



# Lived Experiences of Mothers Whose Children are Experiencing Separation Anxiety

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**Abstract :** This qualitative phenomenological study explored the phenomenon of separation anxiety among kindergarteners. The methods employed in the study are in-depth interview and analysis of the transcripts. From the responses of the five mothers, four themes emerged: *Life Before Becoming a Mother*, *Mother as a Life Coach*, *Socio-Affective Responsibility*, and *Strengthening Maternal Care*. Supported by theories of Attachment and Social Cognitive Theory. Based on the findings, it can be inferred that the lived experiences of mothers to children with separation anxiety transcends the boundaries of usual motherhood. Mothers are more than simply mothers; they are the coaches who help their children grow up holistically. The support of independence as the child face life's transitions in starting school and forming new social relationships. As mothers, they came to understand the importance of being firm and resilient enough to face their child's anxieties. They are honing their parenting abilities by offering comfort, navigating through challenging emotions, and creating a caring and supportive atmosphere that serves as the foundation for a successful parent-child relationship. It is recommended that Parents may consider attending symposium to learn how to cope with children who suffer from separation anxiety, as well as how to be effective parents at home.

**Keywords:** Separation Anxiety, Lived Experiences, Phenomenology

## I. INTRODUCTION

Man is inherently a social being, engaging in societal interactions from the moment of birth. In his Attachment Theory, Bowlby (1969) posits that individuals are born with an innate need to establish bonds with caregivers during childhood, and these early bonds exert a lasting influence on subsequent attachments. Hence, the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University underscores the importance of early childhood experiences, highlighting their role in shaping the developmental architecture of the brain, which serves as the foundation for future learning, behavior, and overall well-being (Shonkoff et al., 2019; Center on the Developing Child, n.d.).

Childhood, particularly the infancy stage, is widely recognized as a critical period for socialization and the holistic development encompassing cognitive, emotional, and physiological aspects that transpire during the early years of life (Shonkoff et al., 2019). The Stages of Socialization (2022) affirm that a child's socialization journey commences in childhood, with their personality being molded by environmental factors and life experiences. As children embark on their schooling journey, they exhibit a keen interest in their surroundings, actively participating in group activities and exemplifying qualities such as cooperation, friendship, social interaction, and leadership (Tyler, 2020; Lang et al., 2022).

On the other hand, school readiness is often associated with a child's preparedness to enter an educational setting. Rafoth (2012) argues that various facets of a child's life, including cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development, as well as early home and preschool experiences, significantly influence their readiness for formal schooling. Moreover, school readiness also encompasses the alignment between a child's individual attributes and the school or system's capacity and resources to effectively engage and respond to them (Docket et al., 2010).

The researcher as a kindergarten teacher observed that year in and year out, there are still kindergarten pupils who cried when their mothers or fathers will leave them in the classroom. This phenomenon happened even during the second month of the school year. Separation anxiety emerges as a consequential concern, contributing to academic difficulties and impacting both society and parents. Stanford Medicine Children's Health (2023) reports that separation anxiety is a normative experience among young children, typically observed between 18 months and 3 years of age. However, when a child refuses to attend preschool or school due to an excessive fear of being separated from caregivers, separation anxiety becomes problematic (Cronk et al., 2004). Fear and anxiety are innate responses to perceived threats, with anxiety often involving anticipatory fear. In the context of separation anxiety, a child's attachment to a particular person becomes disproportionately intense relative to their developmental stage (Peleg et al., 2006).

Children grappling with separation anxiety may exhibit resistance towards attending school or sleeping alone, accompanied by nightmares, disrupted sleep patterns, and psychosomatic symptoms. These manifestations of separation anxiety have been linked to an array of secondary issues, including academic underperformance, impaired peer socialization, and difficulties in emotional adjustment (Cronk et al., 2004). Drawing upon observations made by a kindergarten teacher, the researcher sought to conduct a phenomenological study with mothers to delve into their lived experiences pertaining to children displaying symptoms of separation anxiety.

## Theoretical Perspectives

This study is grounded in two influential theories, namely the Attachment Theory by John Bowlby and the Social Cognitive Theory by Bandura. Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969) emphasizes the significance of secure bonding and highlights the role of parents in providing a secure base for children to explore the world while ensuring a safe haven to return to in times of danger. According to Mcleod (2023), Bowlby proposed that the fear of strangers is an innate survival mechanism in babies, and they display specific attachment behaviors, such as crying and smiling, to ensure proximity and contact with their attachment figure.

Attachment behaviors in both infants and caregivers have evolved through natural selection, with infants instinctively exhibiting behaviors that elicit contact and proximity to their caregivers. Caregivers, in turn, respond to these behaviors, establishing a reciprocal pattern of interaction (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby (1951) argued that the continuous care of a primary attachment figure, typically the mother, during the first two years of life is crucial. He posited that if the attachment figure is disrupted or separated during this critical period, it can lead to irreversible long-term consequences, a concept referred to as maternal deprivation.

The Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis, based on Bowlby's theory, suggests that continual disruption of the attachment between the infant and primary caregiver could result in long-term cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties (Bowlby, 1988). The attachment relationship between the infant and mother during the first five years of life is considered crucial for socialization and overall development (Bowlby, 1944). Separation anxiety and anxious attachment, which manifest as protest behaviors when leaving the attachment figure, can have long-lasting effects on mental health and psychopathologies (Bowlby, 2014; Mcleod, 2023).

The concept of attachment styles, as explored within Attachment Theory, highlights the importance of a secure base and safe haven provided by the attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment styles reflect an individual's confidence in the availability of the attachment figure and influence subsequent development. Individual differences in attachment are determined by the sensitivity of the attachment figure, particularly parental acceptance or rejection, during the early years of life (Ainsworth et al., 2015; Chyung & Lee, 2008; Cournoyer et al., 2005; Erkman, 2006; Kim, 2013; Rohner & Khaleque, 2002; Saritas et al., 2013).

In addition to Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Piaget's adaptation theory provides valuable insights into the ways in which individuals learn, grow, and make sense of the world around them. It is the ability to adjust and respond to the environment by actively acquiring and applying new knowledge, as surmised by Cherry in 2021.

Considering the significance of these theories, this study aims to explore the lived experiences of mothers whose children are experiencing separation anxiety. By delving into these challenges, they face and the coping mechanisms they employ, a better understanding of this condition can be achieved. This research does not only contribute to the medical field by informing the development of effective treatments and therapies for separation anxiety but also provides valuable insights for education professionals as well. Furthermore, studying separation anxiety helps families and caregivers recognize symptoms and extend necessary support through counseling or other means. By addressing the physical and emotional well-being of those affected by separation anxiety, this research aims to enhance the overall care provided to individuals experiencing this condition.

Another theoretical framework in which this study anchors is on Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by renowned psychologist Albert Bandura (2004). Bandura emphasizes the importance of observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. In essence, Social Cognitive Theory posits that learning occurs within a social context and is facilitated through concepts such as attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. The dynamic and reciprocal interaction of personal factors, the environment, and individual behavior. The courses of action required to manage prospective situations, and how it underpins people's ability to deal with social challenges.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature. It focuses on the lived experiences of mothers whose children are experiencing separation anxiety. By employing this type of research, this study provides an understanding of the meaning of separation anxiety sourced from the mothers' perspectives.

The goal of qualitative research is to create a comprehensive description of the phenomenon of interest. Qualitative researchers gather information through various methods such as observations, note-taking, interviews, focus groups, and analysis of documents and artifacts (Streubert Speziale & Carpenter, 2003).

## Transcendental Phenomenology

As a philosophy and method, phenomenology aims to comprehend the human experience by analyzing non-numerical data, allowing for a deep understanding of individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and motivations (Lucca Irizarry & Berrios Rivera, 2013). The phenomenological approach is well-suited for this study as it delved into the lived human experience, acknowledging that individuals' subjective realities shape their understanding of events (Polit et al., 2001; Waller & Pattison, 2013). This study sought to uncover the depth and nuances of the participants' lived experiences within the teaching of kindergarten, providing valuable insights and understanding. The utilization of phenomenology as a research design allows for an exploration of the participants' subjective realities, going beyond surface-level descriptions to uncover the underlying meanings and essences of their experiences (Ponce, 2014; Creswell, 2013).

## Research Setting

The study was conducted at Consolacion Elementary School, situated in Consolacion, Cagayan de Oro City, Misamis Oriental, Philippines. The school holds a significant position in the community as it is located in front of the barangay hall, serving as a prominent public elementary school within the barangay. The school caters to a considerable student population, with a projected enrollment of 1,130+ students from Special Education to Grade VI for the academic year 2023-2024.

The school is considered a vital educational institution, playing a crucial role in providing primary education to a diverse student body. Its strategic location close to the barangay hall enhanced its accessibility and visibility within the community. With its anticipated enrollment size, the school will represent an essential hub for learning and will serve as a foundation for the educational development of the students in the area.

### Sample and Sampling Procedures

In this research study, a purposive sampling technique was utilized to select mothers whose children experience separation anxiety. The selection adhered to the identified criteria established for this inquiry. The selection process involved identifying individuals in the group who possess extensive knowledge or experience related to the phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Additionally, availability, willingness to participate, and the ability to articulate, express, and reflect on experiences and opinions were considered crucial factors, as highlighted by Bernard (2002) and Spradley (1979). The study was participated in by five (5) mothers of kindergarten children who are experiencing separation anxiety, using the following criteria: a) the child was officially enrolled in Kindergarten for the current academic year, b) the child was experiencing separation anxiety even during the 2<sup>nd</sup> month the class has started, and c) the mother was willing to participate and provide honest responses.

### Data Collection Methods

The primary data collection method utilized for the collection of data was the narrative from the participants were in-depth interviews. Through the selected mothers in kindergarten who adhered to the criteria. The data gathering was facilitated by the formulated interview questions that are aligned with the research question of the study.

### Data Collection Procedures

The researcher ensured strict adherence to proper protocols when gathering data for the study. This included obtaining the necessary approval from the research committee as required and diligently following the recommended guidelines throughout the data collection process. By following these protocols, the researcher upholds the standards of ethical research and ensures the credibility and validity of the study.

To ensure informed consent and voluntary participation, the researcher distributed the Informed Consent Forms to the participants in printed form. Prior to conducting the actual interviews, the researcher thoroughly discussed the content of the consent forms with the participants, clarifying any concerns or questions they may have. The consent forms clearly stated that participation in the study was strictly voluntary and that the interviews were audio recorded for accuracy and reference.

In order to proceed with the study, the researcher sought permission from the Schools Division Superintendent through the principal of the chosen school. Once the necessary permission was sought, the data gathering phase commenced. This step highlighted the researcher's commitment to conduct the study in a responsible and authorized manner, while also respecting the guidelines set forth by the educational authorities.

Overall, the researcher's adherence to proper protocols, including obtaining approval, ensuring informed consent, and utilizing various data collection methods, reflects a comprehensive and meticulous approach to gathering reliable data for the study. By following these procedures, the researcher maintains the integrity of the research process and establishes a strong foundation for producing valuable insights and meaningful findings.

### Data Analysis

Phenomenology plays a central role in understanding the essence of participants' experiences and their shared perspectives within a common framework (Williams, H. 2021). It is important to recognize that participants bring both subjective and objective experiences to the table. The analytical process begins by immersing oneself in the data through open-minded in reading, which involves multiple readings of the entire text. This approach embraces the principle of openness, allowing the researcher to delve into the expressions of experiences, examine how they are narrated, and uncover underlying meanings.

During the reading process, the researcher explored the expressions of experiences and sought to comprehend their meanings. The aim was not to confirm existing knowledge, but to illuminate new insights while remaining focused on the study's objectives. The data were examined at both the holistic and detailed levels, engaging in a fluid dialogue with the text. Meanings relevant to the study's aim were marked and given preliminary names using descriptive notes. Comparisons were made between meanings to identify patterns, differences, and similarities. The examination of patterns of meanings further deepened the analysis.

It was crucial not to prematurely solidify meanings, but rather to maintain openness and allow meanings to naturally emerge. This required a reflective mindset and patience in understanding the data and its embedded meanings. As the analysis progressed, themes were organized to capture the interrelated meanings. Methodological principles guided the researcher in maintaining a reflective mind while developing the themes. The process involved careful comparisons and reflections on the tentative themes derived from the data.

The final step involved writing up the findings, where themes were described in meaningful text. The aim was to provide faithful descriptions of the inherent meanings derived from the participants' experiences. The writing process may require multiple iterations to accurately convey the richness and complexity of the themes. By presenting the findings in a conversational manner, starting with the themes followed by descriptive text and supporting quotes, the meanings uncovered from participants' experiences were effectively communicated in a cohesive and meaningful way.



## Ethical Considerations

It is essential to give careful consideration to the ethical implications as they directly impact the integrity and usefulness of the research. One crucial aspect that requires attention is the recruitment procedures, prior to the commencement of data collection, the researcher first sought and received ethical clearance and approval from the school's Research Ethics Committee, then sought and received approval from the school's division office and present it to the school principal to conduct the study targeting the mothers of kindergarten whose children are experiencing separation anxiety. Obtaining their voluntary consent, ensuring that they have the freedom to participate or withdraw without any pressure or coercion, Privacy, confidentiality, Maintaining anonymity, Transparency and honesty are fundamental principles in research communication. researchers conduct the study in a manner that upholds integrity, respects the rights of participants, and contributes to the overall quality and credibility of the research outcomes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method of data analysis, the results of the phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of mothers whose children are experiencing separation anxiety have four phenomenological themes, these are: Life Before Becoming a Mother, Mother As Life Coach, Socio-Affective Responsibility and Strengthening Maternal Care.

### Theme 1: Life Before Becoming a Mother

The period of life approaching motherhood is distinct and changing, encompassing both anticipation and apprehension. Prior to beginning the fulfilling adventure of parental responsibilities, this is a moment to treasure and fully utilize (Pascoe Leahy, 2022). According to John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's Theory of Attachment, early interactions and attachments have a significant impact on how people develop emotionally and socially. People may think back on their own attachment experiences, their connections with caregivers, and their aspirations for parenting and attachment with their future children before they become mothers.(Kendra, 2023). From their stories, four categories defined the theme that the participants encountered experiences and show feelings and concerns are Different Behavior of Children, Negative Effects of Having Children, Positive Effects of Having Children, and Influences of Child Rearing.

### Theme 2: Mother As Life Coach

The goals of motherhood evolve from Bandura's idea that any responsible adult can raise the child and condition them to do anything, to being a "good enough mother," to being the "perfect mother." What mothers do is important for their children's development, and knowing that motherhood is an amazing at times but hard work too. As Donald Winnicott described the good-enough mother as "One who makes active adaptation to the infant's needs, an active adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant's growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration." (First, 2024) the mothers responded to the experiences they encountered differently that vary from Establishing Discipline, Preparing the Child and Role of Mother. The researcher was able to ascertain the mother's sincere endeavor to reciprocate their child's attachment under this phenomenon.

### Theme 3: Socio-Affective Responsibility

Being socio-affective responsible means being considerate and caring towards others in society. It is about showing respect, kindness, and understanding in all relationships and interactions. Socio-affective responsibility involves being aware of how one's actions impact others emotionally and socially. It requires the individual to think about the feelings and well-being of the people around him. Being socio-affectively responsible is essential for creating a harmonious and supportive community where everyone feels valued and included.(Montagna & Branco Vicente, 2019). The key aspect of socio-affective responsibility parents focus on showing explicitly their love and care, building trust and bond with their children, is Creating Social Bonds, Maternal Participation, and Understanding the Child's Feelings.

### Theme 4: Strengthening Maternal Care

As Ream (2021) states, some amount of worry is inevitable and unavoidable. The mothers as the participants of this study want to do their best for their children and learn by what works well. Strengthening maternal care is essential to advancing the growth, health, and well-being of mothers and their children. Under this theme are Building Support System, Facing Challenging Situations, and Thinking About Security.

## Summary of Findings

The participants' life before they become mothers has been defined by the following categories which allowed the participants to see at an early stage the different behavior of children, the negative effects of having children, the positive effects of having children, and the influences of child rearing.

The lifeworld of the mothers whose children are experiencing separation anxiety can be described in two themes such as: mother as a life coach and socio-affective responsibility. The first emerged from the three categories such as establishing discipline, preparing the child, and role of mother. Furthermore, the second emerged from the following categories such as creating social bonds, maternal participation, and understanding the child's feelings.

Lastly, strengthening maternal care is the last theme that emerged from the three categories such as: building support system, facing challenging situations, and thinking about security.

Overall, these themes mentioned provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of mothers who have kindergarten children with separation anxiety.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be inferred that the lived experiences of mothers whose children are experiencing separation anxiety before they become a mother impacts the way they managed their children as to what they have experiences in their childhood and growing up. This is supported by the social cognitive theory, which describes that the social support and cultural structures of a specific group of people can provide a significant role as they may have a positive or negative effect on the experience of the perception. Being mothers to children with separation anxiety transcends the boundaries of a usual motherhood. Mothers are more than simply mothers; they are the coaches who help their children grow up holistically. Learning to confront their anxieties about being by themselves or without a familiar person and support their independence as they face life's transitions such as starting school and forming new social relationships while simultaneously sustaining those relationships through consistent communication. As the mother of a child who suffers from separation anxiety, they came to understand the importance of being firm and resilient enough to face their child's anxieties. This is supported by attachment theory which describes the mothers are honing their parenting abilities by offering comfort, navigating through challenging emotions, and creating a caring and supportive atmosphere that serves as the foundation for a successful parent-child relationship. Giving in to maintain connection to alleviate the anxieties of their children. Thus, the participants engagement in communicating towards their children establishes and strengthens their connection.

## Recommendations

In consonance with the findings of the study, the researcher recognized the following recommendations: In consonance with the findings of the study, the researcher recognized the following recommendations:

1. For Mothers, that they may consider avail of learning opportunities such as attending a symposium on inner healing with their experiences as they were a child who suffered from separation anxiety.
2. For Early Childhood Educators. That they may consider attending training in handling children with separation anxiety. Through the training, they can gain more strategies or interventions to be implemented for children with separation anxiety should be done and continue to and maximally engaged in the wellness and safety of the children.
3. Future Researchers. That they may conduct a study that focuses specifically on the association between child anxiety and parents' beliefs about the child's anxiety or on parents' sense of parenting competence.

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