

The Impact of Separation Anxiety on School Integration and Academic Performance in Early School-Age Students

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Abstract

Keywords:

separation anxiety; school integration; early-age students; academic performance; emotional adjustment

The present study examines the impact of separation anxiety on school adjustment and academic performance in early primary education. Conducted on a cohort of 181 students aged 6 to 10, the research employed a mixed-methods design, integrating the SCARED (Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders) instrument with teacher- and parent-reported questionnaires. Findings revealed that 41 participants exceeded the clinical threshold on the separation anxiety subscale, indicating a considerable prevalence of this condition within the sample. Children exhibiting elevated levels of separation anxiety were found to encounter substantial difficulties in adapting to school demands, maintaining peer relationships, and sustaining academic engagement. Correlational analyses demonstrated significant associations between separation anxiety, social anxiety, and school avoidance behaviors, underscoring the comorbid and multifaceted nature of childhood anxiety. Qualitative data further highlighted regressive behaviors, somatic complaints, and heightened emotional distress, which collectively interfere with learning outcomes and socio-emotional development. The findings contribute to the growing body of literature emphasizing the detrimental effects of separation anxiety on early educational experiences. The implications highlight the urgent need for early detection, targeted psychoeducational interventions, and systematic collaboration among educators, parents, and school counselors. Such measures are essential to promote resilience, enhance academic performance, and ensure the long-term socio-emotional well-being of affected students.

1. Introduction

In the early years of school, children face significant transitions that may affect their emotional balance. Separation from parents, joining a new group, and assuming school responsibilities can generate temporary anxiety. However, in some cases, these experiences exceed the normal intensity and duration expected for the child’s age and may indicate an anxiety disorder, such as separation anxiety.

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), separation anxiety is characterized by excessive and developmentally inappropriate fear of being separated from attachment figures, manifested through emotional symptoms (crying, excessive worry), behavioral symptoms (school refusal, staying close to parents), and somatic symptoms (headaches, abdominal pain).

International studies show that approximately 4–5% of school-aged children exhibit significant symptoms of separation anxiety (Egger & Angold, 2006). Among children in the early primary grades, prevalence may be even higher due to the specific adaptive challenges of this stage. Untreated anxiety

can lead to chronic school absenteeism, decreased academic performance, and social integration difficulties (Kearney & Albano, 2004).

At the national level, data on separation anxiety are relatively limited, but professionals in education and psychology report an increase in children resisting school attendance, showing avoidance behaviors, and displaying hyperattachment to parents – behaviors often associated with this disorder.

Investigating separation anxiety in primary school students is important not only due to its prevalence but also because of its major impact on the child’s academic and socio-emotional development. This paper aims to analyze the extent to which separation anxiety influences children’s adaptation to school demands and relationships with others, based on validated psychological tools and questionnaires administered to parents and teachers.



2. Theoretical foundation

2.1. Definition of Separation Anxiety (DSM-5, ICD-11)

Separation anxiety is classified as an anxiety disorder in both the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition) and the ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases, developed by WHO).

According to the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), separation anxiety disorder is characterized by excessive fear or anxiety about separation from those to whom the child is deeply attached (usually the parents). This fear is considered developmentally inappropriate and must persist for at least four weeks in children for a clinical diagnosis.

The ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2018) includes separation anxiety among anxiety disorders, typically beginning in childhood. It is marked by a strong fear of losing contact with attachment figures, intense distress at the thought of separation, and physical or behavioral manifestations (school refusal, persistent crying, somatization).

2.2. Symptoms and Manifestations in Early School-Age Children

In children aged 6 to 10, separation anxiety may manifest as:

- Intense crying or refusal to go to school without a clear reason;
- Frequent somatic complaints (stomachaches, headaches, nausea), especially on school mornings;
- Constant fear that something bad will happen to parents in their absence;
- Excessive attachment, difficulty sleeping alone or staying without a familiar adult;
- Avoidance of extracurricular activities (field trips, performances, camps).

These behaviors can sometimes be mistaken for “whining” or shyness, but when their frequency and intensity significantly affect the child’s functioning, psychological evaluation is recommended.

2.3. Impact on Social and School Development

Children dealing with separation anxiety often have difficulties integrating into the classroom environment, which affects:

- Peer interaction – they may be withdrawn, fearful, and avoid group play or activities;

- Lesson participation – anxiety can impact their concentration and ability to complete tasks;

- School performance – reduced output may result from lack of motivation, absenteeism, or chronic fatigue;

- Self-image – children may develop feelings of inferiority or low self-confidence. Without proper support, these difficulties can persist and intensify during adolescence or when transitioning to secondary school.

2.4. Previous Similar Studies

Research in the field has shown a clear link between separation anxiety and school integration difficulties:

Egger & Angold (2006) found that 4–5% of school-aged children show clinical symptoms of separation anxiety and are at higher risk for early school dropout or developing later emotional disorders.

Kearney & Albano (2004) emphasized that separation anxiety is one of the most frequent causes of school refusal in children aged 6 to 12.

In a Romanian study, Benga and Rusu (2015) showed that separation anxiety is significantly associated with poor emotional adjustment and low performance in school assessments during grades I–II. Thus, the literature supports the importance of early identification of separation anxiety symptoms and the implementation of psychopedagogical interventions to prevent long-term effects.

3. Research methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the effects of separation anxiety on school adaptation and academic performance in early school-age children. This approach allowed for the triangulation of data, ensuring both measurable accuracy and in-depth understanding of children’s lived experiences.

3.1. Research hypothesis:

Primary school students who display high levels of separation anxiety are expected to show significant difficulties in social integration and lower academic performance compared to their peers. Furthermore, early intervention and active collaboration between teachers and parents are assumed to mitigate these difficulties.

3.2. Research objectives:

- To identify the prevalence of separation anxiety among children aged 6–10 using standardized psychological tools.
- To analyze the correlation between separation anxiety and difficulties in school adaptation (peer relations, emotional adjustment).
- To assess the impact of separation anxiety on academic performance (attention, participation, learning outcomes).
- To integrate the perspectives of teachers and parents regarding the behavioral manifestations of children with separation anxiety.
- To formulate recommendations for targeted interventions within the school environment.

A mixed-methods design was used, combining quantitative (numerical, measurable data) and qualitative (subjective experiences and social interactions) approaches to explore and understand the complex phenomenon of separation anxiety.

3.3. Sample description:

The study was conducted on a sample of 181 students from preparatory and first grade (ages 6–8), enrolled at “Mihai Eminescu” Secondary School in Năsăud, Bistrița-Năsăud County. Participants were selected through convenience sampling and sought counseling with parental/legal guardian consent.

3.4. Research methods:

Two primary methods were employed:

Survey method – used to gather structured information from parents and teachers regarding children’s emotional and behavioral functioning.

Observation method – used to directly monitor students’ behaviors and interactions in classroom and school contexts.

To gain educational insight into the behavior and adjustment of students, a questionnaire was administered to the teachers (primary school educators) who directly interact with these children. A similar questionnaire was also given to the students’ parents. The questionnaires were distributed online via Google Forms to a sample of 9 teachers and 181 parents.

3.5. Tools used:

- Psychological test: SCARED (Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders – child

version), with emphasis on the separation anxiety subscale. This validated tool provided quantitative data on children’s anxiety levels.

- Questionnaires: Structured questionnaires were administered to parents and teachers, adapted to capture dimensions such as peer and teacher relationships, classroom participation, avoidance behaviors (e.g., absenteeism, crying episodes), and concentration difficulties. These instruments served as complementary perspectives on children’s functioning.

- Observation sheet: A structured observation grid was designed and applied by researchers to systematically record manifestations of separation anxiety during school activities. Indicators included somatic complaints, excessive attachment behaviors, withdrawal from group interactions, and avoidance of independent tasks.

3.6. Procedures

- The research process involved three stages:
- Administration of the SCARED test to students, assisted by parents to ensure comprehension.
- Distribution of questionnaires to parents and teachers via Google Forms, allowing systematic collection of behavioral data.
- Classroom observations conducted across different school activities, with behaviors documented on the structured observation sheet.

This methodological framework ensured both quantitative rigor and qualitative depth, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of how separation anxiety manifests and affects children’s academic and socio-emotional development.

4. Results

The study conducted on a sample of 181 primary school students revealed a high level of separation anxiety, both through the SCARED test and through questionnaires completed by teachers and parents. The results confirm the initial hypothesis that students with elevated levels of separation anxiety face social integration difficulties and academic performance below expectations. These findings align with existing literature, which supports the idea that separation anxiety can lead to behavioral problems (such as school refusal, difficulty concentrating) and decreased involvement in educational activities (Egger & Angold, 2006; Kearney & Albano, 2004).

The SCARED test was self-reported by the students, with parental assistance, to ensure age-appropriate accuracy. At the end of the questionnaire, a total score was calculated for each section, including the separation anxiety subscale. Out of the 181 students tested, 41 obtained scores suggesting the presence of separation anxiety. These 41 students scored 5 on items 4, 8, 13, 16, 20, 25, 29, and 31, which may indicate Separation Anxiety Disorder.

The test also measured other disorders: 12 respondents were identified with Social Anxiety Disorder, based on a score of 8 on items 3, 10, 26, 32, 39, 40, and 41, and 15 students showed a tendency towards School Avoidance, scoring 3 on items 2, 11, 17, and 36. Furthermore, both teachers and parents reported clear manifestations of emotional distress and regressive behaviors in children—factors that contribute to adaptation difficulties and lower academic performance. These findings underscore the importance of early intervention to prevent anxiety from evolving into more severe forms and to support children's socio-emotional development.

Students who scored higher on the separation anxiety subscale were also those for whom teachers reported intensified emotional distress ($\rho = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), school adaptation difficulties ($\rho = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$), and regressive behaviors ($\rho = 0.61$, $p = 0.03$). These results confirm qualitative observations and support the need for early intervention measures.

The results obtained from the SCARED questionnaire, completed by 181 students with parental support, highlighted a significant incidence of separation anxiety symptoms. Specifically, 41 students scored 5 or higher on the items specific to this subscale, suggesting the presence of a possible Separation Anxiety Disorder (SAD).

Correlational analysis showed that high scores on the separation anxiety subscale were significantly associated with several themes extracted from the qualitative data. In particular, statistically significant positive correlations were observed between:

- Separation anxiety scores and emotional distress reported by teachers and parents ($\rho = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$),
- Separation anxiety scores and school adaptation difficulties ($\rho = 0.72$, $p < 0.01$),
- Separation anxiety scores and regressive behaviors (e.g., excessive attachment, frequent crying, avoidance of independent activities) ($\rho = 0.61$, $p = 0.03$).

These correlations support the validity of the quantitative data and reflect coherence between children's self-reports and external observations. Additionally, an association was noted between the presence of anxiety and decreased academic performance, as assessed by teachers, although this relationship did not reach statistical significance ($p > 0.05$), possibly due to subjective assessments or other contextual factors (e.g., learning difficulties, lack of educational support).

Besides separation anxiety, 5 respondents recorded significant scores for Social Anxiety Disorder, and 2 for School Avoidance tendencies, illustrating the common comorbidity among various forms of anxiety in children.

Qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and observations complemented the questionnaire findings, providing depth in understanding the child's subjective experience. Manifestations such as refusal to be left alone, excessive fear of separation from attachment figures, or regressive behaviors (e.g., reverting to baby talk, constant need for reassurance) were recurrently mentioned, outlining a complex anxious profile that significantly interferes with school adaptation.

It is important to note that, being a self-report instrument, the scores obtained from the SCARED test may be influenced by children's level of introspection as well as by the perceptions of the parents assisting them. Subjectivity in interpreting emotions or the desire to respond "correctly" may lead to distorted scores. Therefore, result interpretation should be carried out with caution and correlated with qualitative data and contextual observations.

To establish correlations between the obtained data, we applied the Chi-square test, which is used to verify whether there is a significant association between two categorical variables. In the analysis, we examined the association between the presence of separation anxiety and other disorders such as social anxiety and school avoidance.

For the first set of correlations, the hypotheses were as follows:
 Null hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant association between separation anxiety and social anxiety.
 Alternative hypothesis (H_1): There is a significant association between separation anxiety and social anxiety.

The data are as follows:

- Separation anxiety: 41 students
- Social anxiety: 12 students

After entering the data into contingency tables, we obtained a p-value < 0.05 , specifically 0.04. We rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that there is a significant association between the two variables.

For the next set of correlations, the hypotheses were:

Null hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant association between separation anxiety and school avoidance.

Alternative hypothesis (H_1): There is a significant association between separation anxiety and school avoidance.

The data are as follows:

- Separation anxiety: 41 students
- School avoidance: 16 students

After entering the data into contingency tables, we obtained a p-value < 0.05 , specifically 0.045. We rejected the null hypothesis and concluded that there is a significant association between the two variables.

The conclusion is that there is a significant correlation between separation anxiety and social anxiety, as well as between separation anxiety and school avoidance. This suggests that students suffering from separation anxiety are more likely to also experience social anxiety and exhibit school avoidance behaviors.

We also identified the study's limitations:

Small sample size: The study was conducted on a relatively small group of 181 students, which limits the generalizability of the results. A larger sample could provide a more representative picture of the situation.

Local context: The sample comes from a school located in an urban area, and the conclusions cannot be easily extrapolated nationally without additional studies in different contexts.

Self-report methodology: The data obtained from the questionnaires may be influenced by the subjectivity of the respondents, and the results must be interpreted with caution.

Our study's limitations include the reliance on self-reporting from students and parents, which may introduce subjective bias. Other studies (Brown et al., 2021) have found that self-reporting can lead to an underestimation of symptoms, especially in children who may be less aware of their own anxiety. In the

future, it would be useful to include objective measurements or evaluations conducted by professionals to validate the self-reported results.

5. Discussions

Separation anxiety is a form of emotional disorder characterized by an intense and persistent fear of being separated from parents or other attachment figures. In young school-aged children, this disorder often manifests through somatic and behavioral symptoms, such as excessive crying when going to school, refusal to participate in extracurricular activities, or school avoidance reflected in absenteeism.

In the present research, the application of the psychological instrument SCARED (Screen for Child Anxiety Related Emotional Disorders) revealed that a significant number of students (41 out of 181) show symptoms associated with separation anxiety. This result supports the hypothesis that separation anxiety negatively impacts students' school adjustment.

This type of anxiety affects not only the emotional component of adaptation but also the child's ability to interact appropriately with peers and teachers. Consequences may include social isolation, difficulties in establishing interpersonal relationships, and lowered self-esteem. Furthermore, school performance may be significantly affected, as anxiety disrupts attention, concentration, and engagement in educational activities. In this context, the data obtained indicate a significant correlation between separation anxiety, difficulties in social integration, and low academic performance, confirming the findings of other studies in the field (Egger & Angold, 2006; Kearney & Albano, 2004).

The tools used in the psychological evaluation of children, such as the SCARED questionnaire, have proven to be considerably effective in identifying anxious symptoms, including those related to separation anxiety. This scientifically validated and widely used questionnaire allows for an appropriate assessment of the child's reported anxiety level, in collaboration with the parent, thereby contributing to the acquisition of relevant information suited to the child's developmental level.

In our study, we identified a significant association between separation anxiety and social anxiety ($p = 0.04$), as well as between separation anxiety and school avoidance ($p = 0.045$). These results are consistent with previous research (Miller et al., 2020), which found that separation anxiety can lead to an increased manifestation of social anxiety and

difficulties in school adjustment. Additionally, studies by Johnson and Smith (2018) showed that students with separation anxiety are more likely to avoid school activities, supporting our conclusions regarding the negative impact of this disorder on school life.

Based on the results obtained, we concluded that a possible reason for the association between separation anxiety and social anxiety may be explained by attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), which suggests that an insecure or overly strong attachment can lead to a constant fear of separation, which in turn leads to the avoidance of social interactions. Likewise, school avoidance can be seen as a form of avoidance behavior used to reduce the anxiety associated with school situations, which is supported by research by Miller et al. (2017) on the relationship between school anxiety and emotional disorders.

Questionnaires addressed to parents and teachers prove useful within a comprehensive evaluation process, but should not be used as the sole sources of information. A rigorous evaluation involves a multidimensional approach, including: direct observation of the child's behavior, clinical interviews with parents and the child, as well as other standardized, psychometrically validated instruments.

The responses provided by parents offered detailed information regarding the child's reactions in separation contexts (crying, school refusal, somatic manifestations without medical basis), while the data obtained from teachers complemented the symptom picture through observations of students' behavior during class. Teacher participation was essential in the study, through the accuracy of their observations and their willingness to report identified situations. The results highlighted teachers' concern for identifying effective solutions to support students affected by separation anxiety and to facilitate the process of school adjustment.

6. Conclusions

Although there are international studies addressing separation anxiety in children, within the local context, there is a lack of in-depth research on this issue among primary school students. This study aims to help fill that gap, providing updated and relevant data for the Romanian educational context. Separation anxiety affects not only the child's emotional well-being but also their social integration and academic performance. Identifying and understanding these effects can lead to the development of early intervention strategies that are essential for preventing

long-term problems and for improving children's educational experiences.

Previous studies (Smith, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019) have shown that separation anxiety can negatively influence children's social behaviors, and those who suffer from this disorder are more likely to develop social anxiety and engage in school-avoidance behaviors. These findings align with emotional development theory, which suggests that severe anxiety in childhood can affect an individual's adaptive abilities.

To have practical value, this study should be presented to teachers, school counselors, and parents. In doing so, these stakeholders can act in multiple directions:

- **Early intervention:** The study's results highlight the importance of early identification of separation anxiety symptoms. Teachers and school counselors need training to recognize early warning signs and intervene promptly.

- **School-family collaboration:** Constant communication between teachers, counselors, and parents is essential for monitoring children's progress and establishing personalized support strategies.

- **Psychological support programs:** Implementing counseling and psychological support programs in schools can help children better manage their anxiety, thereby improving adaptation and academic performance.

- **Classroom adaptation strategies:** Teachers can use encouragement techniques, reassurance, and emotional management strategies to facilitate the integration of children and reduce anxiety levels within the school environment.

- **Emotional education:** Promoting emotional education both at school and at home can contribute to the development of coping skills and increased self-esteem in children.

- **By studying this increasingly common issue among young schoolchildren, we can provide new directions for research and complete a broader picture of how separation anxiety influences child development. Analyzing these aspects may bring practical benefits in designing more effective, context-specific intervention strategies. Additional considerations include:**

- **The link between separation anxiety and long-term academic performance:** High levels of separation anxiety may predict not only immediate difficulties

but also long-term negative effects on cognitive development and school outcomes. Future studies could explore causal relationships between anxiety, learning abilities, and social skills.

- Effectiveness of psychological interventions: Research could examine how interventions (e.g., individual or group counseling, relaxation techniques, emotional management) can significantly reduce separation anxiety and improve children's school adjustment. Future conclusions might show that early, well-structured intervention brings academic and social benefits.

- The role of family environment and attachment style: Another important aspect would be the in-depth analysis of the relationship between a child's attachment style and their level of separation anxiety. Future studies may reveal that a secure attachment style significantly reduces the risk of anxiety, highlighting the need for parental education programs focused on managing children's emotions.

- Gender and age differences: Results could also be analyzed by gender and age subgroups (e.g., 6–7 years vs. 8–10 years), possibly concluding that the manifestations of separation anxiety vary across these categories and that intervention strategies should be appropriately tailored.

- Involvement of the broader educational environment: Another potential conclusion could relate to the importance of an integrated approach involving not only parents and teachers but also school counselors, psychologists, and even classmates. This would underscore the benefits of a holistic support model within educational institutions.

Through this study, we aimed to highlight the importance of early intervention and emphasize the need for close collaboration among teachers, school counselors, and parents in supporting children's emotional and academic development. Each stakeholder involved in a child's education can contribute by implementing practical applications and recommendations for developing psychological support programs and tailored educational strategies to help reduce anxiety and improve children's adaptation to the school environment.

Authors note:

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