

# Analysis and Alleviation of Preschool Anxiety in Small Class Settings from the Perspective of Noddings' Care Theory

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**Abstract:** *Preschool separation anxiety refers to the emotional reactions of anxiety, displeasure, or unease experienced by children when leaving familiar environments and family members to interact with strangers in unfamiliar settings, also known as separation anxiety. Noddings' ethics of care emphasizes the role of emotion in individual development, enabling early childhood educators to better understand children's needs, focus on their growth processes, and cultivate their empathy and caring qualities. This paper, grounded in American educational philosopher Nelly Noddings' ethics of care, conducts an in-depth analysis of the manifestations and underlying causes of separation anxiety among preschoolers in small classes. It proposes the following strategies: cultivating caring teachers and children; establishing caring teacher-child relationships; and skillfully applying methods of caring education.*

**Keywords:** Separation anxiety; Preschool children; Coping strategies; Attachment theory.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Preschool separation anxiety primarily manifests as separation anxiety, where preschoolers or early elementary children exhibit pronounced anxiety reactions—including excessive sadness and distress—when physically separated from caregivers or anticipating separation. Research indicates that separation anxiety during preschool enrollment not only brings physical issues but also carries a series of adverse psychological consequences for children. These include fear of separation leading to social withdrawal, emotional volatility and irritability hindering concentration, and impaired cognitive development [1]. Simultaneously, this phenomenon poses significant challenges for preschool teachers and parents. Therefore, how to help children quickly and stably navigate this period, while supporting educators and parents in better nurturing young learners, is a crucial topic for both professionals and caregivers. Noddings' theory of caring offers valuable insights and guidance for assisting children through this stage. This study adopts Noddings' caring theory as a novel approach to establish a "caring relationship" with children. The aim is to help them better adapt to kindergarten life, develop a sense of security and dependence, and smoothly navigate the separation anxiety period associated with starting preschool.

## 2. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF NELL NODDINGS'S CARING THEORY AND ITS VALUE IN ADDRESSING PRESCHOOLERS' SEPARATION ANXIETY

Noddings believes that the relationship between teachers and students should establish a new type of interpersonal connection—one between the caregiver and the cared-for. This relationship is not founded on power or authority, but on emotion and care. Within this dynamic, care exists between the cared-for and the caregiver, originating from the caregiver and culminating in the cared-for [2]. Noddings contends that for this relationship to be termed "care," several conditions must be met: First, care is a sense of responsibility. The caregiver should be accountable for their actions and responsible for the well-being of the cared-for individual. This responsibility manifests not only in words and deeds but also in a profound, heartfelt concern for the cared-for person. Second, caring is a form of respect. It involves respecting the independence and autonomy of the cared-for individual, refraining from imposing one's own will upon them. Simultaneously, it entails respecting the feelings and needs of the cared-for person, striving to meet their reasonable requests to the greatest extent possible. Finally, care is understanding. It involves comprehending the emotions and needs of the cared-for individual, empathizing with their inner world. Early childhood educators must possess a sense of responsibility in caring, respect children, and genuinely understand their needs and emotions to better meet their requirements and provide authentic help and support. Therefore, to a certain extent, Noddings' theory of caring offers a novel approach to addressing separation anxiety in young children.

### **3. CURRENT STATUS OF PRESCHOOL ANXIETY**

After leaving their familiar family environment, preschoolers often experience separation anxiety when first entering kindergarten, resisting the new surroundings and unfamiliar people. This anxiety significantly disrupts their adjustment to kindergarten life, including behavioral regression. Upon first entering kindergarten, many children stand in the hallway, hearing the cries of other children from afar. It is common to see parents lingering outside windows, reluctant to leave. Furthermore, children with different personalities exhibit varying behaviors and degrees of anxiety. For example: some children stand at the door with their backpacks, attempting to open the gate, tears glistening in the corners of their eyes; others pound on the door, longing for their family to appear; some run circles in the classroom, impossible for teachers to restrain; others sit quietly on chairs, weeping; while some play silently with their toys. These varied responses stem from each child's unique upbringing (family environment, parenting style, parental temperament, home atmosphere, etc.) and distinct personalities, resulting in different levels and types of anxious behavior.

In summary, the current state of preschool anxiety primarily manifests as children exhibiting severe dependence on parents and other caregivers, refusing to attend kindergarten, experiencing unpredictable emotional outbursts and persistent crying—often from arrival to departure. Physical disturbances include an inability to independently eat, use the restroom, or sleep upon arrival, as well as failure to follow teachers' instructions regarding daily routines and learning activities. More severe cases may involve refusal to eat, endocrine disorders, and aggressive behavior. Children may isolate themselves, refusing to participate in group activities and preferring solitary play. They may also attempt to leave the classroom unnoticed when teachers are distracted. These behaviors have significant negative impacts on both children and educators. For children, prolonged crying and unresolved emotional distress can lead to hoarseness, breathing difficulties, emotional instability, and refusal to eat or use the restroom, potentially causing urinary system damage. For teachers, classroom discipline breakdowns increase the risk of safety incidents and hinder the effective delivery of educational activities.

### **4. ANALYSIS OF CAUSES OF PRESCHOOL ANXIETY**

#### **4.1 Changes in Personal Status**

From birth, young children gradually form relatively stable attachment relationships with their caregivers. Within the family, they often serve as central figures, receiving warm care from adults. Particularly in today's society, where many families have only one child, the child becomes the focal point of the household. In family dynamics, young children frequently hold a dominant position, with everything revolving around their needs.

However, when they enter kindergarten, the situation undergoes a significant transformation. Kindergarten is no longer a world of just one child, but a community of many children. New teachers are unfamiliar with the temperaments and habits of the children and require time to become acquainted with each child's unique characteristics. At this point, children begin to sense a shift in their status, experiencing psychological dissonance. They may exhibit negative emotional responses such as frustration, anxiety, or sadness. Without proactive attention from teachers and parents, these negative emotions can have detrimental effects, potentially leading to feelings of inferiority, irritability, or anger. In severe cases, children may resort to aggressive behavior in an attempt to gain attention.

#### **4.2 Changes in the Environmental Atmosphere**

In the world of young children, sources of security are diverse, but the most crucial is undoubtedly a familiar environment. For those stepping into kindergarten for the first time, the setting is undeniably filled with novelty and unfamiliarity, which can make them feel uneasy. Leaving their parents' embrace, they enter a completely new environment and participate in various group activities. This is undoubtedly a huge challenge for them. They may feel scared, helpless, or even abandoned by their parents. [3] This feeling of unease is what we call "insecurity." Such worries and fears make it even harder for them to adapt to the new environment.

At the same time, trust has yet to be established between newly enrolled children and their teachers. For the children, teachers are new people they encounter. They need time to adjust to the teachers' teaching methods and understand their expectations. For the teachers, they also need time to understand each child's needs and meet their expectations. This process helps children develop a sense of security in kindergarten and discover its positive aspects.

## 5. MEASURES TO ALLEVIATE CHILDREN'S ANXIETY ABOUT ENTERING KINDERGARTEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF NODDINGS' CARE THEORY

Strategies for Alleviating Separation Anxiety in New Kindergarten Entrants from the Perspective of Noddings' Care Theory: Establishing Care Relationships.

### 5.1 Cultivating Caring Teachers and Children

Establishing a caring relationship is a crucial aspect of educational work. To establish such a relationship, the first step is to cultivate caring teachers. Only when teachers know how to proactively show care for students and encourage students to provide feedback on their feelings can a caring relationship be established. As Noddings said, a caring relationship begins with the caregiver and ends with the cared-for. This does not mean that the caregiver gives unilaterally, but requires the joint efforts of both parties. Only when the caregiver genuinely gives and the cared-for genuinely receives can this relationship be called "caring" [4]. In kindergarten, preschool teachers are the ones who have the most contact with children and spend the longest time with them. The main job of preschool teachers is to pay attention to every child, educate and guide every child, so it is appropriate to establish this kind of caring relationship between children and preschool teachers.

#### 5.1.1 Cultivate caring teachers

In today's educational field, the cultivation of caring teachers and young children is particularly important. Caring teachers not only possess professional educational skills but also have a heart that cares for and understands young children. They must also be adept at listening to and observing the needs of young children, providing them with a warm and safe learning environment. When young children grow up in a caring atmosphere, they will gradually learn to care for others, express emotions, and develop healthy personalities and emotional attitudes. To cultivate caring teachers, we need to focus on teachers' emotional education and humanistic literacy. In teacher training, teachers need to have a deep understanding of the theory and practical methods of caring emotional education, and establish a sense of caring, so as to better guide young children. By learning emotional education, teachers can better understand the needs and emotions of young children, thereby establishing a deeper emotional connection with them. In addition, it is also very important to improve teachers' communication skills and empathy. In training, we can arrange some role-playing and simulated scenarios for teachers to personally experience the feelings of separation from young children, so as to better understand their needs and emotions, and then provide targeted care and establish appropriate caring relationships.

#### 5.1.2 Cultivate caring children

In the process of raising young children, emotional education and moral education are two indispensable aspects. Emotional education can help young children learn to express their own emotions, understand the feelings of others, and cultivate empathy and the quality of caring for others. Moral education, on the other hand, focuses on cultivating good moral character and behavioral habits in young children, enabling them to understand respect, care, and assistance for others. In daily activities in kindergarten, teachers can guide young children to experience positive social emotions and behaviors through various forms. Through vivid and interesting stories, young children can feel the importance of caring for others, sharing, and cooperation while listening to the stories. Games are also one of the important ways for young children to learn. Through various cooperative games, young children can learn to communicate and collaborate with others. In addition, art activities are also an effective way to stimulate young children's empathy and caring emotions towards others.

In addition to kindergarten education, the role of parents cannot be overlooked. Parents should actively participate in their children's education, forming a collaborative educational force with the kindergarten to jointly cultivate good moral character and emotional attitudes in their children. Only through the joint efforts of families and kindergartens can a nurturing environment filled with love and care be created for young children.

### 5.2 Establish a Caring Teacher-child Relationship

In kindergarten, a relationship of mutual trust, interaction, and mutual love should be established between teachers and children. The establishment of this relationship requires teachers to care for each child with sincerity, paying attention to their needs and emotional changes. At the same time, teachers should respect the individuality and differences of children, encourage them to express their own thoughts and feelings, and grow together with them.

Specific measures that can be taken are:

5.2.1 In order to establish a caring teacher-child relationship, teachers need to pay attention to communication and interaction with young children.

During the communication process, teachers should use simple and clear language to ensure that young children can understand and respond. At the same time, teachers should actively listen to the expressions of young children, respect their opinions and feelings, and establish a good relationship of mutual trust.

5.2.2 During interaction, teachers can organize various interesting activities.

Games, handicrafts, painting, etc., can stimulate children's interest and creativity, enhance mutual understanding and emotional connection, understand the specific causes of children's separation anxiety, and use patience, care, and warmth to soothe children's hearts, thereby enabling children to trust teachers and kindergartens and feel a sense of security.

5.2.3 Teachers should also pay attention to the psychological needs of young children.

Children may encounter various psychological issues during their growth, such as anxiety. Teachers should promptly identify these issues and take appropriate measures, such as providing psychological counseling or seeking professional help. By paying attention to the psychological needs of children, teachers can assist them in resolving psychological issues and promote their healthy growth.

### **5.3 Be Adept at Utilizing the Method of Caring Education**

Caring education is a people-oriented educational approach that emphasizes paying attention to the emotional needs of young children and cultivating their empathy and caring qualities towards others. In early childhood education, the appropriate application of caring education methods is the key to achieving effective education.

Firstly, caring education requires teachers to pay attention to the emotional needs of young children. The early childhood stage is a critical period for emotional development, and teachers' care can provide young children with a sense of security and belonging, helping to cultivate their self-confidence and positive mindset. Secondly, caring education focuses on cultivating young children's empathy. By caring about others' feelings and needs, young children can better understand others, learn to respect and tolerate, and thus establish good interpersonal relationships. However, caring education is not unrestrained acceptance. Overusing or misusing care not only fails to alleviate young children's separation anxiety but may also exacerbate their insecurities. Therefore, when applying caring education, teachers must strike a balance, satisfying young children's emotional needs while not neglecting the essence of education.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The issue of children entering kindergarten remains a major headache for both preschool teachers and parents. Research aimed at alleviating children's anxiety during kindergarten entry also needs further exploration. The majority of children experience separation anxiety due to a lack of security. This study, from the perspective of Noddings' caring theory, explores whether establishing a "caring" relationship can help alleviate children's anxiety during kindergarten entry and how to correctly establish such a relationship. The research findings indicate that establishing a "caring" relationship in Noddings' caring theory can help alleviate children's anxiety and unease during their first day of kindergarten. However, establishing such a relationship is not a random process where preschool teachers simply provide care. In establishing this relationship, preschool teachers should also pay attention to understanding the children's situations, thereby establishing an appropriate relationship to help children through this period of separation anxiety. In recent years, the issue of children's separation anxiety has gradually entered the public eye, and more and more scholars have begun to delve into this issue, proposing many valuable suggestions and alleviation strategies. Scholars believe that children's separation issues not only affect their mental health but may also have a profound impact on their future development. Therefore, they have put forward a series of targeted suggestions, including strengthening family education, improving the professional competence of preschool teachers, and perfecting the management system of kindergartens. All sectors of society should also pay attention to children's separation issues, strengthen publicity and education, and raise awareness among parents and teachers. Only through joint efforts can we create a healthier and happier growth environment

for children.

In summary, the issue of preschool children's separation anxiety is a complex social problem that requires our joint efforts to address. Only through in-depth research and proactive responses can we create a better future for children. It is hoped that the separation anxiety of future children can be alleviated, and preschool teachers can help children smoothly go through the separation anxiety period from a professional perspective when facing crying children, providing them with greater care and love.

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