

Separation Anxiety on Preschoolers' Development

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Abstract: This study focused on parents' and teachers' strategies in handling children with separation anxiety. A qualitative case study method was used. Multiple cases (3) were explored. A with-in case followed by a cross-case analyses were used to analyze data. The study found out that parents and teachers employed different strategies in handling children with separation anxiety like Affective, Verbal, Cognitive, and Child- Centered Strategies. In spite of these, teachers and parents had limited knowledge on effective strategies in handling and managing children with separation anxiety. Children with separation anxiety need planned, structured and comprehensive intervention and help from other professionals aside from teachers and parents. Thus, it is recommended that parents' and teachers' additional educational training in handling children with separation anxiety are needed. Early childhood centers should have clear policies and services to cater children's general mental health.

Keywords: *Separation anxiety, Preschoolers' Development, Strategies*

Introduction

Dilemma over children with separation anxiety is evident in schools. Society believes this to be a normal scenario. Thus, separation anxiety does not get much attention. However, in normal cases and cases which go beyond normal need attention from practitioners because these give stress or problems to parents, teachers and the children themselves. Causes and effects of separation anxiety have been explored by professionals. Little is known on how parents and teachers handle their children and students. Their strategies in everyday separation are explored in this study.

Studies have been conducted to explain the possible cause of separation anxiety in children. Most of the studies pointed out that separation anxiety is linked to parental relationship or some parenting styles. For instance, parental overprotection is traceable to child separation anxiety. Due to parent's overprotection, the children are prevented to explore the world around thus reducing their opportunities to face novel situations. This also leads to low self- confidence (Mofrad, Abdullah, & Abu Samah, 2009). Parental Intrusiveness also is known to be associated with separation anxiety. If parents give more unnecessary assistance to their child who supposed to be independently doing the activities, the child's mastery of skills is limited thereby developing dependency on adult (Wood, 2006). These studies vividly relate separation anxiety to parents' strategies or styles of child rearing. This is the reason why most of the clinical interventions of separation anxiety involves improvement of child-parent relationship or

modifying maladaptive parenting practices. Inclusion of families is significant in the treatment of separation anxiety (Pacholec, et al., 2013). On the other hand, some effects of the said anxiety are revealed by Mcloone J. et. al (2006) who found out that separation anxiety has a significant impact on relationships among families and it has also reduced child's interaction with peers or the community in general. Separation anxiety also has increased the risks of the development of other psychological and behavioral dysfunction (Biederman, Petty, & Henin, 2007) . It is even affecting and interfering development and learning among preschoolers (Mian, 2014). Given the known effects of separation anxiety, it cannot just be ignored.

Causes and effects of separation anxiety are highlighted in researches. There are clinical interventions available however, there are children who have not received clinical interventions or who have no access of such. The strategies of parents and teachers in handling these children are the focus of the study. Results aim to help parents, teachers and even children in managing the condition.

Review of Related Literature

It is just normal for children to feel anxious upon separation from parents or major attachment figures. Crying and tantrums are normal reactions to separation. We can call this normal separation anxiety. However, in some cases this experience will last a little bit longer. In this case, it would call for attention especially when it already affects and hinders what are supposed to be normal life activities.

Based on the DSM-V diagnostic Criteria for Separation Anxiety, it is defined as “developmentally inappropriate and excessive anxiety concerning separation from home or from those to whom the individual is attached” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Several criteria are reflected in DSM-V. Cases that do not fall under the specified criteria would be considered as normal separation anxiety.

Of all the anxiety affecting children, separation anxiety is the most common which affects about 4-8 % (Carpenter et.al, 2014). Several known effects of the condition have been explored in studies like of Kossowsky, et.al (2013) which point out that separation anxiety would likely increase the development of other conditions like panic disorder. It is even pointed out that anxiety in preschoolers can significantly affect the child's development, relationships with family and peers or even learning (Mian, 2014).Despite of its prevalence and known effects in early childhood, less children are receiving appropriate help. Current practices when it comes to addressing mental health are limited only up to observations by the teachers and discussion with the parents. Working together and asking for help in intervening the condition are less evident (Giannakopoulos, Eirini, Dimitrakaki, Oikonomidou, & Despoina, 2014). This can be attributed to less knowledge of both teachers and parents about preschoolers' mental health. Thus, this study explored on the strategies of both parents and teachers in handling one of the mental health conditions, separation anxiety.

Further, social interactions and family relationships have been affected by separation anxiety (McLoone, JenniferL., & Rapee, 2006). It is even having long lasting effects on peer functioning (Danzig, Buffered, Dougherty, & Carlson, 2013). They may suffer more emotional problems as they grow if they are not treated (Biederman, Petty, & Henin, 2007). Impairment in social interactions and school avoidance are possible consequence of SAD (Pincus et. al, 2005).

Interventions in treating separation anxiety disorder have been also clinically tested. One study is of Pincus et.al (2005) where they tested and made some adaptations to Parent- Child Interaction Therapy and use it to treat children with separation anxiety. This treatment focuses on the improvement of parent-child interaction so that parents can manage their children's behavior effectively. The group does not notice reduction of symptoms of separation anxiety using the PCIT. Another study is of Gosschalk (2004) where he utilized behavioral treatment for school refusal of a child with separation anxiety. In this study, school refusal was treated and this is attributed to the collaboration of school and home. Among other interventions, Cognitive behavioral therapy is the most commonly used by child clinicians. This involved psychoeducation, self-monitoring, cognitive restructuring, behavioral skills, experiments and exposures (Pacholec, et al., 2013). Most of the interventions focused on parents or family strategies. There is no study that focuses on teachers as pseudo parents in school. Teachers' strategies and methods in helping parents manage children with separation anxiety are not evident. This is maybe because teachers would easily refer the children with some problems to clinician. However, it is still hopeful that teachers or school could have a significant role in treating or even preventing children's anxiety (McLoone, JenniferL., & Rapee, 2006). Teachers could be helpful in helping children cope with separation anxiety. With this, the study looked into the different strategies the parents and teachers employed to manage and handle preschool with separation anxiety.

Research Methodology

This research utilized the qualitative method. Multiple case study design was used with 3 cases eligible for children with separation anxiety. This was conducted in Cebu City. The informants of the study were the parents and the teachers of the children with separation anxiety. Validated tools like questionnaires and unstructured interviews were used to gather data. In gathering the data, the researcher and the teachers first identified the cases using the criteria from DSM-V 2013 for children with separation anxiety. Questionnaires were given to teachers and parents to determine the social competence and their strategies in handling children with separation anxiety. Unstructured interview was also done to gather more insights from the informants. Triangulation was done as researcher observed the children with separation anxiety to validate the responses of the parents and teachers on their strategies in handling the said children. A with-in case followed by a cross-case analyses were used to analyze data. Data were transcribed, coded, after which sub-themes and themes were formulated.

Findings

Parents narrated the different strategies they used in order to lessen the separation anxiety of their children. The following are the themes for parents' strategies: Affective Strategies, Verbal Strategies, and Cognitive Strategies.

Affective Strategies

In affective strategies, parents focused on showing explicitly their love and care, building trust and bond with their children. Sub-themes under this are Reassurance, Spending Quality Time Expression of feelings, and Firmness.

Reassurance

Parents reassured their children with love, care and availability. *"I verbally emphasized how much I love her, tell her to call me anytime if she needs me, and I'll be there at lunchtime to check on her and fetch her at dismissal time"* The final words of the parents are comforting and reassuring their children their love and presence. *"I'll be back, don't be sad, it's ok, I'll bring you something"*

Spending Quality Time

Parents believed that spending quality time with their children is very important and would help ease their anxiety. *"I spent quality time with her as much as I can"* Busy parents struggle to give time to their children, that is why parents are guilty sometimes and tried their best to squeeze in time for their children. In one of the parents being physically present with her children meant sacrifice. One parent had sacrificed her career just to be with her child. *I decided to resign from my work and save my child, with the guidance of God and all my best it had a great positive result."* The parent believed that being with the child and be hands-on parent had a positive effect for her child who has separation anxiety.

Expression of feelings

Parents are explicitly expressing their love to their children through verbal and mother's touch (hugs, kisses, I love you's). *"I doubled my love and care that I express every opportunity I have"* Expression of love and care by mothers are also evident strategy used by mothers to ease the separation anxiety of their children. Excessive expression of love may not always have the positive effect in children. It may result to parent dependency which in the case of children with separation anxiety makes it worse. Mother's love express through motherly touch would always be the best touch a child can have. Mothers give hugged and kisses to their children when parting ways are very common to everybody but this doubled or even tripled in frequency and duration when dealing with children with separation anxiety.

Firmness

A parent at times loses their patience that is why she employed tough strategies. Talking to the child in firm voice and not giving in to her child's crying and tantrums are also done by a parent. A parent believes that sometimes, she needs to be strong to model the child that a person should be made of strong attributes too. A parent believed that she needs to model to her child that, she is not afraid, not anxious to be left behind, and does things on her own. Showing firmness in words and actions can be of great help in modeling behavior to the child to ease their anxiety, gain self- confidence and be brave enough to be of his own.

Verbal Strategies

In verbal strategies, parents focused on communication with their children. Sub-themes under this are Encouragement and Transparency

Encouragement

In order for the children with separation anxiety to stay in school, parents used encouragement words. “ *I tell him that he must be in school just like his cousins and other children he knew, school is fun and he can make friends*” Verbally explaining this to the children with separation anxiety is a challenge because they are yet to experience or have not experienced those while in school. Effectiveness relies in the experiences of the child while in school. It is very crucial to promise the children what they would experience inside the school because what if they will not see and experience those. Just like one parent said “*I tell my child that teacher and classmates are friends, teachers are like mommies, and classmates are playmates*”. Reality of what the parent is telling the child might not true inside the classroom. Some classmates may not be friendly and child's concept of mommy might not fit to the type of teacher in the classroom.

Transparency

Transparency here means that parents are telling their children of their whereabouts. This include where, when how long are they away from each other and the reason why. “*I never lied where to go, what to do and why I must leave*” Parents believed that when their children knew where they are they would not be such anxious. Other parent said that they need to keep their words like returned on the promised time. They employ this strategy because they believe that this would help their children trust in them.

Cognitive Strategies

In cognitive strategies, parents helped their children understand their feelings and situations. They also resulted to search answers to their queries through the net and available knowledge published online. Sub-themes under this are Rationalization and Research.

Rationalization

Talking to the child and asking and explaining why she feels that way are also used by a parent. Helping the child understand her feelings may help her rationalize things and help oneself in regulating feelings like worries and fears. Explaining to the child that there some times she/he needs to be with other people aside from their parents is one of the skills children and adult do. Conversation and explanation could help in children's understanding of the bigger world she or he is in.

Research

Parents read researches regarding ways in handling and understanding their children with separation anxiety. They apply some tips they have read in some studies. They tend also to experiment which strategies would suit to their situations. A parent said "*I need to observe if the child displays true or fake feelings, if the reason is the cause or the effect*". The parent is logical in her analysis because sometimes children behave in such a manner just to get parent's attention. Parents should be sensitive to this scenario to avoid manipulation from their children.

Themes are also derived from teachers' narration in handling their students with separation anxiety. These are Child-Centered Strategies and Affective Strategies with sub-themes for each.

Child-Centered Strategies

In child-centered strategies, activities for the children are emphasized by the teachers. It is the most common strategies among the teachers. Sub-themes under this are Keeping them busy, Positive Reinforcement, Selective Ignoring, Humor, Giving outlet of outburst.

Keeping them busy

Keeping the children busy is the most common strategy of the teacher when a child with separation anxiety comes to their classroom. There are several ways to keep the children busy. To mention a few from the teachers themselves "*find distraction by giving toys, manipulatives; give special activities; let the child do simple tasks with me; letting the child contact with water either washing of hands, face*" Having the child something to do will distract him or her from thinking that she/he is away from his/her parents. This is one way of steering the brain away from thinking of their fears.

Positive Reinforcement

Giving reinforcement to children when displaying good behavior is one way a teacher has done to manage her student with separation anxiety. Effectiveness of this strategy is short. "*I will provide rewards when child comes to school not crying, this works sometimes but not on regular basis*" The teacher is right in saying that this is not effective for regular basis, this will depend

on the kind of rewards given if it's good enough for the child it will be effective if not then, it is of no use. On a large scale, this is not really effective because on the first place it is not addressing the issue itself which is the separation anxiety.

Selective Ignoring

Teachers use this strategy to let the child experience, face and regulate the emotions they have. Effects maybe negative or positive, as observed by the teachers, children will cry and have tantrums but leaving them alone for a while eventually make them calm. This is maybe because they have released their emotions or able to regulate their emotions and maybe because they have not received attention.

Humor

Who would not love teachers with humor? This is one of the strategies which keep students attention. Being with the young children humors are expressed by teachers in their actions faces, and how they speak or in other words teachers are being animated, exaggerated in all things. This can be effective in dealing with children with separation anxiety to ease their feeling of fear. If children are happy and smiling or laughing, tension is less and this could be helpful for anxious children.

Giving outlet of outburst

Giving the children outlet of outburst can help them express their feelings. When they cry or have tantrums “*give the child soft toys which he/she can twist, hug or stretch.*” Children need to release their emotions, teachers are facilitating them in school through giving these types of things.

Background Check

To fully understand the child it is just right to check the family background, previous experiences of the child. “*I will ask the parents and child's profile*” The teachers are doing this to gain insights about the child, to understand him/her better so they can device measures that are appropriate for the him or her.

Affective Strategies

Like the parents, teachers also used reassurance to handle students with separation anxiety. Sub-theme under this is Reassurance.

Reassurance

Teachers initially talked to the child for assurance of his/her safety in school. “*I will talk to the child assuring him that he is just fine inside the school without his parents*” Teachers do

this most of the time at the beginning and then make it sure that the child will have a positive experiences inside the classroom to gain her/his trust and conquer his/her fears.

Collectively, teachers' strategies are categorized only in two, Child-centered and Emotional Strategies. Teachers focused more on giving activities to the children to redirect their attention, provide positive experiences as possible.

Totally, this study found out that teachers and parents have similarities and differences in their strategies in handling children with separation anxiety. Both of them used Affective Strategies and one common sub-theme is Reassurance. Both parties reassured the child with separation anxiety with their safety, love, care and availability. Unfortunately, according to some studies, this strategy can encourage anxiety instead. Parents showed behaviors that actually encourage child's anxiety like overprotection, excessive reassurance and avoidance of scenarios that made them anxious (Carpenter, Puliafico, M.S, Pincus, & Comer, 2014) . Parents encourage anxiety when they do excessive reassurance because they are giving attention to child's display of fear (Eisen & Engler, 2011). Parents might excessively be reassuring their anxious children especially when a novel situation is to be experienced. They are intolerant to let their child experience distress because it might be harmful for them (Pincus, Eyberg, & Choate, 2005). In this study parents and teachers believed that they are managing their children's anxiety yet they are unknowingly making it worse instead.

Further, parents employed more strategies under emotional which include Spending Quality Time, Expression of feelings, and Firmness. Spending Quality time and expression of feelings may improve bond between children and parents which can actually help the children gain confidence and eventually overcome its separation anxiety. Firmness is meant by parents as tough strategy that they employed to their children. These are good strategies but if children received these treatments in response to their anxiety it would have the opposite effect. According to Thomson-Hollands (2014), when parents give much attention to their children's avoidant or withdrawn behavior (ex. providing excessive reassurance, security, bribery, raising voice) they are unintentionally encouraging anxiety.

Another strategy used by the parents is verbal which means open communication with the children. Parents are verbally encouraging the child during separation. This strategy is similar to one of the strategies used in the study of Gosschalk,2004 of the child with separation anxiety and school refusal. To promote extinction, the mother is instructed to verbally encourage the child to be in school, firmly state the instruction and reinforce with praise if the child follows the request (Gosschalk, 2004). This yield positive effect on the child however there were additional steps done in the said study like shaping with positive reinforcement which the parents in the current study were not able to do. Teachers however provide positive reinforcement but the ways and procedures are not exactly the same with that of Gosschalk's study.

Lastly, parents employed cognitive strategies which focused on Rationalization and Research. Rationalization is helping the child understand and recognize their feelings and emotions. This strategy has the similarity of one of the strategies in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Cognitive restructuring is a way of shifting a pattern of bad thoughts to good ones. The first step of this is to identify and challenge the distorted thoughts (Hudson & Kendal, 2002). Parents may have applied CBT however, just the first step. For the parents in the study, one parent had asked help through reading researches on line. This can be also a manifestation and realization of parents that they need help on the situations they are in.

On the other hand, teachers have different strategies used in handling their children with separation anxiety. They focused on the activities for the child. They tried to make the children busy to distract them. Humor also on the part of the teacher was applied. There are no studies so far which support the effectiveness of these strategies to be used with children with separation anxiety. These can be angles and directions for future exploration.

Another strategy of the teacher is selective ignoring. They ignore the manifestations of the children for a while. This is effective according to Pincus, (2005) Praising appropriate behavior and ignoring the undesirable ones can help in behavior management throughout in her study. Opposite of this strategy is giving outlet for outburst because teachers seem to give attention to undesirable behavior instead of ignoring them.

Finally, teachers took initiative in knowing and understanding their children with separation anxiety by checking their background only but intervention is not clearly defined. In the current practices, educators are assessing their children with probable problems specifically on mental health and discuss these with the parents but working on the intervention with the parents and providing local mental health services are not visible (Giannakopoulos, Eirini, Dimitrakaki, Oikonomidou, & Despoina, 2014).

No planned, structured intervention were given to the children with separation anxiety in these cases. There is no collaboration between teachers and parents to address the issue. This could be attributed to lack of knowledge and accountability on both parties.

Conclusion

Teachers and parents have varied strategies in handling children with separation anxiety however they had limited knowledge in the effective strategies to be used. Their strategies are only successful in surviving their daily ordeal of these children but failed to treat or lessen the main issue “separation anxiety”. Children with separation anxiety need planned, structured and comprehensive intervention and help from other professionals aside from teachers and parents.

Recommendations

Parents' education and teachers' additional training in handling children with separation anxiety are needed. Early Childhood Centers should have clear policies and services to cater children's mental health. Other professionals like counselors and child psychologist be consulted when crafting and implementing intervention for children with separation anxiety. More classroom trials of strategies or interventions to be implemented with children with separation anxiety should be done.

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