

*Section: PPT cases*

## A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF SEPARATION ANXIETY IN THE EFFECT OF THE MATERNAL AND PATERNAL ROLE ON SEPARATION ANXIETY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD



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Received 2.05.2025

Accepted for publication 15.06.2025

Published 7.07.2025

DOI: [10.52982/1kj279](https://doi.org/10.52982/1kj279)

### Abstract

This article looks at how young children experience separation anxiety by comparing two real-life cases: one of a child with a strong emotional connection to the mother, and another whose father plays an active role in caregiving. The aim is to understand how different patterns of attachment and family dynamics influence the intensity of anxiety reactions. Observations were gathered through everyday behaviour monitoring, conversations with parents, and expressive techniques such as adapted emotion-rating scales and family drawing activities. The therapeutic process was based on Positive Psychotherapy, with a focus on helping the children become more aware of their emotions, build inner coping skills, and see their anxiety in a new, more manageable light. The comparison shows how varied parenting involvement can shape children's ability to regulate emotions and build resilience when faced with separation.

**Keywords:** separation anxiety, early childhood, attachment, family dynamics, Positive Psychotherapy

### Introduction

This article presents two clinical cases of children with separation anxiety, viewed through the lens of Positive Psychotherapy (PPT).

The mother's emotional sensitivity during early childhood provides a stable base from which the child can explore the world.

The emotional bond with the primary caring adult, most often the parent, has a strong influence on the degree of anxiety the child goes through on separation. Children with an attachment pattern of insecure or anxious attachment suffer longer and higher intensity of symptomatology in contrast to children with an established secure attachment who are able to control their emotions and experience shorter

separations more easily (Obeldobel et al., 2022). Research shows further evidence of this difference, highlighting how the quality of early relationships with significant adults can either exacerbate or protect children from developing severe separation anxiety (Volbrecht & Goldsmith, 2010). The most important age at which the foundations for coping and resilience are laid is early childhood, as this is the time for laying mechanisms such as trusting contexts, resilience, and coping patterns (Downey & Crummy, 2021). Identifying children who need psychological help and choosing appropriate treatment depend on an awareness of the difference between abnormal and normal behaviours.

Theoretical approaches related to attachment, most notably Bowlby's attachment theory, emphasize the critical role of early relationships in shaping the child's emotional security and developing coping mechanisms. According to Bowlby, the attachment relationship between the child and the significant adult is fundamental to the way the child explores the world and develops trusting relationships with others. Bowlby and Ainsworth (1989) elaborate on and develop this idea by identifying three attachment styles—secure, avoidant, and ambivalent—that underlie the way children respond to separation and stressful events. In early childhood, secure attachment helps regulate emotions and reduces the severity of separation anxiety; insecure attachment, on the other hand, increases susceptibility to anxiety disorders. Therefore, separation anxiety is not simply a reaction to physical absence but also a reflection of the emotional nature of the interaction between the child and the primary adult in his or her life. In early childhood, secure attachment helps to regulate emotions and reduces the severity of separation anxiety; insecure attachment, in turn, increases susceptibility to anxiety disorders.

When fathers are involved in a warm and supportive manner, they help foster emotional resilience and autonomy in children.

Parenting styles influence how children cope with separation and develop emotional regulation.

Co-parenting and emotional presence from both parents foster attachment security and reduce anxiety.

Conversely, the absence or emotional unavailability of the father—whether due to physical absence, disengagement, or inconsistency in caregiving—may increase the child's vulnerability to anxiety, especially in moments of separation from the mother (Breiner et al., 2016). A lack of paternal involvement can limit the child's exposure to diverse emotional responses and coping models, reducing opportunities to develop flexible strategies for managing distress. This absence may also reinforce the centrality of the maternal figure, heightening the emotional intensity of separations and contributing to the persistence of anxiety symptoms. When fathers are actively involved in a warm and supportive manner, however, they serve as crucial figures in helping children build emotional security and resilience,

ultimately moderating the severity of separation anxiety in early childhood (Cabrera et al., 2018).

Positive Psychotherapy includes child-appropriate symbolic and projective methods.

Family relationships, especially the extent of co-parenting and the presence of both caregivers, are also extremely important for coping with anxiety (Paley & Hajal, 2022). When they are emotionally present and share caregiving tasks, children are less likely to require the care of only one person. This is because they tend to form strong bonds with more than one person. This pattern helps the child feel less stressed when separated from one parent, especially when they are young and more likely to get separation anxiety. Children are more likely to form secure attachments to multiple figures when both parents are emotionally available and share caregiving responsibilities, thus reducing their dependence on a single adult. In early childhood, when the risk of separation anxiety is higher, this distribution of emotional support may mitigate the effects of separation from one parent. According to Pan et al. (2024), consistent emotional presence and cooperation of caregivers not only promote emotional resilience but also serve as a model of effective interpersonal regulation that children can internalize as part of their coping model. Adequate emotional presence and co-parenting not only make children emotionally stronger but also show them how to cope with stressful situations (Pan et al., 2022).

Positive psychotherapy offers a constructive and resource-oriented framework for addressing separation anxiety in early childhood. Central to this approach are several core principles: the focus on individual strengths and capacities and the reinterpretation of internal conflicts through a positive lens. Especially for separation anxiety in children, positive psychotherapy, which is a resource-oriented method of dealing with various types of challenges, is very suitable. Several important concepts are critical to this approach, including focusing on personal resources and actual capacities, positive interpreting internal conflicts, and creating new coping mechanisms. Positive psychotherapy encourages children to see and use their natural coping resources rather than focusing only on pathology; it interprets challenges as opportunities for development. In the case of early emotional difficulties, such as separation

anxiety, where children may lack the verbal and cognitive tools to express distress but have much to gain from emotionally supportive treatment, this perspective is particularly relevant (Peseschkian, 2016).

A modified version of the Affective Facial Impact Visual Analog Scale was used to evaluate emotional response.

## Methodology

The present article investigates the effect of maternal and paternal roles on the degree and expression of separation anxiety in early childhood using a qualitative case study method, as well as the possibility of positive psychotherapy to moderate anxiety levels. Presented are two separate case studies: one on a child with a strong maternal attachment and the other on another child with significant paternal engagement. Both instances were chosen to show different patterns of parent-child attachment and to investigate how these affect the child's emotional control during times of separation.

A modified version of the Affective Facial Impact Visual Analog Scale was used to assess children's emotional state and anxiety levels (Sherman et al., 2006). Originally designed to measure distress in young children, this test was adapted to assess separation anxiety by displaying five facial expressions ranging from calm to severe anxiety. The children were asked to identify which face best represented their feelings at the moment of separation. Each face was scored from 1 (no anxiety) to 5 (very high anxiety), and total scores were interpreted to determine the severity of the child's anxiety response (Nilsson et al., 2012).

In addition to this scale, the study utilized the Conjoint Family Drawing technique to explore family dynamics and attachment representations. This projective method involves all family members working together to create a drawing of their family "doing something together." The task allows observation of interactional patterns, roles, and emotional climate within the family system. The drawing was analyzed using a structured coding grid that considers both the content of the drawing and the process of its creation, providing insight into the family's relational structure, emotional cohesion, and the child's perceived sense of security and belonging.

## Case

### 3.1. Case Study 1: S.D.

Raised in a loving family environment with two parents, S.D. is a four-year-old girl and an only child. Her parents describe her as loving, but note that she exhibits emotional dependency, especially in situations requiring separation from her mother. She attends a public kindergarten and has no history of cognitive or developmental problems. Her mother is the primary adult caregiver, with her father, due to work obligations, playing a more peripheral role.

#### *Actual Situation*

S.D. cries frequently, clings to her mother, and refuses to enter the classroom alone during morning drop-off at kindergarten. Teachers report that she remains socially distant throughout the day and, at most, plays with something on her own or clings to the teacher. However, after separation, she calms down extremely slowly, sometimes failing to do so until her mother comes to pick her up. Her anxiety increases at home in the evenings; she expresses concerns that she will be left alone or that her mother may not return. Her parents noticed that she often sought comfort and avoided sleeping in her room alone.

#### *Actual Conflict*

The actual conflict is localised in the "Contacts" area (the connection to the main attachment object). The conflict reaction is manifested in three areas: "Body" - tension, crying, and a need for physical closeness; "Contact" - refusal to interact with peers and a tendency to seek only an adult; and "Fantasy" - a fear of abandonment.

Conflict processing is in the "Contact" area - she deepens the relationship with her mother through emotional clinging, using regressive and dependent coping patterns that deepen the suffering.

The content of the actual conflict can be framed as "As always, I am obedient and loyal (I stay close, I show need), but despite this, my mother leaves me at the kindergarten".

#### *Inventory*

S.D.'s case inventory revealed a child with a well-defined emotional capacity, a rich imagination, and a strong sensitivity to interpersonal relationships. In projective

methods such as collaborative drawing and figure play, S.D. consistently depicted scenes in which a stable and close relationship existed between the child and mother. These pictures are charged with a sense of security, care, and calm, but they lack any symbolic representation of separation or autonomy. There are no scenes of independent activity, suggesting that her imagination does not include patterns of autonomous functioning.

S. D. tells stories about fear of separation from her mother and expresses emotional distress, helplessness, dependency, and loyalty at the idea of moving away or something happening to her – “Mom might get sad if I’m gone” or “If Mom leaves, I won’t know what to do”. She shows emotional fusion and a lack of clear separation between her feelings and those of her mother. Emotional control is directed outward; S. D. finds comfort in closeness to her mother and struggles with separation, even when it is brief and expected.

#### *Basic Conflict*

This is a basic conflict of the “I” and “You” area, related in S.D.’s case to the experience of fusion and the inability to internalize the object of security.

The conflict is expressed between two important human needs - the need for attachment, warmth, and affection, and the need for autonomy, freedom, and self-development (self-confidence, independence).

The content could be described as follows: “In order to receive love, contact, confidence, and security (trust), I must be with my mother and give her loyalty and obedience.”

#### *Inner Conflict*

S.D. exhibits ambivalence between her desire for exploration and her fear of disconnection from her attachment figure. She expresses longing to “be a big girl and go to school,” yet fears that “mom might forget me” or “get sad if I’m not there.” This reflects a developmental tension between autonomy and dependence, where S.D.’s emotional safety is externally located rather than internally grounded.

„I cannot separate from my mother and go to kindergarten, even though it is expected of me (obedience), nor can I stay with her forever; I want to be sure that she will love me even when I am not with her (trust).“

#### *Therapeutic Task and Results Achieved*

Using the ideas of positive psychotherapy, therapy is concentrated on building emotional resilience and creating internal coping mechanisms. S.D. was assisted in identifying and naming her emotional states by use of the altered version of the Visual Analog Scale of Affective Facial Impact. Storytelling activities highlighted people who triumphed despite separation; paintings were used to symbolize the pursuit of freedom. Gradual exposure activities, encouraging brief separations in secure surroundings, were paired with strength-based affirmations (e.g., “You are brave and loved like the girl who went on the swing alone”).

S.D. began exhibiting more adaptive behavior during separations as treatment progressed. She began engaging with her classmates and entered the class with more enthusiasm. Her parents observed at home that she began spending brief times alone in her room and no longer fought nighttime rituals as forcefully. Most especially, she began to confidently express her emotions and apply self-soothing techniques, such as singing or clutching a comfort item. Although S.D.’s bond to her mother remained strong, she began to show more independence and develop a clearer, stronger sense of self.

### **3.2. Case Study 2: N.K. – 5 years old**

#### *Child with Active Paternal Involvement*

Living in a two-parent home, five-year-old N.K. has both parents actively engaged in his raising. Working from home, the father takes the lead in the child’s everyday activities, including drop-offs and pick-ups from kindergarten, shared meals, and bedtime routines. Described as vibrant, executive, and socially confident, N.K. is the only child in the family who attends private preschool. Although he does not usually exhibit anxiety attacks or insecurity, during separations when the father is not present, this does occur.

#### *Actual Situation*

N.K. shows signs of emotional detachment and unhappiness during the last period when the father had to travel for work. In the mornings, he grew emotional, worried about his father’s condition, and lost interest in the normal play activities, instead focusing on doing the work at hand flawlessly and requesting more. Teachers at school have seen that he is quieter, reluctant to join group games, and frequently inquires about his father’s homecoming. He reads late

into the night and struggles to fall asleep at home. He cleans up his toys and helps with all of his mother's tasks.

#### *Actual Conflict*

The actual conflict is localised in the "Contacts" area (the connection to the main attachment object). The conflict reaction is manifested in the areas of "Body" - sleep disturbances, crying, clinging, "Contact" - avoidance of group games, need for compensatory closeness, "Achievement"-controlled activity, and "Fantasy" - anxious thoughts ("Daddy might get lost.").

Conflict processing is in the "Achievement" area - He tries to focus on completing tasks, which is a way to regain a sense of control. Because he feels a void, he wants additional obligations to fill it. The need for order is expressed through the arrangement of toys. He wants to be constantly with his mother in her tasks, hoping for connection and security. The content of the actual conflict can be framed as „I try to be precise, organized, and helpful (punctuality, obedience, order), but Dad doesn't show up and I don't get any reassurance. ".

#### *Inventory*

Using the Conjoint Family Drawing technique (Gennari & Tamanza, 2022), N.K. depicted himself and his father playing soccer, with his mother watching nearby. The drawing showed clear spatial closeness between the child and father, suggesting a strong dyadic bond. During the task, N.K. was cooperative and communicative, indicating a secure relational pattern within the family. N.K. is a child with high emotional sensitivity and cognitive activity. The projective activities and observations clearly showed a pattern of internal anxiety compensated by action and control.

The symbolic material (drawings, games, stories) was lacking in fantasy and symbolic elements, which suggests a difficulty in expressing emotions freely. The child prefers logical and ordered activities to spontaneous play.

The parents report that N.K. is responsible, independent, and "mature for his age", but note that in the absence of routine with the father, he becomes more sensitive and needs extra attention.

N.K.'s secondary themes are: reliability, conscientiousness, orderliness, and punctuality.

Undeveloped are: Self-confidence, adaptability, and patience.

#### *Basic Conflict*

We identify the main conflict, which falls under the domain of "I" and has the following content: " If I am good and orderly (punctuality, obedience, order), will they love me and stay with me (love, trust). ".

#### *Inner Conflict*

N.K.'s internal struggle is to reconcile his emotional dependence on her father with her developing need to be independent. Although he is generally confident, he shows anxiety when father-related routines are disrupted, fearing that change signals instability. His verbalizations, "What if Dad gets lost?" reveal the conflict between the desire to be secure within himself and the need for constant external stability provided by the presence and structure of the father.

„I cannot be anxious or show that I miss my father (trust), nor can I stop trying to be reliable, useful, and flawless (punctuality, obedience, order), because I believe that this is the only way to maintain order and protect my mother.“.

#### *Therapeutic Task and Results Achieved*

The therapeutic work with N.K. was aimed at helping him to develop an inner security and confidence that was not solely dependent on the physical presence of the father or a precise external structure. The child needed to regain emotional balance not through control and precision, but through connection with himself, his emotions, and trusting patterns of interaction.

Our therapeutic work aimed to support the development of N.S.'s internal resources, thereby helping him enhance his emotional regulation and resilience. Based on positive psychotherapy, the therapist accompanied the boy in developing coping strategies through storytelling and role-playing. The meetings helped the child learn to recognize his emotions and express his feelings. The stories involved characters going through break-ups and adapting to them by using break-up rituals that ensured trusting contact. The father participated in brief therapeutic sessions via video, which enhanced emotional continuity and fostered a secure attachment.

After several sessions, N.C. demonstrated greater emotional stability in the father's

absence. After several sessions, N.K. showed greater emotional stability in the father's absence. He began to express his feelings more clearly and used narrative self-soothing tools, such as recalling bedtime stories or visualising reunions. His behaviour at school improved, with teachers noting that he had returned to communicating and interacting with his peers and found spontaneity in play. At home, he resumed his usual bedtime routine, his sleep patterns returned to normal, he found spontaneity in his play, and his behaviour improved. Therapeutic work supported N.K. in learning to feel safe and secure.

This helped him develop flexibility in breaking routines.

## Discussion

The article analyses how maternal and paternal roles influence the expression and management of separation anxiety in early childhood. The cases described illustrate how the presence, absence, and quality of parental involvement impact a child's emotional regulation, attachment patterns, and coping strategies in stressful situations. Attachment theory views the mother as a central attachment figure, especially during the first years of the infant's (child's) life, whose emotional adequacy strongly influences the child's ability to self-soothe and manage stress (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969).

The use of Positive Psychotherapy, which focuses on identifying strengths, utilizing resources, and reframing conflicts, was beneficial in both cases (Peseschkian, 2016). The therapy helped children talk about how they felt and see moments when they were separated from their parents not as abandonment but as opportunities to become emotionally strong and capable. For example, visual scales and projective drawing helped children access preverbal emotional material, which in turn enabled them to label their feelings. For the child who was overly dependent on his mother, therapy helped the child develop emotional independence and differentiate between the mother's physical absence and her emotional unavailability. As for paternal attachment, therapy helped to reinforce internalized habits and stories that maintained the father's emotional presence even when he was not there physically.

These results highlight the importance of early therapy, as early intervention can foster healthier perspectives on relationships and self (Diamond et al., 2021). The tools, the Modified Affective Attitude Scale and the Joint Family Drawing, have been successfully administered to children, demonstrating that they are appropriate and can be useful in helping people understand their feelings and relationships. In both cases, positive psychotherapy acted not only as a remedy for acute distress but also as a foundation for developing and forming more secure self-esteem and emotional independence.

The results of the cases suggest that separation anxiety in early childhood must be interpreted within the broader framework of family dynamics, attachment patterns, and emerging personality structures. The fact that these children's emotional pathways were different highlights the importance of using therapeutic methods that take into account the different but related roles of both parents. Positive psychotherapy has shown itself to be a reliable integrative model for working with such issues, transforming emotional difficulties into opportunities for development and helping to build a foundation for long-term emotional well-being.

## Conclusions

Overall, this study is based on case studies that show that the roles of mothers and fathers have different impacts on the development and management of separation anxiety in young children. The difference between a child who has a strong bond with their mother and a child who has a high level of involvement from their father suggests that the quality and type of role each parent plays have a significant impact on how the child responds to separation from their parents. A child's sense of security and ability to regulate his emotions are often shaped directly by the mother's role, which is usually associated with emotional closeness and awareness of the child. The father's role, on the other hand, seems to help children learn independence, structured habits, and healthy ways to cope with stress. All of these factors underscore the importance of parents providing children with integrity, consistency, and good judgment by adequately and consistently developing primary and secondary social-emotional capacities, thereby

laying a solid foundation that supports healthy psychological growth.

The results show how important it is for institutions and even doctors to pay attention to the signs of anxiety in young children. Therapy should be conducted in a manner that is sensitive to the needs and desires of children, validating their feelings and emphasizing their strengths. This study supports the idea that building secure relationships with both parents and helping the child understand their feelings through symbolic, expressive, and narrative tools can help them grow emotionally resilient. The therapy achieves this by combining ideas from attachment theory and positive psychotherapy. Positive psychotherapy, especially the Five Finger Method, is flexible enough to be used effectively in early childhood to help with emotional development and prevent anxiety from turning into more serious problems later, as long as the right changes are made. All of this demonstrates the great potential of this combined model for professionals working with young children in both schools and clinics.

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