

Influence of Parents' Divorce on Separation Anxiety in Children

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Abstract:: *Children experience separation from parents as a form of anxiety from the age of six to eight months to the age of five, and beyond. In a completely new form, it can also appear in adolescents. In this article I demonstrate some neuro-psychological aspects of the anxiety which children experience regarding the divorce of their parents; then I present the elements of the anxiety in relations between parents and children/adolescents. Next I present the structure of anxiety. At the end I describe strategies to diminish separation anxiety in children and adolescents regarding the separation (divorce) of their parents.*

Key words: *separation anxiety, child and adolescent, parents, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), modelling, emotions, brain, neuro-psychology.*

I. Introduction

Separation anxiety, which children experience if separated from their parents for a longer period of time, is becoming a common phenomenon in the relationship between children and parents in modern society. It has an impact on the psycho-physical development of children and adolescents, and on the life of grown-ups.

Separation or divorce anxiety develops much greater proportions when children are faced with parents' divorce as this means breaking up a bond which developed in a 'nest', a union of at least two or more people joined in the relationship called family. Children and adolescents are deprived of the feeling of security which the family i.e. the union between father and mother offered them. Anxiety, which has a specific structure, has negative impact on children and adolescents, and on their most important obligations connected with school work, school and extra-curricular activities.

Some neuro-scientific aspects of separation anxiety

Today we know more about anxiety which follows separation of parents, not least because of the enormously fast development of science of brain, neuro-science, and neuro-psychology. In the field of neuro-science research is done on live human brain. Regarding the research of anxiety, the findings of neuro-science which claims that humans can with their thoughts influence and cause change in brain cells, is enormously important. Active thinking influences and changes our physiology. (Pirtošek 2010)

The part of the brain responsible for our emotional life is called limbic system or paleomammalian brain. Because of it all mammals are emotional beings that care for others. Together with milk a child sucks in life energy. Paleomammalian brain is the centre of our emotional life, of powerful emotions, which later in life, in the process of growing up, we successfully control with the neocortex or rational brain. When we experience strong emotions for a longer period of time, regardless of whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, our body reacts to them, and this has a harmful effect on us. Physical reaction causes anxiety. Longterm anxiety that is not treated adequately can lead to changes in metabolism, hormonal processes, tissue structure, and it can cause muscular tension.

Children are emotional beings because their emotions are controlled by amygdala, which is the detector of emotions in the limbic system. In very small children it is completely unprotected, which is why reactions in children to unpleasant stimuli are powerful and accompanied by crying. This happens because the rational brain is not fully developed yet. The brain is completely developed only after the age of 20. Orbitofrontal cortex is a part of the brain which plays a key role in effective controlling of emotions and primitive impulses, which come from the subcortical areas. The rational part of the brain helps children to interact with other people and to understand their emotional and social behaviour. In crying children the level of anxiety rises. In the part of the brain called hypothalamus powerful emotions arise. Hypothalamus, which regulates hormones, releases a hormone, which causes the hypophysis to release the hormone called corticotropin. Consequently, adrenal glands release stress hormone cortisol, which spreads throughout the body. The process could be compared to the central heating system which cannot be stopped. The axis hypothalamus–hypophysis–adrenal glands is rendered ineffective. Stress, which is the consequence of inconsolable weeping, can permanently damage

infant's brain. (Sunderland 2010: 40, 41) Only by consoling the child with hugging can we make their overacting anxiety system inactive. Children's brain, especially the neocortex, are not fully developed yet and cannot control powerful emotions which originate in the limbic system. Children helplessly observe their parents' anxiety with anger and sadness in their heart. (Schoberl 2006) "While we comfort a child, the vagus nerve in organs which have been affected by anxiety re-establishes balance and enables normal functioning of the immune system; heartbeat and breathing return to normalcy." (Sunderland: 2010: 45)

Young adolescents experience anxiety completely different if one of the parents is at hand. Watching videos or photographs from the once happy family life can trigger sadness. Children are left speechless, they start crying, weeping increases and can be accompanied by panic attacks. They are aware of motions but cannot consciously control them. Hugging usually does not help, but can ease anxiety. What helps is immediate contact with the other parent. If it is not provided, weeping develops into panic attacks, which in extreme cases can develop into different levels of anxiety, or can even cause symptoms of depression.

II. Methodology

Research questions

What is the neuro-psychological explanation of separation anxiety in children/adolescents?

What is the structure of separation anxiety?

How can separation anxiety in children/adolescents be reduced?

Analysis tools

The Dilts pyramid was used to observe and analyse children who experienced separation anxiety. The Dilts pyramid is a systematic model, which helps us understand how humans perceive reality, in our case children's anxiety. The model works on the neuro-logical level, and enables collection of data about the structure of anxiety. This enables us to define the point at which change can be triggered. (Dilts, 1998)

Identification of the research problem

Being a researcher, a lecturer, and a neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) coach I regularly encounter different forms of separation anxiety. Using modelling as a way of neuro-linguistic interview I have tried to define the structure of separation anxiety in adolescents, and some strategies to diminish it.

Procedure

The qualitative research approach was applied to analyse the structure of personal experience regarding separation of parents. The analysis was based on the theoretical findings of Robert Dilts and the scientific approach in neuro-linguistic programming (NLP). Behaviour of three children aged 3, 4 and 13 who experienced separation anxiety was analysed. By observing special features in establishing a good contact with parents/guardians, and language patterns in communication between children and parents/guardians, a model of experiencing the contact was created. In the analysis and synthesis, findings in neuro-psychology, science of education, and anthropology of education were taken into account. Neuro-linguistic modelling was used as a form of neuro-linguistic interview. A detailed study of the environment of children experiencing separation anxiety, their behaviour, capabilities and skills, beliefs, values, identity and connection or lack of connection with the social environment, in which separation anxiety appeared, were analysed. The levels mentioned present the so called Dilts pyramid (Dilts, 1998)

A detailed description of the observation of separation anxiety:

Environment: Where, when, and on what conditions does anxiety appear? Obstacles which appear when children and adolescents experience anxiety, and possibilities to diminish it were observed.

Behaviour: What does the child do? Activities and reactions to experiencing anxiety were observed.

Capabilities: How does the child respond to separation anxiety? Conditions and strategies of experiencing anxiety as well as reactions to it were observed.

Values and beliefs: Why does anxiety appear? Motivating factors of children experiencing anxiety were observed.

Identity: Experiencing anxiety regarding self-image was observed. Older children and adolescents were asked questions, younger children were observed while communicating verbally and non-verbally; a good contact with them was established.

Belonging: Deeper meaning of experiencing separation anxiety was analysed. Questions about the quality of belonging and relationship with parents and lack of it were asked.

III. Results

The structure of separation anxiety in children and adolescents

By observing how children and adolescents experience separation anxiety at different neuro-linguistic levels of the Dilts pyramid, I have come to the conclusion that anxiety has a structure and that it is different in every individual. Every individual expresses it with different intensity on emotional, physical, and personality level, consciously or unconsciously.

Emotional stress as a consequence of separation is most powerful in children aged five to eight, however, it can also appear in children as young as eight months, and in young adults older than twenty. Children/adolescents have their own interpretation for fights between parents and blame themselves. They show different emotional states: melancholy, frequent and inconsolable weeping, unreasonable fear, lack of interest for playing and peers, aggression, excessive dilligence or obedience, problems in relationships. (Štadler 2009: 49) Infants and toddlers who experienced different forms of longterm anxietis at home and in school are emotionally nonresonant. The reasons lie in subconscious and consciously expressed relationship between mother and father, which the child experienced even before mother and father separated. If children live for a long time in contentious and emotionally cold environment, their education is deprived of basic sentiments. (Galimberti 2010) The basis of education are honest feelings or sentiments, which are induced by parents. Modern education is based on real sentiments and honest feelings. Today, however, we are experiencing emotional nonresonance, rationality causes coldness. Humans are also impulsive beeing. We are born with an impulse. Emotions are developed by the cultural pattern. Young people are exposed to too many impulses, they have to go to school, learn how to play an instrument, visit extra-curricular activities, they have to dance etc.

Physical stress

Infants and toddlers experience separation anxiety primarily physiologically, which is the result of their stage of development, of the ability to control their body. Every time a child's body performs an act, the brain sends the message to the muscules which react with a movement. At the same time, the system of self-control is activated, which dilligently obeys the orders. In children, the somatic system controls intentional movement, while the autonomous one controls the functioning of the internal organs. Adults react with the fight-or-flight response. By the help of hormones, they can run short distances as fast as a world champion, or they overcome impulsive and extreme strain, which can save their life. Children cannot act in such a way. Infants cannot fight or run, that is why they react to alarm with intense weeping and by swinging their arms and legs. Toddlers in panic run to their parents. Permanent fear that for some reason or other cannot be expressed in form of physical activity, can cause powerful stress which completely paralyses control over the body. The body is prepared for powerful muscular action which, however, does not start. If this pattern occurs repeatedly, the imune system weakens and the child is exposed to disease. (Morris 2008: 100)

Physical contact between mother and infant or child is a unique and mostly indispensable form of comfort. It comes with care which is a healthy basis for a deep and loving relationship between the two and enables a development into an emphatic adult. Children experience physical stress for the first time at their birth when they get separated from their mother even if for a very short time. Children who do not get separated from their mother, lie on her body and recover. Contact with their mother reduces this first separation anxiety. (Morris 2008: 12) Symptoms of separation anxiety are: sleep disorder, diarrhoea, constipation, stomach ulcer, asthma, different kinds of rash, headache, blush, and stool disorderds. Regarding physical skills the symptoms of separation anxiety are: reslessness, eye-blinking, stuttering, and writer's cramp. (Bergant 1966) All these disorders are physical reactions to emotional stress. The child needs to be held in arms and hugged. The skin, our biggest organ, does not only protect organs, it also plays a psychological role in children's education. Skin with its nerve endings reacts to all kinds of physical contacts. A mother's hug, a soft blanket or teddy, sheets, gentle rocking, bathing are all part of love that is as old as the hills. (Morris 2008: 103) Physical contact controls the system of physical arousal the consequence of which is release of the hormone oxytocin, widely referred to as the love hormone. (Sunderland 2010: 47)

Jeder Tolja mentions psychosomatic disorders in children, which are a result of unhealthy relation between eating and their psychological state. When organisms are under stress, special hormones are released, which activate metabolism of crisis situation, and the level of the hormone serotonin rises. When faced with mental stress—and separation anxiety certainly falls under this category—some children, and even parents react with complete loss of appetite. Conflicts between parents can cause stomach ache in children (Kuntzag 1989), which prevents them from eating. When under stress, body and psyche are connected more that we ever imagined. Physical and psychoemotional context are connected. (Tolja 2011: 120) Children who are under strees are melancholic and depressed. We can talk of the psychosomatic and psychoneurotic syndrome in children.

Emotional impairment as a consequence of anxiety on the conscious and unconscious level

Loss can cause extreme stress in children. If parents get separated, they usually confront them with the question: »Why did it have to happen to me?« Parents need to empathize with their children. Empathy, however, can only be achieved if parents accept themselves for who they are. Only then can they unconditionally accept their children and adolescents.

To identify anxiety and feel it means to empathize with the personality of the suffering person. Anxiety often appears on the unconscious level, especially in children. Their rational brain is not able yet to control the powerful impulses of the limbic system, and the unconscious outbursts of fury–tantrums, which originate in the subcortical areas of the brain. In order to understand children's nerve system we need to understand the functioning of the unconscious. Our abilities depend on the level of the development of our nerve system. Any attempt to quicken the maturity process results in stress. Any expectation which goes beyond children's abilities results in disappointment and anxiety. Children must be given the chance to express themselves on a level appropriate to their level of development. (Morris 2008: 51)

Strategies for reducing separation loss and findings

Separation marks anyone who has experienced it. Physical, sensory and mental symptoms are profound, and often unconscious. When emotions calm down, people start thinking rationally. Then they are presumably clear, and they lead to optimistic thoughts, which enable parents to cooperate with children with clarity and integrity. Love and integrity go hand in hand, says Alenka Rebuka, and when children suffer physically and mentally, all they need on their parents' side is clarity and integrity. When children suffer, the first question parents should ask, is 'What should we do to reduce the symptoms of anxiety?' By doing so they consciously set the basis for reduction strategy. What shall we do, is a strategic question which demands a strategic view on the child and a view of the surroundings from the bird's perspective. In other words, when anxiety arises, parents have to analyse conditions and surroundings, in which it occurred. A detailed analysis of challenges, advantages, and risks of the surroundings gives parents the opportunity to solve the problem. Separated parents have to flexibly work and plan together to enable children regular meetings with both of them. Only assertive communication between separated parents, and a clear set of rules regarding new relationships will help children mentally recover.

It is important to set new rules:

Rule No 1, zero tolerance against all kinds of violence.

Rule No 2, children are no patients who need help, and parents are no therapists. Children need their parents' time, attention, love, and communication. Children do not need a therapeutic relationship. (Eckestone and Hayes 2009)

Rule No 3, parents should set an example, and they should be trustworthy. Children should feel that they can share their anxieties with them, that everyone has experienced them, and that they cannot be completely overcome.

Rule No 4, parents must respect children's freedom and responsibility, the two sides of the same coin.

Rule No 5, parents should set goals and priorities.

Rule No 6, parents should seek professional help if they come to the conclusion that they cannot solve the problem alone.

Realisation: Inner strength of attention

Parents and teachers must learn to wait patiently when children suffer of anxiety. Only so can they perceive their true feelings. Physical contact is an important means of communication. To establish an equal relationship, they need to kneel down, be eye to eye with the child. Projecting each other's feeling is a relatively new phenomenon in neuro-psychology and science of brain. It has not been scientifically proven yet what people mean when they say, 'I can feel what you feel.' (Bauer 2008) »Be friendly with those who aren't ready yet. Love them. Be ready to accept them when their time comes.« (Satir 1995)

The quote is a result of longterm experience in working with children and families, and is by one of the most famous family therapists and the founder of gestalt therapy in psychology and therapy, Virginia Satir. Friendliness is an expression of pure humanity and an effective reduction method regarding anxiety in children and adults. Nevertheless, it is effective only when the person offering friendliness is at peace with themselves, when they listen attentively and quietly; when they patiently wait and observe the child's feelings. The person is simply there, offering stability, reliability, and security. Training is an effective method, which enables the

person to develop the feeling for the moment, when the child is ready to open up and talk. Every individual is different regarding the time they need. Human development is based on social relationships. Our thoughts are free, and encouragement, symbolically expressed by words, provokes in children motives, wishes, and curiosity. Having someone's attention is our deepest wish. »Mom, I am here!« a child cries out. »Look at me!« Attention is wonderful, it is something worthwhile, a possibility to find another person, to become truly happy.

Unfavourable forms of addictive relationships can be successfully treated with role models who belong to a different generation and a different cultural environment. They can give an answer to how to treat a child or adolescent suffering of anxiety, and what to do regarding a bullying adolescent suffering of anxiety. In such situation it is important to distinguish between 'little Nero' tantrums and a child seeking attention. Separation anxiety works in multiple directions and on multiple layers. Children whose parents are separated often change environment, meet new relatives, are torn in their expectations, and have to make many difficult decisions regarding new living conditions. Often they are torn between two homes because their original family has transformed into an extended family, or some other form of a modern family, or they do not have it at all. Usually these are the reasons for anxieties and depression. On the other hand, separation can be an advantage. If everyone involved in dealing with anxiety is connected and has accepted it, they can also deal with possible yet unpredictable directions, into which it can develop. Separated families and children from separated families are no exception when it comes to rules and limits. A firm and consistent discipline, which is never directed against someone's personality, calms down and contributes to the healthy development of a child's ego. Permission should be limited, and should never turn into meaningless rewarding. It should be controlled and purposeful. As such it gives children the possibility to remain children who love to play, to explore, and to dream. And later on to become optimistic adults who have found meaning in life.

Responsible and free separated parents give children a chance to learn and toughen up when facing separation anxiety. They gain physically and mentally as cooperative and responsible beings. I have come to the realization that a traumatic experience, which makes people feel consciously and experience things in their mind, soul, and brain, is truly life changing. The brain cannot immediately process all these complex feelings into an image which, like an invisible net, spreads out in our thoughts and takes in stimuli from their environment. We observe the world around us and listen to it. And by doing so we are accepting it in an exciting, mysterious and incomprehensible manner.

Resources:

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