

# What Strategies do Parents Use to Alleviate Separation Anxiety?

Yicheng Zhang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Edinburgh

Correspondence: Yicheng Zhang, University of Edinburgh.

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## Abstract

Nowadays, people are paying more and more attention to children's psychological development and solving their separation anxiety (SA). This study applied behavioral analysis to explore what strategies are helpful in alleviating children's SA. Accordingly, the study aims to evaluate whether it can effectively reduce the SA of children according to the strategies of parents. The qualitative research presented in this report used thematic analysis, explored how parents take effective measures to reduce the separation anxiety of children aged 3-4 in kindergarten. Seven parents and six children at a kindergarten in northeastern England participated in the experiment. The hypothesis of this study is that parents have a variety of strategies to reduce separation anxiety. Analysis of questionnaires and observation identified three major themes: (1) verbal language; (2) body language; (3) using objects. These themes proved that these strategies can not effectively alleviate the separation anxiety of children, and the methods are relatively simple. Parents should take more effective measures to alleviate the SA of children. Specifically, the researcher proved that although the parents' strategies can not completely solve the separation anxiety of children, they still play an important role in the research about children's SA. Therefore, the research on children's separation anxiety should be carried out more deeply and comprehensively.

**Keywords:** separation anxiety, children, parents, strategies, kindergarten

## 1. Introduction

Previous studies have focused more on anxiety in school-age children and adolescents than on preschoolers. However, existing studies have found a high prevalence of separation anxiety in early childhood (e.g. Paulas et al., 2015; Gittelman and Klein, 1984). In the early development process of children, through long-term emotional communication and emotional interaction with their parents and relatives, they form the attachment plot to their parents and relatives (Kossowsky et al., 2013). Attachment is the beginning of children's specific social performance, which determines that children are only close to certain people (Crittenden, 2013). When children are sent to kindergarten by their parents, they will contact people other than their parents and relatives, which will make them feel scared, nervous, and uneasy, cause a series of crying, screaming, stamping, and other behaviors, and appear as an instinctive defense and vigilance (Fagot, 1997). The specific performance is: sleep restlessness, emotional instability, few words, reduced diet, or even refusal to eat. In particular, when separation anxiety develops to a certain period, if it is not handled properly in childhood, it will have a long-term impact on children (Howard, 2010). People often hear about the separation anxiety, which refers to the anxiety, uneasiness, or unpleasant emotional reaction caused by the separation of infants and their relatives. It is also known as "separation anxiety", which actually refers to the physical separation in separation (Bowlby, 2010). With the development of social material life, people pay more and more attention to children's preschool education. Many parents will choose to send their children to kindergarten earlier to study and live, so as to promote the development of their early intelligence, physical and mental comprehensive ability. However, the survey found that in the new kindergarten children, most of them have more serious SA (Kins et al., 2013). Therefore, this study researched children's psychology and development of separation anxiety. In other words, study how parents can effectively alleviate the anxiety of separation from their children. This is a good foundation for the

research of children's psychology in the future.

Due to the lack of understanding of children's psychological development, many parents do not recognize the impact of separation on children's emotional and psychological development. Nowadays, there is increasing research on children's psychology and increasing in-depth topics related to children's psychology (Herren et al., 2013; Bagnell, 2011). Separation anxiety is one of the common problems of children in early childhood. The researcher hopes that more and more people can pay attention to and find effective ways to reduce separation anxiety and give children a better childhood. With the increasing attention to children's separation anxiety, increasing research has been carried out, including the research on children's social anxiety, children's terrorist anxiety, parent-child attachment, children's cognitive theory, and children's psychoanalysis (Manicavasagar et al., 2010). This study is conducive to the harmony and development of parent-child relationships. The research on separation anxiety is beneficial for parents to pay attention to the development of children's psychology and the growth process of children, so as to help parents find a better way to help children alleviate anxiety. Every child is in the middle of the frying pan in the kindergarten, and the separation of children is easy to happen at this stage, because this stage of children from a familiar environment to another unfamiliar environment, from getting along with familiar parents to unfamiliar teachers and classmates, this will let the child fall into a new beginning. The current study aims to investigate how parents alleviate their children's separation anxiety when they separate from their children.

This research is divided into five parts. The next part is the literature review, which referred to the literature involved in this study and the experiments the author has done. These previous studies have laid an important foundation for this study, and are indispensable parts. The Methodology chapter is also vital to the research, which mentioned research and analysis approaches. About the results and analysis chapter mentioned thematic analysis, the researcher made the form to analyze the themes. It is divided into three themes about the parent's strategies. In addition, the discussion chapter discussed the experimental process and results and the conclusion chapter summarized the main findings and problems of this study. All in all, the current study is to investigate the separation anxiety of the children who just went to kindergarten and to consider the measures taken by the parents of the children.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Introduction*

Children's mental health problems are increasingly concerning to a multitude of individuals and organizations. Many children have been or will be separated from their parents in kindergarten. Therefore, in recent years, research on children's psychology is more and more important. In nursery school, the study of children and separation anxiety has obvious theoretical and practical importance. In many cases, poor management of separation anxiety can even have a long-term impact on children and parents.

### *2.2 Attachment Theory*

Bowlby (1959) stated theories of attachment which explain the dimensions of children's separation anxiety behaviors. Bowlby (1982) defines attachment as a specific and restrictive aspect of the relationship between children and caregivers, which makes children feel safe, reassured, and protected. The most important research conducted by Bowlby (1988), when children need encouragement and help, parents play an ongoing role and can only intervene if necessary. Bowlby (1983) points out that in an ordinary family, early age is a year when the child decides the amount of company and care required by the parents. If children are put at the top of decision-making, they can naturally control their emotional state. Bowlby (1959) observed three phases of anxiety regarding separation, namely agitation, depression, and detachment. Specifically, in the first stage, children will cry, kick and make noise; in the second stage, children will still cry, but the noise of actions will be reduced, and then ignore other people; in the third stage, children can accept the care of outsiders, start normal activities, but see their mother will still be sad.

Children's age is related to attachment development. Through longitude observation, Lamb (1977) verified a characteristic of children's attachment in Bowlby attachment theory. Lamb (1977b) invited 10 boys, 10 girls, and their caregivers to do an experiment. He found when children are 7, 8, 12, and 13 months old, none of them shows attachment behaviors to their father or mother. Lamb (1977a) also observed 11 girls and 9 boys, who were children aged 15, 18, 21, and 24 months. He found that during this period, children showed more and more obvious attachment attitudes toward their fathers.

### *2.3 Attachment and SA*

A lack of attachment will cause separation anxiety, and one of the main reasons for the lack of attachment between children and their parents is that parents' rejection of children. For example, there is a consensus among social scientists that the father's rejection of children leads to the rejection of children's attachment to the father (George et al., 2010). 227 fathers and sons participated in the study. They were divided into groups A, B, and C

for the experiment. This experience enables future generations to study the commitment of fathering to children while promoting a deeper study of the impact of father's behaviors on children. Additionally, Howard (2009) invited 87 fathers and children to participate in the study. The result of this research is to review previous research into if the father has different ways of love, this may lead to different parenting ways so that they have an impact on their children's sense of attachment security and different patterns of attachment. However, experience has shown that the quality of parental relationships and the mothers' care for the children are insufficient so that the results only involve the relationship between fathers and children (Bretherton, 2010). All in all, these two experiments show the influence of the father's attitude on children's care.

Parents' emotions always impact children's emotions. Surveys such as that conducted by Leibowitz et al. (2002) showed that how parents' contributions affect children's emotional ability is in line with the theory of "attachment". In other words, if parents allow and facilitate children to enter various emotional states, children can better express their emotions and feelings. They invited 88 participants to do some interviews and complete the separation anxiety test (SAT). They confirmed that there was an important link between the way parents and their children discuss emotional events. It was also linked to narratives of pre-school attachment.

There are three different types of attachment in children. American psychologist Mary Ainsworth (1978), who has conducted a long-term study of attachment patterns in infants and young children, has identified three basic types of parent-child relationships from studies of infants and mothers. The three types of parent-child relationships were secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent. To be specific, secure attachment of children can safely play with their mothers, do not always cling to their mothers, and show obvious distress when their mothers leave. When the mother returns, she immediately seeks contact with her mother, but soon calms down and continues to play. Insecure-avoidant attachment of children was not nervous or worried when their mother left, and when their mother returned, they ignored or briefly approached and walked away, showing neglect and avoidance behavior. These children received the comfort of strangers as well as the comfort of their mother. This type of child may appear to be "going well" when they enter the nursery, but the main reason for their fear of forming a relationship is fear of rejection. The last type of child reacts strongly to the departure of the mother, who returns, seeks contact with the mother, but at the same time shows resistance, even anger, and can no longer play the game. These children will have a marked separation anxiety response.

#### *2.4 Separation Anxiety*

Separation anxiety (SA) is a kind of negative emotional experience. When a child leaves a familiar person or environment, the experience will appear. It is natural for young children to feel anxious when they say goodbye to their parents. For children aged 6 to 20 months, separation anxiety is a stressful and developmental reaction to separation and other essential conditions. Some children have fewer separation anxiety symptoms after two years of age, but anxiety about separation from some children may last until primary school. SA is one of the most common issues in young children but it is also very prominent in teenagers and adults. Bowlby (1973) carried out fundamental research in this field when a person is sure a figure for an attachment is available, that person would be far less vulnerable to serious or chronic fear than the person who does not have such confidence.

Separation anxiety comes from children's attachment to their parents, usually in their first year. Bowlby's theoretical work on attachment as well as the research methodology of Ainsworth (1978) has become the foundation of the current theory of attachment. Certain behaviors of infants may prompt them to interact with others, especially with caregivers. Through this trend, the resulting interaction, a "connection mode" is formed between the two (Bowlby, 1958). Therefore, the two are inseparable, they are tied together. Attachment is an aspect of children's relationship with their parents which makes children feel safe, trustworthy, and protected (Benoit, 2004). In other words, caregivers are the guarantors of their children's sense of security. They feel uncomfortable when they are separated from their parents in the early years. Parents play the most effective role in alleviating this uneasiness. When the attachment is damaged, children may also suffer psychological hurt. Once children feel insecure, they may feel anxiety, which is a separation formed after leaving their parents. Bowlby (1959) observed three phases of anxiety regarding separation, namely agitation, depression, and detachment.

There are several factors that cause children's separation anxiety: attachment security (Bar-Haim et al. 2007; Drake & Ginsburg, 2012), family environment, and specific parenting behaviours (Drake & Ginsburg, 2012). Attachment security may be the most fundamental of these factors. Exploring the quality of the parent-child relationship plays an important role in the study of anxiety disorders. Bar-Haim et al. (2007) found that compared with the children with safe attachment in infancy, the children without safe attachment have a higher level of school refusal. This experiment involved 212 families and used self-report. This conclusion is consistent with Bowlby's attachment theory. In addition, a number of researchers extensively studied factors related to the family environment (e.g., Egger, Costello & Angold, 2003; Kearney et al., 2003). Scaini et al. (2012) also suggest that environmental factor is present which significantly increase the risk of developing SAD. The family

environment includes parents' relationships and their own mentality. The severity of parental SA directly affects whether the child has SA. Hock and colleagues (2001) state that when parents are anxious, their children have less intimate relationships with their parents when they are young. Different parenting behaviours have also been associated with elevated child anxiety rates (Drake & Ginsburg, 2012). Parental control has shown the strongest link to child anxiety levels (McLeod et al., 2007; Rapee 1997; Wood et al., 2003).

There are two types of patterns that children behave when they leave their parents and become upset and anxious: some children have made a strong reaction, such as kicking, biting, lying, and rolling on the floor, some have made a calm reaction, but there are also manifestations of anxiety. Other children have not made a restless response, but actively interact with their environment, and even adapt to their environment (Balaban, 2006). In addition, when young children just come into a new environment, they often respond to external situations. They tend to be curious and explore around, even trying to adapt to the new environment.

Several researchers have done a common experiment. The conclusion of the experiment is that the preliminary evidence shows that the influence of stranger anxiety on children's separation anxiety is more than that of parents' pathology on children's separation anxiety (Schneider et al., 2011). Therefore, children suffering from stranger anxiety are also one of the reasons why children suffer from separation anxiety. It has been proved that the anxiety in children and adolescents is related to the anxiety in children (Bittner et al., 2007).

### *2.5 Separation Anxiety Disorder and Children*

Separation anxiety disorder (SAD) is defined as excessive fear or anxiety about separation from family or close relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Baldwin et al., 2016). Separation from mothers elicits very different responses in children from other types of anxieties (Kossowsky, Wilhelm, Roth & Schneider, 2011). Separation anxiety disorder is the manifestation of aggravation of separation anxiety. When children are separated from their parents, SAD is characterized by frequent, excessive and inappropriate pain, and even some children have a headache and abdominal pain (Tyler et al., 2013).

Longitudinal studies have shown that SAD causes serious consequences for school-age children (Vaughan, et al., 2017). Children with separation anxiety disorder have an extreme fear of getting rid of their attachment (In-Albon et al., 2010; Brand, 2011). The research confirmed by the conclusion: that anxious children will be alert first and then avoid attention. In situations where separation from parents is required, for example, in order to go to school, children with SAD may out of their temper or refuse to listen to their carers (Rodgers and Dunsmuir, 2015). In addition, SAD can make preschool children refuse to go to school, which often leads to poor academic performance and social isolation (Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, 2017).

In fact, the anxiety of separation in young children is common and if properly managed, it can help children adapt to school life as well as consolidate their sense of security towards their parents (Balaban, 2006). However, situations of separation if not under control also cause negative impacts on children. Some children suffer from lasting separation anxiety even with the best efforts from parents. Some children with separation anxiety show some forms of refusal to enter school; their refusal can be linked to a variety of mental health disorders, such as separation anxiety disorder (Kearney & Albano, 2004). Separation anxiety may grow into a full-fledged separation anxiety disorder (SAD) during the elementary school years, with fears of being alone and being abandoned (Eisen & Schaefer, 2005; Waters et al., 2014). Besides, another study using questionnaires and interviews concluded that children with SAD were more likely to have anxiety in infancy than healthy children (Lavalley et al., 2011; Afshari et al., 2014)). Therefore, treatment should be provided to children with SAD in order to reduce their incidence in adulthood (Méndez et al., 2014).

### *2.6 The Influence of SAD on Parents*

Separation anxiety in children not only affects their own mental health but also the mental state of the carers (Schneider et al., 2011). In general, children's mood and behaviors affect their caregivers both in the workplace and at home. If a child is suffering from separation anxiety, the parents may feel uneasy and worry about their children. Children's SA also affects the operation of the family (Sargisson, 2014). Early anxiety not only affects children's function and development but also affects parents' cognition of family function and increases anxiety, depression, fatigue and health problems, followed by the breakdown of interpersonal relationships and the limitation of personal or social activities (Towe-Goodman et al., 2014).

### *2.7 Parents and SA in Children*

Most children grow up with their parents. Parents play an indispensable role in the early life of children. Because children do not want to be separated, SAD can also bring great pressure and difficulties to caregivers (Brand et al., 2011). If parents leave the child, the child will lose the sense of security, thus showing uneasiness and anxiety, that is, anxiety about the separation of children. Parents are best suited to ease children's separation anxiety. According to the results of various experiments on children's separation anxiety, the quality of parents' attachment relationships with children is related to the degree of children's separation anxiety. For example,

Dallaire and Weinraub (2007) found in their long-term self-report experiment that the higher the close relationship between a mother and her child, the lower the level of children's separation anxiety. Anxiety in childhood induces overprotective behavior on the part of parents, which leads to increased anxiety in children (Rubin et al., 2009). According to the father's report in the experiment, the anxiety of the child at 12 months is caused by the father's over-protection and negative life events (Edwards et al., 2010).

### *2.8 Strategies to Alleviate SA*

When children show SA in the early years, parents usually use some strategies to alleviate children's SA in the preparatory stage. Before children go to the nursery, parents are usually nervous and often inform their children in advance so that they can be prepared. Parents often take strategies to help children relieve separation anxiety when they feel it. Under normal conditions, preparatory approaches are crucial in helping children alleviate separation anxiety (Balaban, 2006). Some parents cooperate with teachers, for example, parents can tell their children that teachers are close to them so they can start to build trust with the teachers; teachers can also comfort and hug the children to distract and smooth them down. After parents leave kindergarten, the teaching staff take measures to divert children's attention so anxiety levels can be reduced. Over the years, psychologists have been emphasizing the importance of touch and embrace, which psychologists believe are the core of personality development (Ocklenburg et al., 2018). In a sense, parents give hugs to their children not only to express their love but also to express themselves to their children and return to them. It is a common way for parents to give hugs to their children when they are separated. Furthermore, through experiments, it has been proved that play therapy has a significant effect on reducing children's separation anxiety disorder (SHoaakazemi et al., 2012). Caregivers can help to separate children with anxiety through this method. Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and visual training can be introduced easily to parents who will use them when their children are anxious to alleviate physical symptoms. (Brewer & Sarvet, 2011).

Current research shows that parents' responses are temporary. Perhaps parents can learn the "three stages" theory of Bowlby and adopt different strategies for different stages, in this way parents can clearly recognize and understand which stage their children are in and what measures they should take to deal with this stage. In addition to children having attachment security, parents can also become securely attached.

### *2.9 How Parents' Behaviours Impacts on Children*

Parents and their parenting behaviours strongly influence a child's growth (Mahoney & Nam, 2011; Sameroff, 2009, 2010). If caregivers support the avoidance behavior of separation anxiety children, such as allowing children to stay at home and not go to school, it will lead to children's more serious anxiety symptoms (Mohatt et al., 2014).

### *2.10 Common methodologies in SA research*

Over the years, many experiments have been carried out with empirical research on the separation anxiety of children (Schneider et al., 2011). According to Kossowsky et al. (2011) did the experiment, conducted a separation reaction experiment on children with anxiety. This research used observation and a self-report measure. According to the results of the study, it is necessary to consider whether the isolated response of children affected by SAD can be standardized through treatment and whether the observed response mode is the precursor of SAD in high-risk samples. It also enables us to better understand the development of SAD, thus laying the foundation for effective prevention and treatment (Pini et al., 2010).

In general, children without a caregiver have more separation anxiety than children with a caregiver (VanderLaan et al., 2011; Fiese et al., 2010; Bailey, 2010). This study confirmed Bowlby's (1973) hypothesis that children are without security. This study confirmed Bowlby's (1973) hypothesis that children without security personnel feel more separation anxiety than those with security personnel. Besides, the study did not find a significant relationship between the infant temperament rating of mothers at 6 months of age and the separation anxiety of children at 6 years of age. Nevertheless, since the genetic contribution to the anxiety of children was likely high, it was important to corroborate data, further research, and replication of this finding. In future research, the authors hope to be able to better evaluate the genetic factors of maternal anxiety, including the mother's internal symptoms, as well as the child's temperament and behavior inhibition.

Parents' intervention is the biggest factor in children's SA. In 2006, Wood researched whether separation anxiety was related to parents' interference rather than other factors. This study used interviews, parent-child interaction and self-report forms to explore what relationship with parental intrusiveness. Among them, 40 families of children aged 6 to 13 participated in the survey. According to the survey, there is a special relationship between intrusiveness and separation anxiety. Though Wood (2006) hoped in the next study, intrusion as a mechanism of change can be tested in relevant ways.

Typically, children's separation anxiety can be cured in childhood. In 2004, Gosschalk reported a 5-year-old child with a separation anxiety disorder and explored her performance and treatment. This research interviewed

this girl, her parents, and her preschool teacher. At the end of the fifth week, the child was no longer suffering from separation anxiety. Future research could consider treating children with separation anxiety at home.

Teachers usually have several strategies to help parents reduce their children's separation anxiety. Dozva (2009) focused on three issues, targeting 39 pre-school educators. Three questions are: How can kindergarten nurses relate to the anxiety of children's separation? What is the relationship between the type of nurses and the way they deal with children's separation anxiety? Under what circumstances will people use more methods? Based on these topics, this study used questionnaires to do a survey. The study concluded as follows: first, toys are the best way to solve children's separation anxiety. Second, take different strategies to deal with separation anxiety. Third, toys, role-playing games, and storytelling are the most common strategies for comforting children. Although this research was aimed at teachers, it should not neglect the individual differences of children. Meanwhile, the training of kindergarten carers should be strengthened so that they can take care of SA children of different ages and learn some measures.

### *2.11 Current Study*

In the current study, the researcher observed and reported what strategies parents of young children adopt when they are separating from kindergarten. The hypothesis is that parents can adopt a mix of physical and verbal methods to alleviate the separation anxiety of children. It is often believed that leaving something belonging to his or her parents while the child is away will bring greater security to the child. This qualitative study was conducted within one month with the assistance of questionnaires and observations to determine whether kindergarten children suffer from separation anxiety and how parents attempted to reduce their anxiety. The results will contribute to a better understanding of SA in children for the researcher and to future studies in this field.

## **3. Methodology**

The current study adopted a qualitative approach to questionnaires with open questions and observations to complete the research. For the collected data and information, the study has adopted a thematic analysis. The following is the method of this study.

Diverse methods (such as observation, questionnaire, communication skills, and interview) have been built in the long tradition of traditional developmental child attachment research to assess attachment quality efficiently and accurately (Bosmans & Kerns, 2015; Phellas et al., 2011). There are several reasons for researchers to use qualitative research, questionnaire, and observation methods. First, using qualitative research can provide depth and details (Banna et al., 2010). For example, compared with analyzing ranks and counts, researchers use these investigative methods to record the behaviors, attitudes, and emotions of children when they are separated from their parents, so as to further study what strategies about their parents use to alleviate children's separation anxiety. Qualitative research can also expand children's psychology research areas and focus on the whole process of children's separation anxiety (Epstein et al., 2015). The researcher can clearly analyze the impacts of separation anxiety on children and parents and understand the causes of separation anxiety. In this study, the performance of children's anxiety and the measures taken by parents are very individual and subjective, hence using observation and time samples to record can collect information more accurately.

The research question was pinned down in September 2019, after that, the questionnaire was designed in November 2019. In February 2020, the researcher was assigned to the Greenway school for observation for two weeks. The observation time was February 6th to February 15th, from 8:30 in the morning to 12:00 at noon. The researcher sent questionnaires from February 6th, until February 15th.

### *3.1 Questionnaire*

The questionnaire method provides more realistic information about children's behaviors when they leave their parents and how parents and educational staff deal with children's separation anxiety. In other words, parents can have enough time to think about their answers, they are not usually required to reply immediately. One of the biggest advantages is parents can decide the lengths of their answers. The questionnaire better reflects the true feelings of the respondents at a low cost and with a practical method.

The questionnaires consist of 6 questions. These were distributed to parents in paper form. The questions are:

1. Does your child separate from you easily when you leave them at the nursery?
2. If not, how does your child behave when you leave them?
3. How do you manage the situation when your child is unhappy that you are leaving?
4. What do the staff do if your child is unhappy to be left?
5. Do you feel that anyone's strategy wants to make your child more comfortable when you leave?
6. Do you feel the nursery could do anything differently to support you and the child in this situation?

These questions directly put forward to the participants what kind of solutions can make children more effectively alleviate separation anxiety, which is conducive to the discussion and analysis of the subject.

The reason for selecting the questionnaires is that they can communicate with parents indirectly and understand their thoughts. Specifically, through these questions, the researcher can know what kind of useful methods parents adopt to help their children when they have separation anxiety. With these questions, the researcher planned to get a detailed answer to how parents deal with their children's separation anxiety and how they react to it (Schellings, 2010). For example, parents may say to their children, "you will stay in the kindergarten, and when school is over, mom and dad will pick you up and take you to the amusement park." Or the child starts to cry, after a period of parent's strategies' adjustment, can go to the kindergarten. These more specific measures may help the researcher to summarize and analyze, and then conclude which measures are effective for children's separation anxiety.

The process of collecting information via questionnaires is as follows: The first step is to inform parents of the researchers' intentions through an information letter. The second step is to let participants answer one fixed scale question and five semi-structured questions. Together with the questionnaire, the parents also received an information letter that directly communicated the purpose of the study to the parents and told them that the researcher needed to observe their children for the study. The researchers distributed the questionnaires to parents on Feb. 6, 2020, and withdrew them a week later.

### *3.2 Observation*

Naturalistic observation is adopted for the current study. This method is a research method commonly used by psychologists and social scientists (Suen & Ary, 2014). The researcher chose a time sample as a means to record children's behaviors and used it to record the state of the child every five minutes. Time sampling is a method of gathering data or information in which you observe participants in the study for a certain period of time and record whether a particular event or action has occurred or not (Henkel et al., 2010).

The time sample is used because it can be shorthand for what the child is doing every five minutes, or it can keep track of several children at once, something that many observational methods cannot do. A major advantage of the momentary time sample recording process is that the researcher does not need to be present to observe a child's behavior all the time. Time sampling offers children's activity predictions rather than evidence of each event and can be reasonably easy to incorporate in the nursery. In the current study, by recording children's behavior in the state of SA, the researcher can record data on many children at once and parents' strategies can be judged by their children's behaviors.

For the current study, a total of 6 children were observed in a natural context in a nursery, they have been observed 1 hour a day, one day every week for 2 weeks. When parents send their children to school, the researcher made time sampling and recorded the main anxiety performance of each child every five minutes. For example, some children would cry, some would shout to their parents and could not calm down or engage normally with the rest of the children in the nursery. The observations are brief but will include the behaviors the child is engaged in, when the parents leave the nursery and how anxious the child is at that particular time.

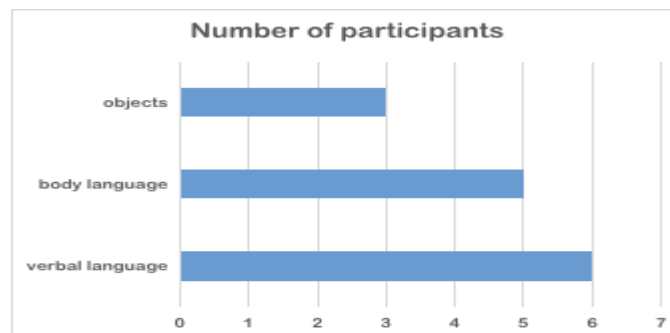
### *3.3 Participants*

The study involved two groups of participants, parents, and their children. Among them, the participants who responded to the questionnaire were parents. Due to the rules and regulations of the kindergarten, researchers were unable to choose participants on their own. Participants' choices are randomly distributed by teachers with the consent of the parents and children. Therefore, 7 participants agreed to complete the survey. With the help of the teacher, the parents got the questionnaire and submitted it a week later.

Another group of participants is six children of the adult participants who finished the questionnaires. They were chosen purposefully because, on the first day of observation, the researcher found that the six children showed significant behaviors of separation anxiety. One child of the seven participants' candidates was not included in the observation because he showed no anxiety symptoms after separation from his parents. These children are 3 to 4 years old and attend the same nursery. 4 of them are females and 2 are males.

## **4. Results and Analysis**

Table 1.



Through preliminary observation and questionnaires answers. Among them, 6 parents used “verbal language”, 5 parents used “body language”, and 3 parents used “objects”.

Thematic analysis is the most commonly used way of analyzing the text information collected by social surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and observation research. For the purpose of this research, the researcher collected 7 questionnaires, approximately 450 words of open question feedback. The word count of answers in each questionnaire is different. To be specific, the maximum number of word count in answers is 130, and the minimum is 50. Due to a variety of factors, the length of parents’ answers is different, which may be due to the insufficient time to answer the questionnaire, or the different degree of parents’ attention to their children’s separation anxiety, which may cause the question to different words in the final questionnaire.

Thematic analysis is a very flexible method, which can be modified according to the needs of the current study (Virginia & Victoria, 2012). It permits the researcher to grow the range of study past individual experiences and enables the researcher to expand the strategic scope of parental research by observing children’s separation anxiety, such as teachers’ means. It is beneficial to help researchers’ objectivity when analyzing data-backed-up topics.

The main analysis steps in this study are as follows. First, the researcher familiarized herself with all the information collected, including the responses to the questionnaires and the records on the time samples. The data was organized into a spreadsheet after a general check for validity. For example, the first question asked parents whether their children were easily separated when they left for kindergarten. If the parents answered yes, they could not answer the following questions. The contents of this questionnaire were not useful for this study. On the contrary, if the parents answered no, this information was useful for the research.

Then, observe the rules on spreadsheets to understand the issues that parents are most concerned about in terms of their child’s separation anxiety, children’s emotions, children’s performance, the way teachers help parents, and parents’ expectations of them. Further research can be done by understanding what issues parents are most concerned about. This is explained in the questionnaire for separated children. Researchers will summarize these questions by familiarizing themselves with information.

In the next step, the researcher coded pieces of information from the texts based on Bowlby’s foundation theory of attachment (1980) and SA. To be specific, the core of attachment theory is the premise of a biological system, which can promote the intimate relationship with potential caregivers. If a child’s behavior triggers the system, such as crying and shouting to attract caregivers, caregivers can provide care and protection for the child (Bowlby, 1980 & Bar-Haim et.al., 2007). That is to say, children’s attachment security can be obtained through these behaviors. The researcher classified parents’ approaches and children’s performance by coding and judged whether the children get a sense of attachment security according to the children’s specific performance, so as to judge whether the children’s separation anxiety is reduced after which specific method of parents.

In the thematic analysis, questionnaires were classified and named into three themes. Several keywords were identified and marked out in the texts, for example, parents say “calm down” and “goodbye” very often, and these phrases were coded as “verbal language(VB)”. All the actions and facial expressions of parents when they separate were coded as “body language(BL)”. The behaviors of alleviating children’s emotions with toys and other objects were coded as “using objects(UO)”.

Colour labelling was also used during the coding process, in the questionnaire feedback, the researcher marked “VL” as red, “BL” as green, “UO” as blue. This is conducive to further analysis and clear identification of each classification.

After the completion of coding, according to the three key themes, the researcher analyzed the results of the questionnaire and observation, respectively. First of all, through manual analysis, to find the relevant content related to keywords, listed in the thematic analysis table. Secondly, there are some problems in the process of



analysis. One problem is that some descriptive words can not be classified directly, because parents choose the general method when answering questions, and do not elaborate specifically. For example, when parents encourage their children, researchers summarize encouragement into verbal encouragement, so that it can be summarized in the “VB” column. Another question is that some of the answers to the questionnaire are very short and do not mention strategy, so this box is blank.

The result of the analysis showed three themes: “VL”, “BL” and “UO”, with two groups of participants: parents and children.

Table 2

Thematic analysis of questionnaires			
Participants: parents	Theme1: verbal language	Theme 2: body language	Theme 3: using objects
Example 1	“Calm down, baby”	teach children breathing technique, hugs	toys from home
Example 2	In addition to children will be sad, parents will also be very sad.	cuddle	toys, blanket
Example 3	“Mommy will come back for you.”		throw pillow from home
Example 4	“the teacher is very kind, don’t worry”	kiss	

Table 3.

Thematic analysis to observation			
Participants: children	Theme1: verbal language	Theme 2: body language	Theme 3: using objects
Example 1	calling their parents “mommy”, “daddy”	unsettling behaviours “He ran around the classroom while crying with tears.”	The child often holds the doll and refuses to let it go.
Example 2	ask to go home “I want to back to home”	The child often looked at the teacher and also cuddled with the teacher.	She put the pillow on the table and then put her head on it.
Example 3	ask the teacher “when can I back home?”	She always needs a hug from her mother.	She looked at the doll and kiss the doll.
Example 4	Shouted and crazy, can not calm down	“She stayed away from the teacher and other children.”	She cuddled with the doll.
Example 5	express upset “I miss my mom and dad.”	She kisses to mother.	She looked at the blanket for a long time.

#### Theme 1: using verbal language to alleviate SA in children

Through the observation and questionnaire, the verbal language was found to be the most frequently used tool for parents to calm down their children in anxiety during separation. For example, in the questionnaire feedback, 3 out of 7 parents mentioned saying comforting words such as “calm down, baby”, “Mommy will come back for you”, “the teacher is very kind, don’t worry” in order to soothe the emotion of the children. One parent also expressed sadness when their children were distressed due to SA.

As the results of applying this strategy, it was observed that all children showed a slight change in their emotions and calmed down temporarily, but this change was not consistent and they would return to the previous state of

anxiety soon. None of the children were completely calmed down after hearing the comforting speech.

#### Theme 2: using body language to alleviate SA in children

Body language was found to be the second most frequently used tool for parents to calm down their children in anxiety during separation. For example, in the questionnaire feedback, 2 out of 7 parents cuddled with their children. One parent kissed their child when they separated.

In the observation, children behaved differently, some children run around the classroom while crying with tears, some children looked at and cuddled with the teacher, and other children stayed away from the teacher and other children.

#### Theme 3: using objects to alleviate SA in children

Using objects was one of the tools that parents use the least to relieve children's separation anxiety. For example, in the questionnaire feedback, parents gave their children some objects from home, such as toys, blankets, and throw pillows.

As a result of applying this strategy, it was observed that three of the six observed children were used by their parents the parents of children A, B, and C used kissing, hugging and verbal comfort to ease their children's emotions when they separated. Children A, B, and C would become happier. Children D often held the doll and refused to let it go when his mother left kindergarten. It means this strategy can alleviate children's SA.

The child can not calm down completely but will have a good performance, some children will hug the teacher to call mom and dad. The result of the second theme is that the children are mostly quiet but behave differently. Some children stayed away from the teacher and other children. The result of the third theme is that children place their trust in the things they bring from home. These themes all showed the reactions of children when their parents left them and the strategies of parents when they sent their children to the kindergarten.

In a word, this experiment showed that although parents' strategies alleviate the anxiety of children's separation to some extent, they are not particularly effective. According to Bowlby (1983), children's separation anxiety will go through three stages: resistance, disappointment, and detachment. This study found children's behaviors in these two stages: resistance and disappointment. However, the result of this experiment was different from the further hypothesis. Parents treat their children's separation anxiety in a single way, and there are not many strategies to alleviate their children's anxiety. Hence these single methods can not fundamentally solve the separation anxiety of children. Through a subjective questionnaire and objective observation, the researcher found that when parents sent their children to kindergartens and separated them from their children, the measures they took were very single, mainly to appease their children verbally. For example, four of the seven parents used the sentence "calm down, baby" to appease their children's emotions. The other three parents used other verbal language to pacify their children. There are many reasons for the inconsistency between the experimental results and the hypothesis. At first, there were fewer participants and no big data to count the strategies used by more parents. Second, the setting of the questionnaire questions may not be detailed enough, resulting in the parents' short answers.

### 5. Discussion

In the current study, the researcher examined the hypothesis that parents have effective approaches to help their children ease separation anxiety(SA). Additionally, the experiment also recorded the children's behaviors within an hour of the parent's departure to determine whether the parent's measures were helpful. The researcher used questionnaires and naturalistic observation to analyze how the child behaves when the parents use the strategies to determine whether the parents' strategies are effective in alleviating the children's SA. According to one of the parents' responses to the questionnaire, parents said that when separated from their children, the parents are unhappy and the children are also unhappy. This is related to Leibowitz et al. (2002) said that children's emotions are closely related to parents' emotions.

According to the researcher's hypothesis, parents' strategies should have many kinds. In contrast, the approaches parents used were extremely few (Dabkowska et al., 2011 & Eapen et al., 2014). In addition to the objective results, there are still some limitations in the experiment. For example, there were too few participants. Originally, 20 people were recruited, yet many parents declined to participate in the experiment because of the inevitable special accidents. Another limitation was the questionnaire questions were not set in detail, some answers were too short. For example, some of the answers in question 1 are 50 words, while the shortest answer is only 3 words. However, in the self-reports from Balaban (2006), the length of self-reports was approximately more than 100 words for each question. In addition, the study also lacked a survey of uncertainties, such as the close relationship between parents and children, and the environment in which children grow up.

As a result of this research, parents' languages can slightly alleviate their children's SA. For example, when parents send their children to the nursery, parents say "Mommy will come soon", children would calm down

their emotions. According to parents' behaviours, such as cuddling and kissing, these can also alleviate their children's SA. If parents have friendly behaviours towards their children, children's emotions also calm down to some extent.

In this study, using objects is a commendable approach to comfort children. According to Dozva (2009), toys are one of the most common strategies for comforting children. In future studies, researchers can study how parents use some objects from home to attract children's attention or which objects are most effective in relieving children's separation anxiety.

In this study, these results show that parents' strategies can alleviate children's separation anxiety (SA) to a certain extent. For example, after the parents took the mixed measures of verbal language and body language, all the children at least had the performance of slightly alleviating SA, some children began to be quiet, and some children stopped crying and looked at the teacher. This result is in line with what was suggested by Leibowitz et al. (2002) when parents send their children to kindergartens, they can pacify their children, and their children's emotions can be slightly relieved. Parents' strategies were helpful to develop children's psychological and adaptability to kindergarten. When children leave their parents in the nursery, they typically exhibit two behaviors: extreme crying and quiet avoidance of interaction with others.

The researcher examined the hypothesis that parents' strategies were useful to alleviate children's SA. In fact, when parents send their children to the nursery, some parents kiss and cuddle their children, and others tell their children to "calm down baby" and "Mommy will be back soon". Ainsworth(1967) stated that the three types of relationships between parent and child were secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent.

Through a time sample, the researcher observed and recorded the behaviors of children every five minutes in an hour. The researcher found that from the time when the parents just left the children, the children were not calm at first, then slowly calmed down, and then became unable to calm down, they all experienced a certain process. As Bowlby (1983) analyzed, children's separation anxiety can go through three stages: resistance, disappointment, and detachment. This study recorded that children's separation anxiety is going through the first two stages. It also proved even if children have passed the initial period of separation anxiety, this anxiety will occur when they recall their previous experience (Balaban, 2006).

### *5.1 Limitations*

There are some limitations in questionnaire design, sampling, and field observation.

In the questionnaire survey, although the open-ended questions gave participants enough freedom to provide as much information as possible, in fact, there was still a large amount of information collected that did not meet the expectations of the researchers. Firstly, some answers are too short. For example, one parent answered the third question in seven words. Because the answer is short, parents do not say how they calm their children. Using only calm-down notes, the researcher can not know what the strategy is or whether it is effective in alleviating separation anxiety. Secondly, the answers of some parents are repetitive, which is not conducive to the comparison and analysis of the researcher. In future experiments, the researcher could look for more participants and write in the information letter in the hope that the participants' answers would be more varied and richer.

Besides, the problem of sample size being too small occurred during the sampling process.

In an ideal situation, this study should find 10 to 20 participants to investigate for more than one month, using questionnaires and observation methods to investigate. In this study, due to the mid-term rest of the institution and the inability to select participants through the researcher, the number of children who agree to be observed is relatively small and the number of questionnaires filled in by parents is very small. Therefore, in this investigation, there are too few participants, too short answers to the questionnaire and untimely recovery, which may limit the generalizability of the results.

Additionally, during the school observation, the seats of the six children who agreed to be observed were relatively scattered. The researcher is required to record the performance of six children at the same time, which may lead to problems of not recording in time or not understanding the causes of children's performance. For example, when a child begins to cry, it calms down after being comforted by the teacher. The researcher may ignore that the child is calmed down by the teacher. In future observations, the researcher can check whether the records are correct by asking the teacher or children.

Finally, the research design itself has some limitations. What strategies do parents adopt when they are separated from their children? About this information, this study used subjective reports instead of objective means to collect this information, therefore there may be some subjective bias in the information given by participants, or there may be errors in the feedback due to inaccurate memory. For example, in the seven questionnaires, only three people said that they gave comfort speeches when they pacified their children. However, in fact, all parents

would say some comfort words when they were separated from their children. Maybe some parents did not think that “baby is good” and “mother will come back soon” belong to comfort words, which shows that there must be some errors between the feedback given by the participants and the real situation (Wuyts et al., 2017). In future experiments, the researcher should not only collect subjective information, such as interviews and questionnaires but also collect objective information, such as videos or field observations, so as to eliminate the subjective bias in the feedback by comparing subjective and objective information.

This study did not consider the factors of the family environment, especially intimacy. Another support that lacks ideas is surveys of the home and family environment. As Eley and colleagues (2003) pointed out the home and family environment affects the development of children’s SA. Attachment is influenced by the environment in which the two of them coexist. The better the family environment, the less separation anxiety the child will have. This study has no surveys of children’s family environments, this factor may have a huge impact on children’s SA.

One variable that can not be controlled for this research is the quality of parent-child attachment. For example, in this experiment, among the six children observed, some children may have a higher quality of intimacy with their parents, and their separation anxiety performance will be lower. One reason was that the experiment was limited by objective factors, and the researcher was not authorized to conduct further investigation on the participants; on the other hand, due to the limited length of the experiment, it was impossible to conduct a long-term investigation, therefore the accuracy of the experiment results is affected. Due to practical constraints, this study cannot provide a comprehensive review of all strategies by parents when they send their children to kindergarten. Because there is a fundamental relationship between intimacy and separation anxiety, this experiment did not investigate the intimate relationship between children and their parents. It is necessary to investigate the quality of intimacy between children and parents before observing the performance of SA in future experiments.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the hypothesis of this study argued parents can use a mix of strategies to reduce or even control children’s SA. According to the result of the current study, the main strategies leveraged by parents to deal with SA in children can be divided into three types. The first type is “verbal language”, parents calm their children by talking to them directly. For example, some parents said “calm down,” “Mommy will come back for you” or “the teacher is very kind, don’t worry” to reassure their children that they will be safe and the separation will end eventually, this is usually done before the separation happens. The second type is “body language”, parents hug or kiss their children to calm them down and remind the children that affection and attachment are sound. The third type of strategy is deploying the assistance of special objects. Parents bring toys, throw pillows, and blankets from home so their children can be reassured that they still have things they are familiar with around, and they can slowly adjust to the new environment. As a result of the children’s observation, parents only use one strategy, their children’s separation anxiety is almost not alleviated; for parents who use two strategies, their children’s separation anxiety can be alleviated temporarily; for parents who use three strategies, their children’s separation anxiety can be alleviated to a large extent.

These findings have important implications. This research aimed to identify approaches that parents used to overcome separation anxiety in preschoolers. The parent’s strategy can help the child overcome separation anxiety early on. In practical use, parents can use a variety of strategies to alleviate their children’s separation anxiety. For example, when parents separated from their children, they can use verbal language and body language to comfort their children.

Further research can be done on children’s separation anxiety. For example, what do kindergarten teachers do when children have separation anxiety? What are the specific manifestations of separation anxiety in children? Why do children have separation anxiety? How can the staff help the child with separation anxiety? The current study’s shortcomings indicate some important paths for future investigations. These research questions can be further developed.

On the other hand, the supporting evidence for validation of the three types of strategies was still lacking. The researcher believed that the quality of the previous intimate relationship between parents and children is different, and children are less separated (Howard, 2009), therefore, only after controlling the parent-child relationship, can the actual effect of other methods on relieving anxiety be more accurately observed.

Except for the first two pieces of supporting evidence, the study also overlooked whether parents of children with separation anxiety had separation anxiety. Some parents also have some high levels of anxiety. Biederman and colleagues (2001) report finding that the degree of parents’ separation anxiety is directly related to children’s separation anxiety. The researcher’s hypothesis is that if parents also suffer from separation anxiety, children are more likely to have bad feelings when separated.

In the current study, neither a single strategy nor multiple strategies used by parents do not completely solve the separation anxiety of children. Future research in this area can be investigated that if language, behaviour or object assisting specific training for parents can help them deal with the symptoms of separation anxiety in children, so as to reduce the impact of separation anxiety on the health of physical and mental development of children.

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