PRELIMINARY STUDY OF THE "SEPARATION ANXIETY" PHENOMENON THROUGH THE EYES OF THE METHOD OF POSITIVE AND TRANSCULTURAL PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Abstract

The article presents the results of a preliminary study which forms part of the preparation of a dissertation titled: “Influence of parental behavior on separation anxiety in children aged 1.5 to 5 years.” This article discusses the relationship between the symptoms and problems of children manifesting separation anxiety when starting to attend kindergarten and the experiences of their parents. The preliminary study included 38 parents and their children manifesting anxiety upon separation. The study used the tools of Positive psychotherapy, which offers the opportunity to diagnose parent-child relationships and supportive intervention.

Keywords: Positive Psychotherapy, separation anxiety, parent-child, current abilities.

Introduction

One of the family crises that puts parents to the test and directs their search for psychotherapy clinics is related to their children’s starting to attend a nursery / kindergarten. September is the time when psychotherapy rooms used to be filled with parents and children who had made an unsuccessful attempt at separation when the children were starting and adapting to a new place. The anxiety that the children feel is sometimes so strong that it causes experiences of guilt in the parents, who in turn blame the kindergartens, the law, teachers, etc. and finally turn to specialists.

According to Freud (1991), anxiety arises when there appears a threat of breaking the closeness between a child and its mother. It is a manifestation of protest against a possible separation, which is essential for the existence of the little man. Harry Sullivan (Stamatov, 2006) defines anxiety as an interpersonal emotion that manifests itself in the frustration of a relationship between a child and the mother. Emotion arises as a result of the experience of loss, being associated with a loss of security and love, which brings a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Anxiety is an existential problem related to the contradiction between security and insecurity, between intimacy and separation.

E. Erickson (1996) in turn makes a connection between anxiety and fear of losing identity. Anxiety and love are the main motives for identification, and parental love is internalized in the child in the form of trust, security and acceptability, which is the basis for positive self-esteem. When such behavior is maintained by the parents, it becomes a sustainable model. By the same token, anxiety could be internalized and become a sustainable experience for a child.

The onset of anxiety is associated with the emergence of two experiences:

- Experience of separation, respectively loss;
- Experience associated with loss of love (rejection).
Every day the child faces moments of approval or disapproval. The mother's reactions, which are related to disagreement, anger, punishment, can be perceived by the child as a loss of love of his/her significant figures and this can affect the child's self-esteem. The experience related to eventual loss of love is a variant of the experience of separation afterwards.

According to John Bowlby (2005), maternal care in early childhood is as important to mental health as vitamins and protein are to physical health. This forms an inseparable, symbiotic and coherent "parent-child" system, in which the two main parties (usually mother-child) are interdependent in their needs.

For a child, separation is not only the severance of an external bond, the destruction of that bond is the experience of losing a part of the child itself.

In summary of the above, it is clear that when examining a child's anxiety, we must take into account the experiences of its parent, because the child's behavior is closely related to the parent's presentation as a reference person. Often, when a parent brings a child to the psychotherapy clinic with a problem of separation anxiety, the parent's focus is only on the child, and the expectation is that the therapist will work only with the child to stop him/her worrying.

The literature review shows that the topic of separation anxiety and the relationship between a child's experiences as presented by the child's reactions and those of the parent is a topical area for research. At the time of the study, information about the observed phenomenon was found in Dallaire, D., Weinraub, M. (2006). Their research proved that the model of attachment is fundamental for understanding the development of separation anxiety in 6-year-old children, which on the one hand does not affect problems related to psychological and social development of children, and on the other covers a group different than that studied by us (1, 5 - 5 years of age). There are no sources of data found on the topic in Bulgaria.

Methodology

The object of the study is the relationship between mother (parents) and child upon admission to kindergarten/nursery.

Subject of study: Separation anxiety in children aged 1.5 to 5 years when separated from parents on the occasion of admission to kindergarten/nursery

The aim of the study is the relationship between children's anxiety at separation and the parent's reaction.

Methods of study:
1) Content analysis of the data on the Conflict processing model – areas: body, activity, contacts, future/fantasy and the data from the Differential-analytical inventory (DAI);
2) Processing of individual information in aggregate on the basis of percentages.

The study is of a preliminary nature, and as part of my dissertation titled: "Influence of parental behavior on separation anxiety in children aged 1.5 to 5 years." and continues with the expansion of the experimental sample.

The study was conducted with the parents of 38 children aged 2 years up to 4 years, 20 boys and 18 girls, exhibiting separation anxiety.

Results

The model of conflict processing provides a good field for diagnosis of what is happening in the parent-child dyad, where the discrepancy in expected and actual behavior in both parties becomes the basis for the deployment of conflicting experiences (anxiety, frustration, fear, sadness, dissatisfaction, etc.). A parent describes well their reaction to the daily recurring situation – bringing and leaving their child in kindergarten or nursery, in more than half (65%) the localization of the conflict is in the area: "Future / Fantasy", there is doubt, mistrust and fears present, and in 35% - area: "Contacts", shown through irritation and dissatisfaction. Children, in turn, respond to the onset of "separation" through a symptom ("Body"), refusal of activity ("Activity") and reluctance to communicate with others ("Contact"), together with 38 parents of children showing separation anxiety. age from 2 years up to 4 years, 20 boys and 18 girls.

Figure 1 summarizes the data on how an event affects both children and their parents.

In the "body" area 73% of children express their anxiety through crying (pay attention to me, you hurt me), nocturnal urination (crying from below), nausea and vomiting (I want to get rid of this feeling, to be free of it), insomnia (I’m on the alert), reluctance to eat (I do not want and can not take anything), on the other hand, 70% of mothers express their anxiety through headache (feverish thoughts about what is happening and seeking a solution),

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insomnia (more time to attempt at problem solving and fear of the coming day) and tension (it all depends on me). It becomes clear that the feeling in both parties is strong anxiety.

In the "Activity" field in 80% of the surveyed parents and children the main feeling in both parties is apathy. The manifestation of this feeling is the child's reluctance to play and participate in favorite activities, and the mother's loss of desire to do housework and practice favorite hobbies.

In the field of "Contacts" for 81% the main thing is that both parties are excluded from the outside world, but merge with each other, because only this brings peace to both. The child does not want to be in contact with adults other than its mother, and the mother in turn makes contact with others (teachers, psychologists), only based on comments related to the child's anxiety. Apart from not making good contact with others, the mother is also unable to make contact with herself (to see her own involvement in the situation), but believes that the only problem is with the child.

In the "Future / Fantasy" field for 69% of the interviewees, the common thing for both parties is the helplessness, which in the child is expressed through fear of losing love. "Mom does not love me anymore!", Fear of abandonment, "Mom will not come to take me back!", the parent has strong feelings of confusion and insecurity", Am I doing the right thing?", "Am I a good parent?"

The use of the differential analytical approach, where the areas of behavior (real or expected) described by secondary actual abilities (accuracy, obedience, discipline, diligence, reliability, etc.) and areas of attitude (to oneself, the other and the environment) described by content through the primary actual abilities (time, patience, trust, model – sample, attention, love, etc.), allowed the disclosure of conflict readiness.

At the heart of the trigger that accompanies separation anxiety in children is the question of parental behaviour and how parental patterns directly or indirectly affect children's anxiety and the onset of attachment disorders. The study showed the following results in terms of primary actual abilities in parents. (Fig. 2)

For 80% of parents it is extremely difficult to trust an institution or another adult for the care of their children and they approach this with expressed distrust. In 78% there is strong impatience in both in the situation (the child gets used to it and stops crying) and to oneself (I can no longer bear the situation). 88% of parents are pessimistic that time is crucial and that over time the child will get used to it, as well as not showing a willingness to give time. For 71%, the separation of children is meaningless and they consider it a "robbery" of childhood.

Data on secondary actual abilities showed that 65% of parents lack respect for authority (obedience, discipline), and 77% are indifferent to the recommendations of employees in the kindergarten and challenge the rules introduced there (responsibility, order).

Both the parents and the children have identical experiences related to the separation process.

The child actively seeks the mother's presence and demands that she constantly shares each of its new experiences or feelings. Although the child is no longer as dependent and helpless as in the previous stages of its development, with its behavior it seems to strive to be just the opposite. To the mother, this behavior seems confusing and contradictory. Some mothers cannot accept the constant demanding and requiring behavior of their child, while others cannot tolerate the gradual separation of the child from them and cannot accept the fact that their child is becoming more independent and separate and is no longer part of them. At the same time, the child becomes more and more aware of its autonomy, but cannot completely separate from the mother, as shown by the child's constant attempts to do something with her or to imitate her.

An in-depth analysis of the information shows that often parents do not even suspect how they project their own traumas on their children: "I have very bad memories from the nursery!", "It is normal for him to cry, I used to cry, too.", "My parents still tell unpleasant stories from my time in kindergarten." The difficulties they themselves had were easily passed on to their children and brought to the surface the trauma of their own experiences.

The derivation of strong (resourceful) topical abilities such as: diligence, love, security, consistency, reliability in both the child and the parent normalize the experience and allow them to see the situation from another angle:

- 93% of parents show their love;
- 90% of the interviewees show tenderness to the child;
- 87% show perseverance in child care and self-sacrifice.

Here it is very important for the mother to be supported in recognizing and accepting the child as an individual, without trying to subordinate it to her own preferences and desires. Verbal communication and empathy are abilities that are important in a parent's relationship with a child. According to Margaret Mahler (Mahler, 1979; Mahler et al., 1975), if the mother shares the child's experiences and

**Fig. 2. Primary actual abilities in parents**
calmly accepts them, the child builds a loving image of her and of what is happening, begins to imitate her and the child becomes her "shadow" and her presence and emotional participation is predictable. When the mother is overly caring and anxious, intervenes rudely in the child's world and is extremely attached to it, she becomes its "shadow", which hinders the normal process of individualization and exit from the symbiotic relationship with the child. Excessive care for the child by the mother maintains the illusion that the child can only function in a symbiotic relationship. The mother may be emotionally distant to respond primarily and rationally to the child's urges, which will cause the child to focus much of his/her energy and skills on trying to win her love, instead of investing that energy in his/her own development which would lead to autonomy.

Non-acceptance and denial of separation in time leads to a pathological dependence on the object and an inability to tolerate the frustrations coming from the external reality. How much a child will suffer anxiety during separation depends on three variables that are subject to support during the therapeutic process.

The first is regarding the development of the "I" feeling of a child – to what extent he/she perceives him/herself as an independent human being and to what extent he/she builds a concept of him/herself as autonomous, how does it rely on the abilities which he/she has already developed in contact with the parent and how does he/she connect them to reality?

The second variable is related to the experiences arising in connection with separation, namely the extent of frustration and how it is experienced by the child in terms of primary actual abilities (I expect from mom: love, attention, security) and by the parent in terms of secondary current abilities (I expect from the child: obedience, order, discipline).

The third variable is related to the child's ability to integrate primary and secondary actual abilities into relationships involving several people.

In the developmental stages, the child must give up some things in order to acquire others. Going to kindergarten is a key moment in a child's existence, which he/she will tolerate well if the parents manage to show the child support, not to spare the child. It is important to clarify not only the socializing role of kindergartens, but also their importance for the psychological development of children. It is through the five-step model for intervention of Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy that parents become acquainted with the need to "dose" love and set flexible boundaries in contact with the child. For example: In the observation / distancing phase, the therapist teaches the parents to observe with curiosity what is happening to their child, how he/she is changing, what is attracting his/her attention, what is interesting to this child, etc.

In the inventory phase, the parent, with the help of the positive psychotherapist, learns to find out what is difficult for the child at this stage of his/her development, what it is coping with without a problem, etc. During this first separation, the parent and the child both undergo a fundamental change in their inner worlds and these changes require mental preparation for this move toward autonomy, which is experienced emotionally, especially on the part of the mother.

Three stages are of particular importance. In the language of Positive and Transcultural Psychotherapy, these are attachment - differentiation - separation. The process of separation occurs without conflict only after successful differentiation. In terms of good differentiation, a positive parental attitude towards leaving their child in kindergarten would sound something like this: "You are dressed and ready for kindergarten, I am ready for work. Today you will play with the other children, you will sleep in the kindergarten, and I will work at my job." and to suggest to the child that what is happening is not a separation but a detachment (preparation for a new connection), the parent could react like this, for example: "You stay here with the other children and the nurse, I am going to work. When you sleep and have breakfast, I will come and pick you up."

Conclusion

The anxiety which occurs when a child starts attending a kindergarten is significant for both the child and the parents. Children in this age group are characterized by strong curiosity and desire to explore the world on their own, here these characteristics of the age crisis give way to fears of abandonment, loss of their parents' love and of the unknown. Parents know and realize that this moment of separation will come. Think that they are prepared for this step, but they discover that they also must face their own fears. Positive and transcultural psychotherapy provides an opportunity to develop the overall picture of the process and to support the parent-child system in order to help them go through this challenge more easily, smoothly and without conflict.

References