

Abstract

The transition from home to preschool is a very emotional and sometimes distressing period for both parent and child. The teacher plays a significant role, in that they are entrusted with the distressed and separation anxious child, and assist in helping both parent and child to adjust to the change. Research in the field of early childhood separation anxiety has suggested that, when the child has difficulty managing their anxiety, maladjustment can potentially predispose them to various other forms of pathology later in life. Thus, the potential implications of maladjustment simultaneously imply the importance of understanding and helping anxious and struggling preschoolers to adjust to developmental demands.

This study qualitatively explored the perspectives and experiences of teachers, and how they have come to make sense of and respond to separation anxiety in children. Four private preschools in the Johannesburg area participated in the study and a sample of thirteen teachers were interviewed. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews which were audio-recorded. A thematic content analysis of the collected data revealed two core themes concerning teachers' views on separation anxiety. The first theme addressed the 'challenges encountered' during the transitional period, which focused primarily on the presentation, impacts and predisposing factors of separation anxiety. The second major theme addressed 'helpful qualities in the caregiver role', which discussed useful qualities to be considered when engaging with a separation anxious child. Collectively, these findings presented an understanding of the various ways in which teachers make sense of and respond to separation anxiety during the transitional process. These qualitative insights also add to the existing body of literature, highlight areas for future research and attempt to offer thoughts on how separation anxiety can be managed, as to avoid further exacerbation and implications on later development.