

SCHOOL PHOBIA AND ADAPTATION PROBLEM IN PRESCHOOL PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

The preschool period which comprises the early years of life is of high importance in terms of development; besides, many children start their school life with preschool education institutions. According to Şentürk Berber (2015), starting preschool education is considered as an adaptation period for both children and parents. Upon starting school many factors such as separation of a child from home and mother, child's undertaking of new responsibilities, unfamiliarity and size of the school environment cause the child to go into an adaptation period. Starting the school represents a very difficult process for some children and their families (Kıldan, 2012). At the preschool period, the first obstacle which is faced during the child's adaptation to the school is school phobia (Gündüz, 2015). The child's future academic success and social performance the child's adaptation to the school is quite important in terms of getting the expected benefit from the preschool period. In this study, the school phobia and adaptation problems, the causes for these and suggestions for parents will be included.

Keywords: School phobia, preschool, adaptation period

INTRODUCTION

The preschool period covers the process from birth to the start of primary education. The preschool period is the most important period in which the development speed in the lifetime of a child is high and the personality of the child is shaped (Yeşil, 2008). As Oktay (1990) stated the early years of life is a period in which not only the child is in a fast development and has a high capacity from learning, but also the need for love and interest is high. In this respect, the family in which the preschool child lives, the preschool educational institution, and the immediate environment is quite important. Other than family, the social interaction zone is generally the school. The first task that a child starting the school must fulfill is adaptation (Kaya, 2014). There are many things in the school that the child needs to adapt. One of the first things for adaptation is the size of the school. Afterward, the child needs to adapt the school rules, his/her friends, and teachers. In other words, upon starting the school the child faces with many factors to adapt himself/herself (Ustabaş, 2017).

Starting the school is one of the most important changes that children encounter in the early childhood period. This is an important situation for families and children. Starting the school is an important stage that determines the quality of the child's school life later (anaokulu.cu.edu.tr/___/file/5_OKULA_BASLAMA_VE_OKULA_UYUM_SURECI.pdf).

The school period is a period in which the teacher who is the most significant person after parents is involved with the child's life, and the child becomes open to the influence fields other than the family. This period is a stage which necessitates leaving the family and opening up the world, establishing relationships with others, and being self-sufficient. This

process comes with the child's staying in school for a while without his/her family, responsibilities regarding the school, and beginning his/her, to some extent, autonomous life (Sevimli, 2010).

When the school comes to the school leaving his/her small world in the house, faces the outer world's both physical and concrete, and social and cultural realities, and experiences difficulties in the responsibility of coping with the problems stemmed from these realities (Kılıççı, 2006). For children starting the school is very important in terms of being the first separation from the family, and at the same time the period that the child first encounters with the outer world. While a great majority of children overcome this adaptation period healthfully, for some students going to school continuously becomes a source of anxiety (Özcan and Aysev, 2009). Starting the school represents a tough period for some children and their families. The children who are still dependent on their family and those children's families are quite negatively affected by this process. The children who grew up with trust and have healthy communication and environment before the school experience a healthy start for the school with the support of their families (Kıldan, 2012). The school is a brand new social environment for a child. The rules of the school that the child must obey, encountering other children and teachers that the child doesn't know, and the learning tasks that the child must fulfill cause difficulties in the child's adaptation to this new environment. For the child who discovers the presence of a new world other than the family world, the importance of establishing a solid basis in the preschool period in terms of social relationships is clear. The children who cannot adapt to the social environment in school are mostly the ones who did not exceed the borders of family environment in the preschool period, and were deprived of social relationships (Yavuzer, 2012).

It is a fact that the preschool education experience contributes to the child's psycho-social and mental development. The transaction from a home environment in which the interest is focused on the child to a school environment and establishing relationships with many other people causes the child to go into a confusion period. If the preschool educational institution can provide a safe love environment that can eliminate the confusion and surprise, then the benefit expected from the educational institution can be gained (Bilgin Aydın, 2004).

Starting the preschool education means an adaptation process for both the children and their parents. It is the first time that children who start the being in a different environment upon start to take part in the preschool education (Şentürk Berber, 2015). The school along with being a place where social skills and social learning outcomes are learned, adaptation to the school is a process which differentiates based on the previous experiences of the individual. The first obstacle faced in the child's adaptation to the school during the preschool period is the school phobia that can stem from different reasons (Gündüz, 2015).

Adaptation is the fulfillment of the needs through the individual's sensitive relationships established in his/her environment in a way to be beneficial to himself/herself and other people around, and realization of his/her desires. Because of its individual nature, adaptation is a relative concept. In this respect, the individual need to make changes in himself/herself or adaptation (Bakırcıoğlu, 2011). A child tries to adapt his/her social environment starting from birth. Adaptation of the child to the society which s/he lives in occurs upon acquiring the social behaviors that are valid in the society (Kotil, 2010). School adaptation is a multi-dimensional concept which is related to the school success, social effect, and social behaviors. School adaptation is shaped with the success, interest, and conformity of children in the school environment. In the school adaptation, the peers, parents, and teachers have important influences (Önder and Gülay, 2010). Adaptation to the school is the child's gaining social and academic benefit from the environment that s/he enters; and it is a complement of

positive attitudes that the child has towards the school, teachers, and friends (Kaya 2014). Pianta (1997) defines adaptation to the school as the complement of the social, behavioral, and academic reaction skills that the child performs towards the requirements of the new environment while starting the school (Şentürk Berber, 2015).

The adaptation of children who start the preschool education is one of the primary factors that enable them to benefit from the preschool education. Therefore, detection of the factors that can affect the adaptation of the children towards the school is an important component in the planning and of the intervention studies that support and facilitates adaptation. There are many different variables related to the child, family, and school determining the adaptation towards the school (Kaya and Akgün, 2016).

The school adaptation period, along with being very important for future school experience, it is also a period in which the child must be supported in terms of getting used to a new environment, being in an environment other than his/her family, and having effective learning (Erten, 2012). The children who can adapt to the school can be very successful in their social interactions. Because the children during the adaptation period can have the possibility to use their social skills more frequently and to realize that they are loved and accepted by their peers. The school adaptation period is important in terms of enabling raising the children in a healthy way and enabling them to become individuals who can adapt to their environments. Based on the fact that a healthy society can be composed of healthy individuals, in order for the individuals to acquire healthy behaviors and being supported on this issue, the adaptation period provides a unique opportunity in terms of adapting to the changing conditions and fulfilling their adaptation needs (Şentürk Berber, 2015).

SCHOOL PHOBIA

For some children going to school is unexpectedly challenging. Those children are either having difficulty in going to school or refusing to go to school. In the literature there exist studies which have been conducted on the students who refuse to go to school since the previous century. In 1913 the “neurotic refusal” term was used to refer to the school attendance situation. The term “school phobia” was first used by Johnson et al. in 1941 and it was defined as a childhood period syndrome characterized by anxiety related to avoidance of school attendance (Bahalı and Tahiroğlu, 2010). School phobia is the child’s refusal of attending the school or seeming reluctant on this issue because of strong anxiety. The children with school phobia are the children who typically reflect their reluctance to go to school through physical complaints and thus trying to convince their parents to stay at home (Yavuzer, 2012). School phobia is the children’s reluctance to go to school or not going to school (Demiral Büküşoğlu, 2000). School phobia can be seen in any age group; however in certain transaction periods, especially; at the ages of 5-6, and 10-11 its frequency increases (Özcan and Aysev, 2009). School phobia is not a fear of going to school. But it is a fear of leaving the house and mother. It is a fear of facing the outer world and strangers. The child perceives the outer world as an enemy and scary (Kırkıncıoğlu, 2003).

School phobia is not a real phobia. It is more complicated and even if the anxiety is focused on the school environment, it can involve a series of disorders such as separation anxiety, agoraphobia, and social phobia. In fact, the child with a school phobia is scared of separation from the safe house environment and primary caretaker. A child who is having a separation anxiety while in a friend’s house can experience the same symptoms that s/he experiences when s/he is left in the school. A child with agoraphobia can experience the same symptoms in both school bus and cinema. And a child suffering from social phobia can experience the same symptoms when asked to read out loud in a prayer room. Therefore school is not the

only place with these unwanted symptoms (Csóti, 2003). The studies revealed that the reason behind the refusal of going to school is not because of dislike the environment of the school but the main problem is because of the unbearable anxiety that the process of going to school brings about (Yavuzer, 2003, p. 114). Starting the school is the beginning of a new period that will last long not only for the child but also for parents. The child's schooling excitement starts earlier after the preschool education become widespread. Nowadays the children's first school experience start with the kindergarten before the 1st grade of the primary school is becoming more and more popular. With the practice of Ministry of National Education, each primary school was obliged to establish a kindergarten and this raised the start of school before 1st grade. The 5-6 years old children feel uncomfortable spending the whole day in a completely different environment separated from their parents. Therefore they start having separation anxiety (Kotil, 2010; Ünüvar et al., 2012).

School phobia occurs through reluctance to go to school and showing this reluctance by means of various physical, and spiritual reactions. When the child will go to kindergarten or an older child warns him/her with an acute anxiety. School phobia reveals itself through physiological symptoms such as nausea, vomit, inappetence, headache, stomachache, enuresis, and encopresis. These are sometimes true. Moreover, the child has nightmares, wakes up crying, and wants to sleep together with his/her mother. The child feels sick, cries and shows reluctance when the school time comes. S/he becomes very happy in times out of school time (Yurtbay, 1997; Ekşi, 1999; Kırkıncıolu, 2003; Bakırcıoğlu, 2011). The physiological complaints in child such as nausea, stomach- or headache generally occur in the morning immediately after the child wakes up but disappears immediately after they are decided not to go to school. If the children are offered to go to school afternoon it can be observed that the same complaints repeat within one hour. When they are promised that they will stay at home on that specific day the symptoms reoccur the next day. If the parents decide that the child will not go to school for one week it can be observed that the child's health is in good condition until the following week. In general, weekends are the most loved period for children with school phobia since they can be active, and they can enjoy with no school pressure (Yavuzer, 2012).

The children who are having school phobia experience problems in adaptation. In this process, an expert must observe the child's behaviors and the underlying reasons of this fear must be detected by conducting interviews (Geçin, 2016).

Table 1. *The differences between school phobia and truancy (Sevimli, 2010)*

School phobia	Truancy
There is a fear of school	There is not a fear of school
There is physiological complaint due to the difficulty of separation from the attachment person	There is no physiological complaint
Fear and affectivity	Disobedience to rules and apathy
No discipline problems in school	There may be discipline problems in school
Parents aware of the situation when children do not go to school	Parents unaware of the situation when children do not go to school
Stays at home when s/he does not go to school	Does not stay at home when s/he does not go to school

The school phobia should not be confused with being truant. The child with school phobia doesn't go to school and stays at home at certain times within the knowledge of his/her parents. While the truant children, hide this situation from their parents, and spend their time out of their houses; the children with school phobia do not go away from their houses and they are happy and cheerful in their houses. The school success of these children is moderate. The underlying reasons for not going to the school for children with school phobia are the fear of becoming unsuccessful and the anxiety of not being active in the classroom, but the truant children dislike the school, at the same time they are lazy, and they do not have an academic goal (Demiral Büküşoğlu, 2000; Yavuzer, 2012).

THE REASONS OF SCHOOL PHOBIA AND ADAPTATION PROBLEMS

This situation named as fear of going to school is not a rare situation, at all. The preschool teachers describe the emotions of children who came to the school for the first time as “fear, anxiety, shyness, reluctance to leave the family, crying, adaptation problem, and happiness”. Teacher state that they mostly encounter the feeling of fear. Similarly, parents describe the emotions of children when they first go to the school as “happiness, fear, reluctance to leave the family, anxiety, crying, and bad temper”. School phobia can seem like a causeless fear from going to the school on the surface. However, there are certain basic factors that form this fear. At the beginning of these, a family environment controlled by a common predominance can be considered. Even though the fear of school is mostly explained on the surface through an angry teacher, the fear of becoming unsuccessful in exams, or fear from a bully friend; most of the school phobia stems from home rather than school. On the roots of this fear, which is misnamed as school fear, there exist the fear of something bad to happen to himself/herself or someone s/he cared about, and therefore the fear of being separated from this person. The feeling of fear is, in fact, a separation anxiety, and the school child almost experiences the same fear of 24 months old children. Upon starting the school one of the tasks expected of the child is to be separated from the primary caregiver in certain hours of the day (Ekşi, 1999; Sevimli, 2010; Bakırcıoğlu, 2011; Kıldan, 2012; Yavuzer, 2012).

The adaptation process in the transaction of the child to the school is influenced by a variety of environments and relationships. The interactions among these environments and people can form the support resources for the children who will experience difficulties in the transaction to the school (Kotil, 2010). Bakırcıoğlu (2011) states that the source of these fears is the over-dependence of the child to his/her mother. The child who is not trained to manage himself/herself, and solve his/her problems on his/her own starting from preschool does not want to go to school when the time comes. Parents who led such a problem must approach the situation cold-blooded, and if necessary s/he must take the child to the school for a while.

Children with school phobia are found to have been raised with great care during the previous years of their life. These mothers spend the effort to earn their children's love by trying to make them happy all the time, meet all of the demands of their children, and afraid of disappointing them. These mothers are closely interested, especially in their children's physical disorders. They feel alone when their children are not around. They feel the psychological and physiological necessity of being close to their children. These mothers refrain from sending their children to kindergarten as well as sending them to their friends' houses to play games. The fathers of children with school phobia are also in cooperation with their mothers regarding over-dependence and protection (Yavuzer, 2012).

The school phobia complaint in children is generally an avoidance behavior dependent to separation nausea (Özcan, Kılıç and Aysev, 2006). Yurtbay (1997) states that school phobia is a close relationship that develops in mutually hostile dependent mother-child relationship

and mutual life (symbiosis). The researchers state that the source of anxiety in school phobia is mostly the fear of separation from the mother (and sometimes from the father). According to Ekşi (1999) school phobia develops generally in the presence of a mutually dependent pathological mother-child relationship. These children generally have an over protective mother and a too distant father. Sometimes the parents are too much fond of their child, and they also cannot afford to separate from their children. Sometimes parents themselves are neurotic or insecure, they needlessly afraid of something bad to happen to the child, and they try to keep the child inside the house all the time. Therefore the child insists on staying at home because unconsciously scared of something bad to happen to his/her father, mother or himself/herself when s/he leaves the house, insist on staying at home to prevent this, and panic if forced to leave the house. Such a mother-child relationship in the early years of life, constitutes an obstacle when the child starts school, the child who did not get out of this protective and oppressive environment of their mother even for a moment experiences quite a discomfort of spending their days in an unfamiliar environment with the people s/he does not know (Yavuzer, 2012).

School phobia sometimes based on the fear of losing mother or father. Children who developed a fear that their mother or father will sometimes leave the house, become ill or die do not want to go to school. If the child witnessed that his/her father hit his/her mother and saw her mother crying can feel the fear of “My mother will die”. Also, the children who witnessed sexual intercourse of his/her parents and considered this as his/her fathers attack to his/her mother can develop the fear of losing mother. With the influence of such incidents or cases that the child saw or heard, the child may feel the fear that his/her mother will leave the house or die, his/her father will kill his/her mother, and s/he will be left without a mother. Additionally, if his/her mother taken to hospital after such incidents that the child saw or heard his/her fear completely increases. Therefore the child does not want to go to school leaving his/her mother (Bakırcıoğlu, 2011).

Meeting all of the necessities leads the child being very demanding and play tricks. Such children achieve whatever they want and whenever they want. The parents cause the development of control feeling in children because of their deficiencies and failures regarding discipline, and inability to limit the child’s requests. In this case, the child intervenes with not only subjects that are related to him/her but also the family issues (Yavuzer, 2012).

Additionally, the wrong behaviors that the mother presents during mother-child conflicts may lead to such a fear. During a conflict with her child when the mother says “I wish I were dead” in anger these words can create a guilt feeling in the child. If mother becomes a little bit ill, let alone being confined to bed, at times following this incident the child considers that she will die. And interprets that this death as caused by him/her. Such fear and anxieties also prevent the child leaving his/her mother and going to school. Unconsciously thinks that, if s/he stays with her, s/he can protect her (Bakırcıoğlu, 2011).

Such family related reasons are not the only group of factors that form school phobia. The separation anxiety, change, and boredom can also be counted among the reasons of school phobia. The illness of mother or father, a fire outbreak in the house, or theft etc. also prevents the child from going out of the house. In such cases the child feels himself/herself as responsible for staying at home. Change can be the only reason of school phobia in some children, a new house, new conditions, a new school, or a new class level can cause this phobia (Yavuzer, 2012).

If the child heard or was told scary stories about school or teacher before starting school, this can cause a fear towards school in the child. A child who faced intimidation or violence;

witnessed violence towards any other person in school, or heard about such practices can develop school phobia (Bakircioğlu, 2011).

At the start of the school the child may have fears that s/he can face dangers on the way to the school, s/he will get lost in the school, s/he will be horrified from the crowd in the classroom, his/her family can leave him or will not come back to pick him/her up at the time they promised, and s/he can stay at the school alone. Along with this, the child may have concerns about the issues such as what is going on at home when s/he is out, whether his/her family missed him/her or not, whether anything will happen to his/her toys or not, what he will do in case of s/he needs a toilet, and whether s/he will have friends or not. Especially the case of experiencing fears and anxieties about the school can be prolonged based on causes such as if families do not fulfill the conditions about these situations (e.g. not picking up the child at the promised time, leaving the child at school the whole day during the adaptation period), the trainer's and school's solid attitude regarding the adaptation issue etc. Again the coincidence of the period of starting the school with the following situations that cause stress in the life of the child such as the birth of a new brother, moving to a new home or city, or the loss of one of the family members will make the adaptation of the child to the school more difficult. (anaokulu.cu.edu.tr/__/file/5_OKULA_BASLAMA_VE_OKULA_UYUM_SURECI.pdf).

There are various factors that can affect the child's adaptation to the school. At the start of the school, detecting the school adaptation problems is the prerequisite for producing possible solutions. Otherwise, the child's future academic and social performance will be risked. These can be grouped as the characteristics of the child, the factors caused by the family, and the factors caused by the school environment (Kaya, 2014; Seven, 2011).

Along with the variables such as gender, the duration of attending the school; the child's character and self-respect, and academic self-respect are among the variables that affect the child's adaptation to the school (Kaya, 2014). The concept of school maturity refers the child's being ready for the school and reaching the developmental level to start the education life. The children who reached school maturity can adapt the school which is a new process in terms of physical, emotional, and social development levels easily (Şentürk Berber, 2015). The children who do not have the readiness enough to start school will experience difficulties in starting/transition to school (Yalman, 2007). The children who are ready for the school will not experience difficulties in using basic knowledge and skills and lead a more successful and happy education life by having a better interaction with his/her environment since they will adapt easier. To make the small children's adaptation to the school easier there must be classes which are appropriate for their level of development, and families suggestions and knowledge must be considered. The dialogues between the teacher and family must be regulated through an empathic point of view and the teacher should guide the family (Günaydın Balta, 2015).

The children' lack of full interpretation of the time periods, their concerns about the duration of staying in school and the time when they will turn back to their families can make the adaptation to the school more difficult (Gündüz, 2015). Since the child may not be able to figure out the time when s/he will turn back to his/her house, and when his/her parents will pick him/her up. S/he is anxious about turning back home.

The process of the school's acceptance of the child is also an important variable that may determine the adaptation to the school. The educational institutions need to take the necessary measures in terms of helping the integration of the children who started the school to the education system and their adaptation (Kaya and Akgün 2016). Children start establishing relationships with other people rather than their family. The structure of the relationship with peers and teachers is different from the relationship established inside the family, and some

behaviors that are regarded as acceptable inside the family may not be regarded as acceptable in these relationships (Demirtaş Zorbaz, 2016). Another factor that affects the adaptation period of the children in the preschool education is the preschool teachers and the quality of their approach. In this respect, it is stated that the children in the classes of teachers who are affectionate, patient, cheerful, understanding, and tolerant do not experience adaptation problems. Ensuring that the child feels relaxed in the classroom, loving the child and spending effort, establishing an emphatic communication with the child, being patient and tolerant are among the points that need to be paid attention for adaptation to the school. The teacher who spends effort in this regard can be considered to have taken a great step towards the student's adaptation to the school. This situation emphasizes the importance of teachers in the school adaptation process. It is important that teachers know the students in order to be able to provide them the support that they need. Just as the quality of the relationship established with teachers, peers are also an important factor that affects the adaptation to the school. For the children who will share the classroom environment with other peers for the first time activities in which they will be able to conduct successful peer relationships should be included regularly. The children should be supported and encouraged to be able to develop positive peer relationships. The negative dimensions of peer relationships such as aggression, being exposed to violence, and not being loved may decrease the level of adaptation of children to the school (Birch & Ladd 1997; Erten, 2012; Günaydın Balta, 2015; Şentürk Berber, 2015).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PARENTS

The child is the last person to be considered at the center in terms of school adaptation. Starting school is a very important experience for the child. In this process, the child can feel excited, or s/he can cry when s/he go to school and see the crowded environment. Therefore, getting over this period in a healthy way is important. In this process, both school and family should provide the correct support for the children in order for them to live the adaptation process in a healthy way. The only way to overcome these concerns is to establish an effective communication channel. If an effective communication line among the parents, child, and teacher these anxieties can be positively overcome (Gedik 2015; Şentürk Berber 2015).

In order to enhance adaptation to the school, before starting the preschool educational institution, activities to support the adaptation to the school can be conducted. For instance, the child can be informed about the preschool education, visit the school that s/he will enroll, can be introduced with his/her teacher, can be informed about the school rules, operation, and order, books can be prepared about the adaptation to the school. Regarding the children who experience problems in adaptation to the school, a teacher-family-school counselor, cooperation should be established. The teacher should be in communication with the family by making systematic observations, and with the help of school counselor the teacher should conduct activities using different methods and techniques to facilitate the adaptation process (Kaya, 2014). Mothers' sparing enough time for their children who are back from school and being interested in the children's activities that they brought from school both shows mother's adaptation to the school program and supports the child's adaptation to the school (Kotil, 2010).

Starting the school is an exciting process for both child and family regardless of the education level of the school. The process of starting school which includes stepping into a different environment than the family environment may cause the formation of certain anxieties and fears in children due to the changes and innovations (anaokulu.cu.edu.tr/__/file/5_OKULA_BASLAMA_VE_OKULA_UYUM_SURECI.pdf).

The parents should approach the child who is experiencing school phobia and reluctant to go to school, if necessary the father or mother should take the child to the school. In this case, the duty of parents is to explain the issue to the teacher and ensure that the child is going to or they should take the child to the school. The best way to help these children is to show understanding to the problems of their problem and support them as the father, mother, and teacher, and make the child feel that s/he is not alone. In addition to this, reviewing the mother-father, mother-child, and father-child relationships and fixing if there are any problems. If fixing is not possible after all of the efforts, a psychologist or child psychiatrist should be consulted (Bakircioğlu, 2011).

Parents who face school phobia first should not permit the child to stay away from the school. As the child stays at home longer, turning back to school is made more difficult. Letting the child stay at home thinking that “Let’s give him/her time to calm down, relax, and don’t put him/her under pressure” does not decrease the crisis but increases it. The parents should approach the child calmly. Scaring the child or hitting will work for the contrary. The parents fail in a very short time. Begging or trying to stay at the good side of the child is ineffective, as well. But the determined and consistent one of the father and mother should take the child to the school. Generally, mothers are not successful in this because of the close relationship with the children. The teachers need to be informed about the situation and cooperation should be established. It is worth to highlight that even if the child is nervous and scared s/he should not stay away from the school. Even if s/he is reluctant to go inside the classroom s/he should go to school anyway. Sitting in the teachers’ lounge or wandering in the garden is better than staying at home. Even if the problems of the child seem to increase in the first days, later it will be decreased. Taking the child to the school is half of the solution. The reasons of the phobia should be uncovered and talked over, and precautions towards recovering the mother-child relationships should be taken (Yörükoğlu, 2004).

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