

## THE SEPARATION ANXIETY AT KINDERGARTEN CHILDREN

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**Abstract:** *The separation anxiety is one of the most frequent anxiety troubles met at children. The major risk of the debut of this trouble is in three age stages: between 5-6 years old, 7-9 years old and 12-14 years old, appearing approximately at 40% from the children. The authors made a study on the separation anxiety on 36 kindergarten children and presents their quantitative and qualitative results, obtained with three different questionnaires: for educators, for parents and for children. The conclusions of the research made them propose an intervention programme for the children with separation anxiety syndrome.*

**Key words:** *separation anxiety, kindergarten children, stage ages, physiologic, cognitive and emotional symptoms*

### **Theoretical frame**

The separation anxiety is one of the most frequent anxiety troubles met to the children and that is why its definitions and its causality are very different, fonction of the authors. Even the periods of manifestation and its procentual frequency is different from an author to another.

After Olaru (1988), the major risk of the debut of this trouble is in three age stages: between 5-6 years old, 7-9 years old and 12-14 years old, appearing approximately at 40% from the children.

The anxiety of separation is a disease which are manifested by an intense fear feeling, which appears to the children in the moment in which they are in unfamiliar situations and in which they are not with the persons with whom they feel secure (usually the mother). This type of reactions are considered normal until the age of 2 years old. After this age, the children begin to accommodate themselves with the new persons and situations, and the fear of separation are less intense (Erikson, 1985).

For other researchers in the domain, this emotional problem affects 4-5% from the children with ages between 5-7 years old and tends to lower to 2% till 11-13 years old. The debut of the separation anxiety takes place most frequently in the period 7-12 years old, but it is possible earlier and it is manifested by the excessive fear which appears at the real or imaginary separation of the child from a significant person, usually one of his parents (Dindelegan, 2012).

The separation anxiety is a problem frequently meets: about 12% from the children suffer from this problem before 18 years old. Taking into account that half of the children with an anxiety disease will continue to experiment anxiety problems even at the adult age, it is very important that this problem be indentified early and adressed to a specialist (Birt, 2001; Fodoreanu, 2004).

The separation anxiety have the debut, generally in the preschool period (but it can happen latter, till the age of 18 years old) and appears after some stressant events, as: the parents divorce, the death of a favourit relative or animal, the change of the house, of the school, the movind in another district, or in another locality etc. It is different from the generalized anxiety by the facts that it interesed, predominantly, the separation from the house or persons to whom the child is attached (Enăchescu, 2008).

The children with anxiety separation can present, each time that they are separated from the house or the persons on which they are attached, manifestations like: social isolation, apathy, sadness, concentration difficulties in the games or other activities, fear of animals, of darkness, of monsters, of thieves, of kidnappers (Galbard, 2007).

They perceive different situations as being dangerous for them and their family. They have difficulties to go to bed and insist to stay with somebody near them till they are asleep. In the sleep time some of them live true nightmares of which content expressed their fears (Dobrescu, 2011). Many times they relate unusual perceiving experiences: horrible creatures, eyes that are looking to them etc. These are based on the erroneous perception of a real stimulus, appear only during the night and disappear in the presence of the person to whom the child is attached (Enăchescu, 2007).

The diagnosis of separation anxiety is made to a child if the disposition troubles last at least 4 weeks and he presents the symptoms describe before. Although the separation anxiety become manifest in the middle period of the childhood, it reflects itself also latter, limiting the person independence and making it to refuse living home (Munteanu, 2009).

#### **Causes and manifestations**

The authors agree to mention between the principal causes which determine the separation anxiety to the child, the followings:

- *genetic causes*: the anxiety in separation situation can be more intense if it is associated with temperamental (innate) predispositions, which favour the tendence to retire and to isolate in connection to new persons or situations;

- *environmental causes*

- the anxiety in separation situation can be more intense, if the parents do not take any measures to accustom gradually the children with their absence;

- the tendence to protect excessively the children in new or unfamiliar situations, encourages their dependence to the parents and deprives them from learning experiences about how they can behave in such contexts;

- the stress factors (as for example the divorce, the communication problems between parents, the firsts days in kidergarten or school) can favour the manifestation of the separation anxiety (Crețu, 2001; Ionescu, 2006).

The environmental factors are considered as having the most important role in the installation of this disease. Some authors (Holdevici, 2009) mention in this categories:

- anxious parents that become overprotective, encouraging the dependence from the parents and depriving the child from the different learning occasions;

- stress factors (besides those mentioned above also the appearance of a new brother, the leaving of a parent abroad etc);

- the very authoritarian parental style;

- perfectionist or very critic parents, who forget to reward the positive behaviors of the child;

- sleeping in the same bed with the mother (or one of the parents).

The symptoms of separation anxiety are manifested in physiologic, cognitive, emotional an behavioral plane (Schaffer, 2005).

*The physiologic symptoms* can represent a good indicator for the parents to identify the separation anxiety. The children or the adolescents with this problem present headaches, nausea, stomach aches, vertigo, powerfull heart knocks, the respiration out of order or other physic symptoms typical to the anxiety state. Usually these symptoms appear befor the vicinity of the separation moment and are absent in the moments in which the child is togheter with his parents – for example they appear in the morning when the child must go to school, but they are absent in the weekend days, when the child stay at home with his parents (Șchiopu, Verza, 1995).

*In the cognitive plane* appears a series of worries and anxious thoughts related to the separation and to be alone; some children, from a smaller age, do not succeed to identify these worries or thoughts, but the bigger children or the adolescents can say that they are afraid that something bad will come to them or to someone close to them – a close person (parents or the person who look after them) (Cattell, 1983).

*In the emotional plane*, provoke an intense state of fear and uncertainty. The little children manifest themselves by crying crisis, shouts, rolling over on foot, or hanging on the parents when they anticipate or are passing through the separation moment. They can also refuse to remain alone in a room, to stay at the kindergarten or at school or to participate to other activities (swimming, dance, group activities etc) in the absence of their parents (Verza, 2000).

### **Hypothesis and objectives**

The research domain was that of the separation anxiety. The research is from non-experimental type, a finding out one. The hypothesis from which we started in our research approach were the following: 1. We have supposed that the separation anxiety is present to half of the kindergarten children from the little group; 2. We supposed that the separation anxiety is bigger to the children who have never be separated from their parents, until the entrance in the kindergarten; 3. We supposed that the separation anxiety is bigger to the children that are unic child to their parents.

The enunciation of these hypothesis determined us to coach the following objectives of our research: the emphasizing of the separation anxiety to the children from the little groupe in kindergarten; the selection of the adequate samples of subjects on which the research must be carry on; the establishment of the methods which could evidenciate the separation anxiety; the establishment of the link between the separation anxiety and the fact to be unic child to the parents; the settling down of the relation between the separation anxiety and the frequency of the separation from the parents in the precursory period to the entrance in kindergarten.

### **The studied sample**

To realise the proposed research we took for sample a lot of 36 children from two small groups from the PP.17 Kindergarten from Arad. In the sample we had 15 boys and 21 girls.

### **Work methodology**

With the view of verifying the validity of the enounced hypothesis, we made three different questionnaires: for the children, for the parents and for the preschool learning teacher (educators). The questionnaires were applied individual to each child from the two groups. In the same time, the parents questionnaire was applied to the parent who came to take the child from the kindergarten. The educators questionnaire was completed by the two educators from the two little groups took into the study. The questionnaires were completed six weeks after the beginning of the school year.

### **Results and discussions**

#### *The first hypothesis*

*We have supposed that the separation anxiety is present to half of the kindergarten children from the lower group.*

To verify this hypothesis were analysed the answers to the questions 1 and 2 from the educators questionnaire and the answers to the questions 1, 2 and 3 from the parents questionnaire. Also we took into account the answers to the firsts two questions from the children questionnaire.

Both the educators asserts that a quarter from their group could be framed to the separation anxiety. It is a relative great number of children who can not separate from their parents and who can influence the well progress of the daily programme in kindergarten by their

behavior. The figure 1 presents the time that the children are crying after the leaving of their parents.

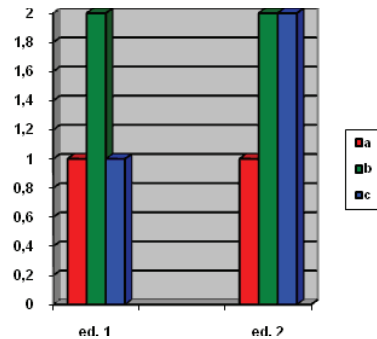


Fig. 1. The educators estimation about the time that the children are crying after the leaving of their parents.

Where: a = some minutes; b = a quarter of hour; c = half an hour.

Analysing all the answers we can appreciate that in conformity with the educators evaluation, a quarter from the children from the little group, present separation anxiety, because they manifest crying behavior even at 6 weeks after the beginning of the school year. The time duration that the children are crying, after the parents evaluation is approximately a quarter of an hour. From this point of view we can assert that **our starting hypothesis is validated: there is separation anxiety to the little group children**, but this is present only to a quarter of the preschool population of a group, not to a third part as we supposed.

The answers of the parents sustained this hypothesis. We have a number of 3 parents who estimate that the cry of their children was about 4 weeks; 10 parents appreciate that the cry duration was about 5 weeks and 3 parents evaluate the duration of the cry to 6 weeks, that means till the beginning of our research.

The prolongation over 4 weeks of this type of behavior is considered already separation anxiety. It is appreciate that in a month interval the child must habituate himself to the kindergarten life, to the colleagues and to the educator who replaces the role of the parents on the period that the child spend in the kindergarten.

The accommodation incapacity of the child can be an alarm signal on many directions: either the parental education and behavior regarding the child were not adequate, or there are some accommodation problems which belong to the child intimate structure and than it must be seen a specialist. We make this mention, especially for those children who continue to cry even after a month and half after their entrance in the kindergarten.

In conclusion, taking into account the qualitative interpretation of the obtained results by the application of the specific questionnaires to the three categories of subjects- children, parents, educators – we can assert that **our starting hypothesis was validated by the practice**. There are differences between educators who appreciate the presence of the separation anxiety to a quarter of the children population, and the parents who approximate the presence of the separation anxiety to half of the children, but performing an average between the two evaluations and estimating in a qualitative way the educators and parents evaluations we consider that the separation anxiety is present to about a third from the little group children.

#### *The second hypothesis*

*We supposed that the separation anxiety is greater to the children who have never be separated from their parents, until the entrance in the kindergarten.*

To verify this hypothesis we have resort to the interpretation of the parents answers to the questions 6, 7 and 8 and to the question 3 from the educators questionnaire.

More than half of the parents state that they never separated from their child before his entrance in the kindergarten.

This could be one of the reason for which a so great number of children manifest separation anxiety. Never being separated from their parents, between the previous three years, the children consider that there are no activities wich can be done without them, or consider that there are no location in which they can be without their parents. The moment when they must separate from the parents becomes a dramatic one, because the fear to remain alone and the anxiety related to what could happened to them or to their parents is very great. This anxiety is as great as they were less separated from the parents in the previous three years.

Anyhow, the separation from the parents, previous to the kindergarten, even it was done for a short period of time, habituated the children with the idea that they can remain alone without their parents or can make some activities alone, without anything wrong to them or to their parents happened. In this way the child is more prepared to manage with the separation situation from the parents in the moment in which he must remain in the kindergarten for a part of the day.

*Table 1. The degree of integration in the collective*

	<b>Answers</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>a</b>	they do not integrate	5
<b>b</b>	they integrated but they do not communicate with the colleagues	4
<b>c</b>	they integrated but they do not play with their colleagues	6

From the children with separation anxiety, after the educators opinion, 4 couldn't integrate themselves in the collective. They do not arrive to establish collegial relations with the other children, don't want to discuss with the educator and, generally, are isolated and maintain the distance from the other children. A number of 4 children can be considered as being integrated but they do not discuss with their colleaguse. The integration was considered fonction to the participation to the daily activities. These children participate to the activities, but they do not want to communicate with their colleagues in any way; they don't answer to their questions and they do not initiate any communication. Finnally, a number of 6 children are considered integrated, but they don't play with their colleagues. These participate to the daily activities but they want to do all the things alone, without cooperation ar collaboration with the others and they do not accept the team work.

It is a consequence of what we mentioned previously regarding the parents attitudes. If the parents do not create conditions for the children to be independant, to confront themselves fonction of their own powers to the separation and other difficulties, than at the begining of the kindergarten will arrive problems of integration and accommodation.

The results obtained by us through the answers to the questionnaires, as well as their quantitative and qualitative processing allow us to affirm that **the second hypothesis**, made by us to the begining of the research, **was validated in practice**. The separation anxiety is gratter to the children who never were separated from their parents and this fact has consequences on the accommodation degree of the children to the kindergarten life.

*The third hypothesis*

*We supposed that the separation anxiety is greater to the children that are unic child to their parents.*

To verify this hypothesis we analysed in a quantitative and qualitative way the answers obtained to the following questions: 4 and 5 from the parents questionnaire; 3, 4 and 5 from the children questionnaire and 4 and 5 from the educators questionnaire.

The children answers analysis pointed out for us that there where does not exist brothers or sisters, the child is dependent from the adult not only to eat and sleep but also to play or to go to a walk. The family adults become the only anchors for the child and when they are not present, the child anxiety grows because he doesn't understand their absence and why he must accept some stragers in their place. They cant understand what could happen in the presence of this strangers or of the outside children. We can state that the separation anxiety is more powerfull to the unic children.

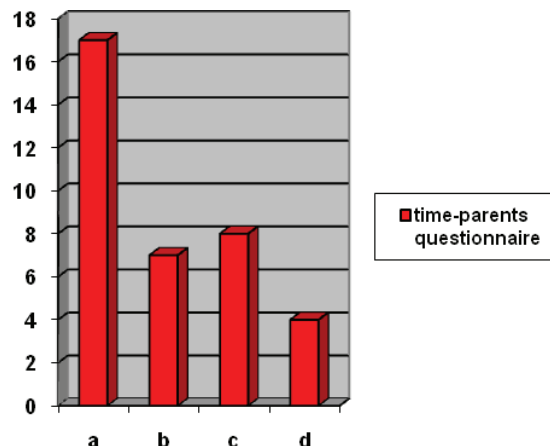


Figure 2. The person with which the child spend his time at home

Where: a = with the mother; b = with the father; c = with his grandparents;  
d = with the baby-sitter.

It is normal if we think that in the contemporary society the woman is that who is responsible for the growth and education of the children. She shares her time between the husband and the children, between the wife and the mother duties. All these in the idea that the mother doesn't work. The actual legislation permits to the mothers to stay at home with the children till the reaching of the age of 2 years old. In all this period the father is absent from home most of the day, because he works. That is why the mother is the main character whom the child sees from his wake-up till he is asleep, with her he eats, he plays, he goes for a walk and it is she who answers to all his questions.

It remains to analysis the last two questions from the educators questionnaire, which are regarding most the capacity of accommodation and integration of the children with separation anxiety.

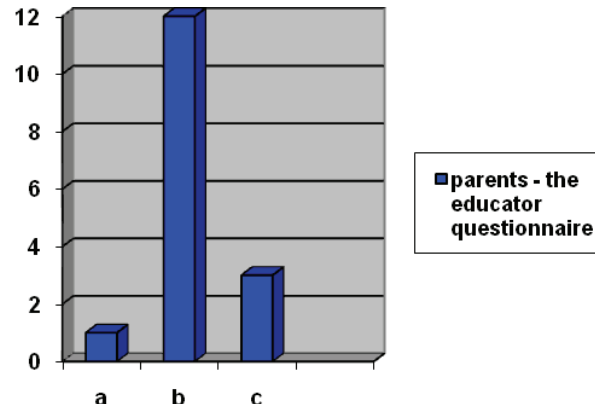


Figure 3. The evaluation of the parents by the educators (educators questionnaire)

In the educators evaluation, only one parent appear as being indifferent towards his child. This comes to take the child from the kindergarten, but he doesn't ask anything about the daily activities, the way of behaving of the child, or the problems that the child has. Moreover, when the educators tried to speak to him, their observations were took as personal and insulting criticism made to his parent qualities.

Twelve (12) from the parents are evaluated as being overprotective. This overprotection appears as a result of the fact that we have here a unic child, without brothers or sisters. Due to this fact, the preoccupations, the attentions and the worries of the parents are centred on a single direction, becoming exaggerated, inspite to be shared in two or three directions. Without being conscious of this the overprotective parents determine a greater separation anxiety to their child, in comparison with the parents who have more than one child.

Three from the parents (3) are evaluated by the educators as being too occupied by their profession to have time for their children. These are parents whom in the analysis of the previous answers made by us, let their children to the care of babysitters, who must supply them and undertake all their educational fonctions.

In conclusion, we can assert that **the third hypothesis** made by us **was validated in practice**. The child who is a unic child presents a greater separation anxiety due to the fact that they are overprotected by their parents.

#### Final conclusions

The collection of data and their static processing, as well as their qualitative interpretation lead us to the following assertions:

- *the first hypothesis was validated in practice*. There are differences between educators (who estimate the presence of separation anxiety to a quarter of the children) and the parents (who estimate the presence of separation anxiety to half of the children). Making an average between these two estimations and taking into account the qualitative evaluations of the educators and parents, we consider that the separation anxiety is present to about a third from the little group kindergarten children.

- the second hypothesis enounced by us to the begining of the research is validated in practice. The separation anxiety is greater to the chhildren who never been separated from their parents and this fact has big consequences on the accommodation degree of the child to the kindergarten life.

- the third hypothesis enounced by us was also validated in practice. The children who are unic chlidren to their parents have a greater separation anxiety due to the fact that they are overprotected by their parents.

The separation anxiety, one of the most frequent emotional problems met to adolscents and children, can be treated successfully by cognitive-behavioral intervention methods and by the collaboration between the psychotherapist, children and parents.

Some of the essential principles in the intervention on the separation anxiety are the followings:

1. The parents play a crucial role in the separation anxiety treatment, the practitioner experience suggesting that the degree of motivation, involvement and disponibility of them is the condition for a successfull intervention.

2. The gold rule in the separation anxiety treatment, as in the case of other anxiety forms, is the gradual exposure to the feared situations, after the previously settling down of a hierarchy of them. The principles of an efficient exposure are the duration (the child must remain in the feared situation untill he feels a diminution of the anxiety intensity) and the frequency (to reduce the anxiety intensity, the exposure must be made daily, for the begining).

3. At the begining, the child will feel badly (the exposure to the feared situation – the separation – will start an intensification of the emotional discomfort and of the physical sensations), and latter he will feel better (the symptoms diminished in intensity). It is very important both to the child and to the parents to know this thing for being able to understand the therapeutic approach and the emotional and behavioral manifestation dynamic.

4. The structured and predictive environment, created by the daily routine of the child (meal, hygiene, sleep, the games) increases the control degree of the child on the current activities and on the eveniments from his life, reducing the intensity of the uncertainty and incertitude.

5. The child emotions must be validated („I understand that it is difficult for you to...”), and in this way we transmit to the child that he is understood. This method offers in another hand to the child an alternative to manage with the anxiety: instead of rolling on foot and the shouts, he can verbally expresses what he feels. It is very important to support all the time the child in his attempt to defeat his fear and anxiety.

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