



# The Effect of Parent-child Interaction Therapy on Separation Anxiety in 3-6-Year-old Children of Nurses

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## Abstract

**Background:** Separation anxiety disorder is considered as the most common anxiety disorder in childhood. Failure to treat this disorder in early age can be converted into a risk factor for childhood and adolescent psychiatric disorders.

**Objectives:** This study aimed at investigating the effect of parent-child interaction therapy on reducing the symptoms of separation anxiety disorder among the nurses' children aged between 3 and 6 years old working in educational hospitals in Qazvin.

**Methods:** The intervention was designed as pre- and post-test along with the control group. The sample included 67 children aged 3 - 6 years' old who were divided into intervention and control groups using the blocking method. The intervention consists of three steps: child directed interaction, bravery directed interaction and parent directed interaction which was performed for 8 sessions per week. No intervention was performed for the control group. The obtained data were collected using the Spence questionnaire (parents' version) and the results were evaluated.

**Results:** Intervention therapy significantly reduced the symptoms of separation anxiety in the intervention group at the post-test stage compared to the control group. The mean of separation anxiety decreased from  $10.82 \pm 0.62$  to  $7.69 \pm 0.52$  in the intervention group.

**Conclusions:** Parent-child interaction therapy can be used as an effective treatment plan to reduce the symptoms of separation anxiety disorder among preschool children.

**Keywords:** Children, Nurse, Parent Child Interaction Therapy, Preschool Ages, Separation Anxiety Disorder

## 1. Background

Anxiety disorders have significant negative effects on children's academic performance, peer relationships, and family functioning (1). Among anxiety disorders, separation anxiety disorder is known as one of the most common anxiety problems among children (2). In a study by Shear et al., 4.1% of children had clinical levels of separation anxiety, and in almost one third (36.1%) of the cases, they remained until adolescents (3). The main characteristic of separation anxiety disorder is severe fear or anxiety related to separation, which are some of the symbols of attachment or anticipation of separation (4). Some of the separation anxiety naturally appear in early childhood and are part of a child's normal development. However, when anxiety is severe, it persists until later childhood and the diagnosis of separation anxiety disorder is raised (5). In other words,

the main point in the diagnosis of this disorder is the disproportionate anxiety and distress in the child during separation, in terms of their age and developmental stage. So, in such cases, fear of separation interferes with daily activities like going to school or participating in activities related to the age (6). Effective childhood intervention not only improves current adjustment, but also significantly reduces future psychological trauma (7).

There are several factors contributing to anxiety disorders. One of the most important changes in today's life that can affect child care is the increase in the number of mothers who are working outside home (8). The findings of some studies indicated that, the supervisory role of the working mother decreases in different aspects of the child's life, and this less likely supervision in parenting styles increases the likelihood of behavioral problems