

Separation anxiety – a case study on transitioning into a school-based setting

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Executive summary

For a number of students both in SEN settings and mainstream settings, some struggle to separate from parents for when they attend new settings. This case study follows a student who presented with severe separation anxiety from his mother and steps which were implemented to reduce this and integrate the student into fulltime school.

Introduction

This case study involves a 4-year-old in Reception. They are in a class with 8 other students with an age range of 4 – 7-year-old. They are able to request their needs vocally, label items, spell preferred items and words, and list numbers. The pupil is able to read short stories. The pupil is at Reception level academically, however the behaviours that challenge prevent them from accessing a mainstream education. On arrival at school his biggest barrier was leaving his mother. Separation anxiety is a term that describes individuals feeling anxious or stressed when the individuals is separated or is about to separate from a significant carer (Anxiety, 2021). If his mother tried to leave the pupil would immediately try to leave with his mum or engage in behaviours that challenge such as screaming and clinging on to his mum. If the pupil hadn't immediately realised his mum had left, he would begin asking for his mum and then he would start to cry, run around, swipe items from tables, kick others, hit others and bang his head on surfaces.

Method

There were a number of procedures implemented in line with separation anxiety recommendations, these included:

- Typically, within school students have 2 tutors to support them during the week. To aid transition the pupil had the same

dedicated 1:1 tutor to allow rapport to build between the pupil and his tutor. It also provided consistency to his morning as the handover from mother to teacher was the same every day.

- Having a toy come in from home to have a familiar object.
- Practice short transitions with mum in class, mum sitting further and further away so the pupil could engage in activities with his tutor without his mum.
- Teaching the pupil to ask for mum to come back if she was not in view, rather than engaging in self-injurious behaviour.

These procedures were implemented initially to help reduce the immediate dangers of the behaviours that challenge which occurred when mum tried to leave. Once the pupil had developed rapport with his tutor another set of criteria and skills teaching were implemented to increase the amount of time the student stayed in school. The next level of procedures included:

- A visual timetable, so when he asked for mum we could show him when she would be coming back.
- Creating a positive goodbye and clear instructions around when mum was leaving.
- Ensuring a highly motivating activity was the first activity of the day.
- Slowly lengthening the day to a full day when no requests for mum occurred during the day after she had left.
- Having dad occasionally drop off.

Results

Results demonstrate it took 5 weeks for the pupil to successfully attend full time school. Mum or dad were able to leave within 5 minutes of dropping pupil off. This is when we began extending the length of time the pupil was in school. As we began to extend the time the pupil was in school, they began to struggle leaving mum again in the morning. This was not noted when dad dropped off. The pupil at this time was also having a medical issue which required an operation. Behaviour started to increase at separation, however as there was a medical issue, intervention was paused until the medical issue had resolved. After the medical issue was resolved the staff implemented a 'positive goodbye'. Staff would engage the pupil with a preferred activity in class with mum. When the pupil was engaged and sat with his staff member, mum would say goodbye, and everyone would walk to the door and say goodbye to mum here. This significantly reduced the behaviour that challenged, and the pupil was happy to leave mum (see Figure 1).

Within class it was then noted the pupil was not able to move to different locations within the school or leave the school building to attend activity such as swimming. Whenever novel places were presented, he would either ask to go back to his classroom or mum. If we attempted to leave the building, he would immediately say 'mum'. The pupils first target was to transition to other rooms within the school which were not his classroom, this was achieved on 25.01.2021 (see Figure 2). The next step is for the student to attend the park in the community via the front door. The pupil is currently able to leave the front door and the front gate and walk 5 steps on the pavement before returning from school. This is being worked on through pairing preferred items with leaving the school.

Discussion

This case study has demonstrated a range of techniques and procedures to consider in terms of separation anxiety. It is important to pair new environments with a familiar person and have a preferred items available when the student arrives at school. Staff should teach language and maybe provide visuals to explain where or when the caregiver will be returning. In this case we then had to analyse transitioning to any new space without his parent present, presented as another difficulty. Anecdotally we know this is related to the separation anxiety as he would request the caregiver soon after presenting a novel location. The student is currently learning to label emotions in others to support his emotional regulation and talk when he is feeling anxious around numerous locations. The aim for this student is to reduce his levels of behaviours that challenge and increase his flexibility around his routine so he can attend a mainstream primary school alongside his academic peers.

References

Anxiety (2021), Anxiety types; Separation anxiety. Separation Anxiety - Anxiety UK

Figure 1

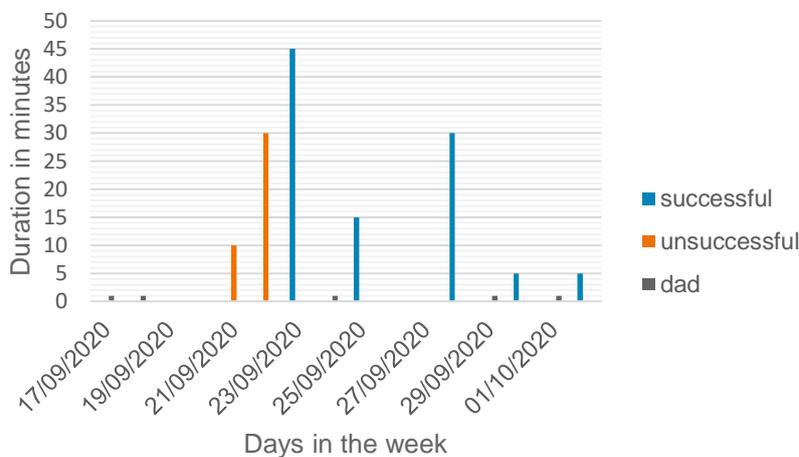


Figure 2

| SKILL AREA: | | EFL R13: Makes transitions from preferred activities to required tasks. | |
|---|-----------------------|---|--|
| Target Skill | Date Introduced/Known | Date Mastered | |
| Remains at instructor led activity for 5 minutes) | 01/12/2020 | 02/02/2021 | |
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