



Mommy don't go: The stories of separation anxiety of kindergarten pupils thru the lens of mothers

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Abstract

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the separation from home anxiety among kindergarten pupils from the perspective of mothers of Ibayay Central School Colongcolong Annex School Year 2022-2023. Using purposive sampling, five parents were selected as participants. Data were collected through face-to-face interviews using a researcher-made interview guide. The findings revealed that children exhibited excessive reliance on their parents, often requiring parental persuasion and showing trust only in their parents and close relatives. Parents noted that separation anxiety was linked to home training and parenting styles, which sometimes led to the child's fear of unfamiliar places and strangers, resulting in separation anxiety disorder. To address this, continuous parental support and understanding were deemed crucial. Parents faced challenges such as recurring issues, disruption of daily routines, and their children's difficulties in social interactions. Coping mechanisms included engaging children in social activities, fostering self-motivation, and providing consistent care. Through these efforts, parents developed resilience, which in turn helped their children become more self-reliant and confident. The study indicates that increasing parents' awareness of separation anxiety, strengthening parent-child relationships, and integrating spiritual guidance can accelerate the recovery process and lead to more positive outcomes for both parents and children. The research emphasizes the critical role of thorough information sharing and resilient family support in addressing separation anxiety.

Keywords: *phenomenological study, kindergarten separation anxiety, parents lived experiences, coping mechanism*

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Introduction

Separation anxiety is a common developmental stage for children, characterized by fear and distress when apart from their parents (Gonzales, 2021). This anxiety often occurs when children start school, where they face conflicting feelings of excitement and fear. Children may feel their existence depends on having a primary caregiver nearby (Quimson et al., 2018). In the Philippines, where strong family bonds are highly valued (Annie, 2019; Cruz, 2017), separation anxiety can be more pronounced (Alampay, 2017). This was evident at Ibajay Central School Colongcolong Annex, where 7 out of 34 Kindergarten pupils showed signs of separation anxiety, such as crying, tantrums, shouting, and attempts to leave the classroom to find their parents during the first week of school. These behaviors indicate a significant presence of separation anxiety among the young learners (Jerud, 2019).

By understanding these experiences, the study aims to uncover the challenges parents face, the coping mechanisms they employ, and the potential development of a separation anxiety program to assist Kindergarten pupils. This research is crucial for developing effective strategies to support children and parents in managing separation anxiety and fostering a smoother transition into the school environment. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the experiences of parents with pupils that have separation anxiety, challenges that parents encountered with having a child with separation anxiety and their coping mechanisms to address the problem.

Methodology

This study uses a phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of parents whose kindergarten children exhibit separation anxiety. Phenomenology focuses on how individuals perceive and comprehend their surroundings through their daily experiences, using interviews to gather unfiltered opinions and perceptions.

Conducted at Ibajay Central School Colongcolong Annex in Ibajay, Aklan, the study involves five kindergarten parents selected for the school year 2022-2023. These participants were chosen based on criteria including having a child with separation anxiety, willingness to share experiences, and having developed coping mechanisms. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality. A researcher-made interview guide, validated by experts, included open-ended questions divided into three parts: lived experiences, challenges encountered, and coping

mechanisms. Data collection involved face-to-face interviews, recorded and transcribed for accuracy. The information was analyzed and significant statements were clustered into themes, producing a comprehensive understanding of the topic. The condensed statement capturing the essential aspects was returned to participants for verification to ensure accuracy. Proper consent and confidentiality measures were followed, adhering to the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

Findings

The study identified four key themes in the lived experiences of parents dealing with their child's separation anxiety. Firstly, there was a significant emphasis on the child's excessive reliance on parental presence. Parents observed that their children often needed strong parental persuasion, primarily trusting only their parents and close relatives while fearing unfamiliar places and strangers. This reliance was attributed to home training influences, which parents linked to poor parenting practices and unfounded child protection beliefs. These factors led to the child's disconnection from the outside world, resulting in separation anxiety disorder. Overcoming this challenge necessitated continuous parental support and a deep understanding of the child's situation.

In addressing the challenges of dealing with separation anxiety, three dominant themes emerged. Parents faced the daily recurrence of issues related to their child's separation anxiety, encountering difficulties in persuading their children to stay in the classroom and enduring their whining throughout the day. Despite these persistent struggles, parents displayed resilience, addressing their child's behavior at their own pace with individual methods. This process proved profoundly distressing for both parents and children. Additionally, parents experienced significant disruptions to their daily work and chores, sometimes sacrificing work commitments to be physically present with their anxious children. The struggle to interact with other children also led to neglect, particularly for solo parents, potentially resulting in the neglect of responsibilities towards siblings of the anxious child.

The coping mechanisms adopted by parents were summarized into four themes. Peer socialization, despite its challenges, helped develop physical and communication skills among toddlers and elementary learners. It fostered opportunities for shared knowledge, preferences, and experiences, creating a sense of belonging and self-discovery. Reward as motivational encouragement was effective in training the child to perform certain tasks, maximizing productivity, or solving problems. Consistent parenting, while challenging, was essential for

addressing separation anxiety. Parents needed to understand the problem thoroughly to respond effectively. The coping strategies parents discovered were crucial in helping their children overcome separation anxiety, involving simple training to encourage self-reliance and efficiency.

To address these findings, the researcher proposed an Intervention Program titled "Separation Anxiety Symposium." The program aimed to define parenting and teaching, identify concepts of Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD), enumerate the dangers of SAD, distinguish coping mechanisms for SAD, provide advice on pursuing passions and dreams for children, discuss supervision of children with SAD, strengthen the spiritual dimension through religious discussions, and share success and disappointment stories related to dealing with SAD.

Conclusions

Children exhibited excessive reliance on parental presence, needing strong parental persuasion and fearing unfamiliar places and strangers. This reliance was linked to poor parenting practices and unfounded child protection beliefs, leading to separation anxiety disorder. Overcoming this challenge requires continuous parental support and a deep understanding of the child's situation. Parents faced daily recurrence of issues related to separation anxiety, such as difficulties persuading their children to stay in the classroom and enduring their whining throughout the day, causing significant distress for both parents and children. Additionally, parents experienced disruptions to their work and chores, sometimes sacrificing commitments to be with their anxious children. This also led to neglect of responsibilities towards siblings of the anxious child.

Parents adopted coping mechanisms summarized into four themes: peer socialization, which developed physical and communication skills; reward as motivational encouragement, effective in training children to perform tasks; consistent parenting, essential for addressing separation anxiety; and simple training to encourage self-reliance and efficiency. These strategies were crucial in helping children overcome separation anxiety.

The proposed "Separation Anxiety Symposium" aims to address these findings by defining parenting and teaching, identifying concepts of Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD), enumerating the dangers of SAD, distinguishing coping mechanisms for SAD, providing advice on pursuing passions and dreams for children, discussing supervision of children with SAD, strengthening the spiritual dimension through religious discussions, and sharing success and disappointment stories related to dealing with SAD.

Parents should create predictable routines for drop-off and pick-up times to reduce anxiety. Promote open dialogue regarding the child's emotions and worries about separation. Parents and teachers should collaborate to foster good communication about the child's progress. Seek assistance from a mental health professional if the child continues to experience separation anxiety. Attend seminars and trainings on children's mental and behavioral problems to improve parenting and teaching strategies.

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