, focusing on children who continued to exhibit separation anxiety over a period of three to four weeks. This approach enabled the researchers to obtain a comprehensive and contextual understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The study was conducted at Bunga Teratai Islamic Kindergarten, Semarang. Data were collected through observations, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña

(2014). The participants consisted of five kindergarten teachers and twenty-five parents of students from Bunga Teratai Islamic Kindergarten, Semarang.

Observations were conducted in two Group A kindergarten classes, consisting of a total of twenty-five children, with ten students in the first class and fifteen students in the second class. The researcher observed the entire learning process, from the beginning to the end of each school day. According to Cartwright, observation is defined as the process of systematically viewing, observing, examining, and recording behavior for a specific purpose (Herdiansyah, 2010). The purpose of the observations in this study was to obtain an accurate and in-depth understanding of children's behaviors that emerged in situations involving separation anxiety.

In addition, the researcher administered questionnaires to the respondents to identify children who experienced separation anxiety. According to Sugiyono (2016), questionnaires are an effective method of data collection for measuring research variables as well as respondents' perceptions.

Results and Discussion

Characteristics of Separation Anxiety Behaviors Among Children

Table 1. Observation Results of Separation Anxiety Behaviors Among Students

Category	Number of Students	Percentage
Exhibited crying behavior	11	44%
Did not exhibit crying behavior	14	56%
Total	25	100%

Based on observations conducted over a period of three to four weeks involving 25 Group A students at Bunga Teratai Islamic Kindergarten, Semarang, 11 children (44%) exhibited anxiety-related behaviors when separated from their parents during the initial days of school. In contrast, 14 children (56%) were able to participate in classroom activities without showing signs of anxiety.

Children who experienced separation anxiety demonstrated behaviors such as crying, clinging tightly to their parents, refusing to enter the classroom, asking to go home, and showing reluctance to interact with teachers and peers. These behaviors were most frequently observed during the first week of school and gradually decreased during the second week. However, several children continued to display anxiety-related behaviors into the third week, indicating the need for additional guidance and support.

Teacher's Statement

"During the first week, quite a number of children cried when their parents left the classroom. After interacting with their teachers and classmates, most of them gradually became more comfortable participating in classroom activities."

These findings indicate that children's emotional responses to a new environment are commonly expressed through crying. The results are consistent with Sadock (2015), who stated that anxiety is a normal response when individuals encounter unfamiliar experiences. Among young children, anxiety frequently arises when they are separated from their parents or primary attachment figures and are required to adjust to a new school environment.

Factors Contributing to Separation Anxiety

Table 2. Factors Contributing to Separation Anxiety

Factor	Findings
Attachment to parents or primary attachment figures	Highly dominant
First experience of attending school	Dominant
New school environment	Dominant
Underdeveloped emotional regulation	Observed in several children

Based on interviews with teachers and parents, the most influential factor contributing to separation anxiety was the children's attachment to their parents, particularly their mothers, who served as their primary attachment figures. In addition, most of the children cried because they had no previous experience with preschool education and therefore required more time to adjust to the school environment. Other contributing factors included fear of the new environment, unfamiliar teachers and peers, as well as children's still-developing emotional regulation skills, which limited their ability to manage their emotions when confronted with these new situations.

Teacher's Statement 2

"The children who cried for the longest period were usually those who had never attended school before, so they needed more time to adjust."

Parent's Statement 1

"At home, my child is always with us and is not accustomed to being separated from us for an extended period."

These findings are consistent with Hasanah (2013), who explained that Separation Anxiety Disorder is characterized by excessive worry when children are separated from their primary attachment figures. Furthermore, Lazarus et al. (2016) stated that separation anxiety commonly emerges during early childhood when children begin adapting to a new.

The Impact of Separation Anxiety on the Learning Process

Table 3. Observed Impacts of Separation Anxiety

Impact	Observation Results
Crying during learning activities	Yes
Difficulty concentrating	Yes
Refusal to participate in learning activities	Some children
Reluctance to interact	Yes
Asking to go home	Some children

The observation results indicate that children experiencing separation anxiety tend to encounter difficulties in participating in learning activities. These children frequently cry, have difficulty concentrating on the teacher's instructions, and show reluctance to interact with their peers. The adjustment process among children experiencing separation anxiety takes longer compared to children who do not exhibit significant anxiety symptoms. Teachers also require additional time to provide individual support and guidance so that learning activities can proceed effectively.

Teacher's Statement 3

"When children are still crying, they are unable to focus on learning activities because their attention remains focused on their parents and they have not yet developed a sense of comfort in the new environment."

These findings are consistent with Heath (2024), who stated that separation anxiety can affect children's social abilities, emotional regulation, learning concentration, and adjustment to the school environment. If this condition persists beyond the normal adaptation period, further intervention from the school, teachers, and support from parents or primary attachment figures is necessary to prevent disruptions to children's development and to help them participate in learning activities more effectively.

Efforts of Teachers and Parents in Reducing Separation Anxiety

Table 4. Strategies for Managing Separation Anxiety

Teachers	Parents
Welcoming children warmly	Providing motivation before going to school
Encouraging children to play	Establishing consistent routines
Providing positive reinforcement	Saying goodbye consistently
Communicating with parents	Coordinating with teachers

Based on the interview results, teachers attempted to support children through warm and responsive approaches, encouraging them to play with their peers, providing positive reinforcement, and creating a safe and enjoyable classroom atmosphere. Teachers also maintained intensive communication with parents regarding children's development during learning activities. Furthermore, effective communication between teachers and parents contributes to supporting children's development beyond the school environment.

Parents also provided emotional support, established positive routines before school, and demonstrated calm attitudes during the separation process, allowing children to feel safer and more comfortable when being separated from their parents.

Teacher's Statement 4

"We do not force children to enter the classroom immediately. Instead, we encourage them to play and provide outdoor activities so that they can gradually adapt and feel comfortable in the school environment."

Parent's Statement 2

"After receiving guidance from the teacher, we established a consistent routine for our child when going to school every day. We always provide encouragement so that our child feels comfortable participating in learning activities."

The collaboration between teachers and parents has been shown to help children adapt more quickly to the school environment. According to Halgunseth (2009), family and school are the two primary environments that significantly influence children's development. Powell et al. (2010) further explained that parental involvement in education can improve children's adjustment abilities, while Padan (2010) emphasized that effective communication between teachers and parents plays an important role in reducing separation anxiety.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to describe the characteristics of separation anxiety among young children at Bunga Teratai Islamic Kindergarten, Semarang, including the factors influencing it, its impact on the learning process, and the efforts made by teachers and parents to overcome this condition. Based on the results of observations, interviews, and documentation, it was found that 11 out of 25 children (44%) exhibited crying behavior when separated from their parents during the initial period of school entry, while 14 children (56%) were able to adapt to the school environment without showing significant anxiety.

Separation anxiety was demonstrated through behaviors such as crying, refusing to enter the classroom, clinging tightly to parents, asking to go home, and showing reluctance to interact with teachers and peers. Contributing factors included attachment to parents or primary attachment

figures, experiences of entering a new school environment, fear of unfamiliar surroundings, and still-developing emotional regulation abilities. These conditions affected children's participation in learning activities, concentration, social interaction, and adjustment within the school environment.

The results show that parents and teachers played a crucial role in helping kids deal with adjustment challenges during the adaption phase. Through exchanges, play activities, encouragement, and a welcoming school setting, teachers can offer help. In the meanwhile, parents can help by creating regular routines, providing encouragement, and maintaining composure when bidding their child farewell. Children can feel safer and progressively more at ease in the school setting if parents and teachers communicate and work together. As a result, children's anxiety related to separation can be lessened and the adjustment process throughout the first school year can be supported with the right kind of assistance from both parents and teachers.

Therefore, separation anxiety during the initial transition to kindergarten is a common condition experienced by young children entering school and tends to be temporary when appropriate support is provided. Collaboration between teachers and parents or primary attachment figures is an important factor in facilitating optimal adjustment, enabling children to participate comfortably in learning activities while supporting their positive social and emotional development.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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