

The Effect of Play Techniques on Separation Anxiety among Preschool Children

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Abstract: Separation anxiety is a universal human developmental phenomenon that affects preschool age children and has a negative impact on physical, psychological, social and mental status of children. The aim of the study was to evaluate the effect of play techniques on separation anxiety among preschool children. A quasi experimental research design was used to achieve the aim of the study. This Study was carried out at two nursery schools at EL-Bagor and El-Batanoon, Menoufia Governorate, Egypt. A purposive sample of (n=100) preschool age children who have separation anxiety was selected from the above mentioned setting and divided into two groups; study group and control group 50 for each group. Two tools were used 1) A constructed interview questionnaire to assess; socio-demographic characteristics of preschool children and their mothers 2) Preschool children separation anxiety scale (mother version). The main findings of this study revealed that there was a highly statistical significant difference in the level of separation anxiety between the study group and control group post-test at p-value (0.001). The level of separation anxiety in the study group were decreased from 34% for moderate level and 10% for severe level respectively to 0.00% post-test. It was concluded that the play techniques had a great effect in reducing separation anxiety disorder among preschool children. **Recommendation:** Generalize the application of play techniques to all preschool age children to reduce their separation anxiety.

Keywords: play techniques, separation anxiety, preschool children.

I. INTRODUCTION

"Preschool education proves to be a critical period for cognitive development, school readiness and achievement, language development, learning motivation, as well as social and emotional development of children. Preschool is also a period during which children have their first experiences of school. At this age, the child may not simply adjust to the new rules and limitations, but instead, may respond by displaying behavioral and psychological problems as separation anxiety disorder" [1]

"Separation anxiety is a universal human developmental phenomenon that affects preschool age children. Children with separation anxiety fear that some harm will occur to those they love leading to loss or long-term separation. Children with separation anxiety may cry, throw, tantrums and clingy. Children who develop significant problems with separation anxiety may complain of headaches, nausea or other illnesses when faced with a separation. Some children may even vomit from the distress, experience nightmares about separation, and may have associated sleep difficulties. These children will do whatever is in their power to avoid separating from important attachment figures; they may avoid attending school, sleeping alone and staying away overnight" [2].

"Numerous researches indicate that play therapy has successfully managed to bring separation anxiety disorder among children under control. Play therapy provides therapists with an opportunity to help children learn how to solve problems.

The main goal of play therapy intervention is to help children participate in learning, self-avoidance, gaining a sense of responsibility, controlling emotions, showing respect, self-acceptance and accepting others, improving behaviors such as social skills, increasing self-esteem and reducing anxiety" [3] .

The psychiatric nurse should help the parents to understand that the preschool age is a time for rapidly growing independence; the child learns to separate through preparation for attending school. During the preschool years, the child will learn essential life skills, like dressing and feeding herself. The school nurse should advice parents to comment on the child's desirable behavior frequently and positively, avoid giving commands, judging, avoid shaming or belittling the child (Foy et al., 2010). The parents should point out the positive aspects of starting school .The nurse should advise parents to talk to their child about school before classes begin, parents should consider taking their child to his or her school before the school year starts [4].

The significance of the study:

Preschool period is playing main role in development and adjustment of children. Fear and anxiety are of externalizing disorders, providing untreated it lead to negative effects on individual and social relationship especially in adulthood, therefore , this study evaluate the effect of play techniques on separation anxiety among preschool children.

Child with separation anxiety disorder is an important construct in the field of child and adolescent psychiatric and mental health nursing. A better understanding of these behavior problems and risk factors underlying it is essential for learning how to prevent these behavior problems in the future. Developing a strong knowledge base of separation anxiety disorder, it will be possible to develop interventions that reduce this disorder. Scatter researches were done to assess separation anxiety among children. In spite of separation anxiety prevalence in preschool children and its possible relation to later pathology, few studies investigated the efficacy of play techniques interventions on separation anxiety of children. Therefore this study will help in evaluation separation anxiety among children and the influence of play techniques on it.

Theoretical and Operational Definitions:

"Separation anxiety is theoretically defined as an anxiety disorder in which the individual experiences excessive anxiety concerning separation from home or from those to whom the person is strongly emotionally attached to " [5]. Separation anxiety in the present study is operationally defined as the mean score of the symptoms of separation anxiety measured by [6] "Play techniques are theoretically defined as a consulting procedure which attempts to communicate with the child and to solve his/her problem through the toys"[7]. Play techniques in the present study is operationally defined as program includes (drawing, storytelling, role play and play with ball) used by the researcher to help preschool children to express their feelings and decreases symptoms of separation anxiety disorder. Preschool child is theoretically defined as a child who is either boy or girl ages 3-7 years"[8]. Preschool child in the present study is operationally defined as a child who ages 3-5 years.

2. SUBJECTS AND METHODS

The aim of the study:

Evaluate the effect of play techniques on separation anxiety among preschool children.

Research Hypotheses:

The preschool children who participate in play techniques intervention program (study group) will have lower mean score of separation anxiety post program than the preschool children who don't receive the play techniques intervention program (control group).

Research Design:

A quasi experimental) research design (two group study and control group pre/ posttest was used to achieve the aim of the study.

Research Setting:

This study was conducted at two nursery schools at EL-Bagor and El-Batanoon , Menoufia Governorate ,Egypt.

Subjects:

A purposive sample of 100 preschool age children. fit the inclusion criteria in the study as preschool children from both sexes, having separation anxiety disorder and aged from 3-5 years old and free from history of any chronic or terminal physical illness or injury and a history of any psychological illness divided into two groups; study group and control group (50for each group).

Tools of data Collection:

Two tools were used to achieve the aim of the study,

- **Tool (1) - A constructed interview questionnaire.** This questionnaire developed by the investigator based on the scientific reviewing literature consists of two parts:-First part was designed to assess socio demographic characteristics of the child:- as age, gender, birth order .The second part was designed to assess socio-demographic characteristics of the mother as age, education, and occupation.

-**Tool (2) - Preschool children separation anxiety scale (mother version).** This scale was originally developed by [6] to assess separation anxiety among preschool children as perceived by mother. It was tested for its validity by a panel of experts. It consists of 37 items. Responses were measured on three points likert. Score ranged from (1) not at all to (3) usually. The level of anxiety was considered severe if the score was (94-111), moderate if the score was (75-93), mild if the score (56-74) and no separation anxiety if the score was (37-55).

Procedure Data Collection:

Administrative approval: An official permission to conduct the study was obtained from the directors of nursery schools at EL-Bagor and El-Batanoon.

Ethical consideration: the informed consent from mother of preschool children was obtained after complete description of the aim, nature and confidentiality of the study.

A pilot study: A pilot study was conducted in order to test the reliability and validity of the questionnaire items and clarity of questions. A total of 10% of the sample were recruited for the pilot study. All subjects included in the pilot study met the inclusion criteria for. The pilot study revealed minimal modifications in the questionnaires. Subjects in the pilot study were excluded from the main study sample.

The validity of the tools: The validity of the tool was ascertained by a group of experts in the field of child psychiatry and pediatric nursing to examine the face validity in terms of whether that reflected the concepts intended to measure and to determine its clarity to reach consensus on the best form to be implemented.

Reliability of the tools: The internal consistency of the questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. The reliability of the tools were done using test - retest reliability and proved to be strongly reliable at 0.80 for tool one and at 0.90 for tool two.

Collection of study subject and application of the program began from February to June (2017).The data in the current study was collected through three phases: assessment phase, implementation phase and evaluation phase.

1. Assessment phase:

The investigator asks the director of the kindergarten to collect the mothers of the children and inform them about the date and the place of meeting. The investigator divides the mothers into two groups (group A, group B). The investigator meets every group within one day from 10 AM to 10.30 AM in play room for group (A as study group) and in other room for group (B as control group). Through interview technique the mothers of both the study and control groups individually filled the assessment sheet for structured interview schedule. They also filled Preschool children separation anxiety scale (mother version). The investigator contacted with the mothers for clarification of scale and for explanation of the aim of the study.

Regarding to preschool children separation anxiety scale (mother version), it was applied to the study group (A) in the play room and the investigator let children in play room and observe his/her behavior and interactions during their play. The investigator showed sample of toys for children to gain their interactions for coming again and involving in play therapy sessions. After pre- test, the investigator divides preschool children into two equal groups (study and control group).

Implementation phase:

The investigator applied the implementation phase according to the following steps:

The first step: All subjects who were supposed to be meeting the inclusion criteria were included in the study, the investigator introduced herself to them, provides verbal explanation of the study and answered all related question, and then they were interviewed to complete the socio demographic data and given pre- test questionnaires.

The second step: the investigator started to divide the participants of study group into five equal sub-groups. Every sub-group was 10 child and their mothers, every group attended (13) nursing intervention session every session take one hour within one day\week from 10 AM to 12 PM. The sessions designed to meet specific objectives, including techniques and content. At the beginning of session the investigator explain the game for children and instructed them about the game's rules , also the investigator showed have balloons, sweets, toys as examples of reinforcement for child or team who followed the rules and finished the task completely. The investigator changed the reinforcement from time to time.

The investigator prepared a booklet for mothers containing introduction, objectives, method of teaching and the content for mothers of the study group. Through three sessions, the mothers of the study group received information about separation anxiety disorder definition, symptoms, effects, and management and guidance instructions about how to deal effectively with their children. In mother's sessions, the investigator distributed the content of session after explanation and discussion of content with mothers and provides them homework as list of the signs and symptoms of separation anxiety disorder. Before the beginning of each session the investigator asked mothers about their children change in behavior and how they used the content.

Play techniques program:

After reviewing related literature the investigator developed the play techniques program in Arabic language in the form of a booklet. It included introduction about separation anxiety disorder, play techniques and its effect on children with separation anxiety disorder, objectives of the program, and total equipment as clay colored pencils, papers for application, and program sessions in details (name of game, objectives, equipment, and procedures for each one). The playing technique program aimed at minimizing the separation anxiety among preschool children. Play techniques in each session were selected to match children's developmental characteristics as well as their age.

The selection of techniques for this study was guided by three main criteria: (a) to include a variety of play approaches (e.g. sensorimotor, art, fantasy), (b) to focus on techniques appropriate for 3-5 year-old children, and (c) to present techniques that are enjoyable, inexpensive, and easy to implement. This playing technique program has a set of specific objectives for each session and the number of program's sessions was about 10 sessions, each session take about 1hour. The program reviewed by experts in pediatrics and child psychiatry. The goals of the chosen techniques include helping children become aware of and express their feelings, reduce fear, anxiety and manage anger .Application of the play techniques program was performed in the play room at Sonaa EL-Mostakbal nursery school, EL-Bagor city, Shebin EL-Kom, Menoufia Governorate, Egypt on 50 preschool age children who have separation anxiety (study group).

The sessions of play techniques program were:

Session one: This session aimed to establishing an appropriate relationship with mothers. The investigator sits at the center circle and introduces herself to them. The investigator begins to orient mothers about objectives of play techniques program and the benefits of this program for them and their children.

Session two, third: This session aimed to providing mothers with information about separation anxiety to help them deal effectively with their children. The investigator sits at the center circle among the mothers then welcome them. The investigator distributes handout that illustrate definition of separation anxiety, symptoms and causes then provide instructions for mothers to help them deal effectively with their children

Session four: This session aimed to establishing an appropriate relationship with the child in a way that the child feels comfortable when the investigator is present. The investigator sits at the center of the circle among children then introduces herself for children. The investigator asks every child about his/her name and age then claps the child who introduces her/his self successfully as a way of reinforcement.

Session five: This session aimed to providing children with a non-threatening, concrete method of understanding and discussing various affective states, develop an awareness of numerous affective states, relate these states to their environmental events, and the skill to verbally express their feelings in appropriate manner. The investigator sits with children and introduces the activity to them by saying "we are going to sing.", and then the investigator begins by asking the children to sing with her some songs about the kindergarten. These songs allow many opportunities for children to express their feelings in a non-threatening manner and by time children will love their kindergarten.

Session six: This session aimed to allowing children to communicate their feelings in enjoyable and non-threatening manner. Often children have difficulty verbalizing their feelings when directly questioned or they don't connect with those feelings they find most threatening. When involved in playing a game as drawing, children defenses are reduced and they are more likely to talk about their feelings. Drawing allows children to communicate their feelings in an enjoyable manner. The investigator begins the session by telling children a story about animals then, asks them to imitate the voices of animals that they hear. The investigator provides children with a blank paper and tells them to fill the paper with the pictures of animals. The child may complete the drawing in whatever way he/she chooses. Once the child clearly understands the task, the investigator limits her talking and encourages the child's discussion of the picture. At the end of the session, the investigator provides children with blank paper to draw animals at home.

Session seven: This session aimed to facilitating affective expression in children. This technique is a fun way for children to express their feelings and pair various affective states with environmental events in a game context. Also this technique helps children to verbally express their anger in a safe way. The investigator begins the session by reviewing homework with the children. Next, the investigator explains the activity for children then distributes pictures about the characters of the story and identifies every child about his character and name in the story. The investigator tells the story and asks children about their opinions of the characters of the story. At the end of the session, the investigator asks children to act the story with their friends.

Session eight: Children often worry about numerous things that they keep bottled up inside. These worries may be the root of some of their presenting problems, such as fears and separation anxiety. This technique is an effective method for helping children to identify and then discuss their worries with an adult or other child. The investigator begins the session by asking children about homework. Next, the investigator provides children with pictures of desirable and undesirable behaviors. The investigator asks every child to select his/her preferred picture and put it on the board. The investigator draws a smiling face in front of selected desirable behavior and draws angry face in front of selected undesirable behavior then discuss every behavior with children. At the end of the session, the investigator pictures of desirable and undesirable behaviors and asks them to select his/her preferred picture at home.

Session nine: Playing with balls is fun, inexpensive and allows non-threatening interactions between child and other children. It is an effective technique for expression of feelings. The investigator begins the session by reviewing homework with children. Next, the investigator gives children colored balls to play to help children improve sense of social relationship. At the end of the session, the investigator gives every child pencil and balloon to reinforce his/her positive behavior.

Session ten: This session aimed to increasing the child's comfort level and allowing him/her to remain at a safe emotional distance, improving social communication and relationship. The investigator begins the session by asking children to join her to the playground of the kindergarten and then encourage them to play swings and slips. The investigator encourages every child to play with other children.

Session eleven: Fish hunter game is a fun, inexpensive and allows non threatening interactions between all children. It is an effective game for fostering social communication, relationship and cooperation among children. The investigator begins the session by dividing children into two groups then explains the rules of the game for the two groups. The investigator encourages the children to start to play. At the end of the session, the investigator gives gifts to the earned group.

Session twelve: This session aimed to increasing children's self-control. The goal of this game for children is to resist distraction, remaining on task and focused for a specified period of time. When the child is successful at the game, the child is filled with a sense of competence. The investigator begins the session by dividing children into two groups (male

group- female group) then the investigator introduces the activity to the children. First the investigator will set the timer for 10 minutes. During that time, children will begin to design shapes with macaroni beans and not be distracted by any thing around them. Do not stop designing until they hear the timer go off. At the end of the session, the investigator gives the children who are quick with the shapes that they make to encourage them.

Session thirteen: This session aimed to evaluation of the program. The investigator welcomes the children and their mothers and then asks children about what they doing when their mothers leave them now? What they doing when they go to kindergarten now?. The investigator distributes post-test questionnaires for mothers. At the end of the session, the investigator says goodbye.

Statistical analysis:-

The collected data were organized, tabulated and statistically analyzed using SPSS version 20.0. Graphic were done using excel program. Data were presented using descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages for qualitative variables. Mc Nemar test, Mann Whitney test, Chi-square test (χ^2) and t-test were used. Level of significance was set as highly significant level as P value < 0.001 and significant level as P-value <0.05 while P value of >0.05 indicated non-significant.

3. RESULTS

Table (1): reveals that there is no statistically significant difference between the study group and the control group regarding to all their socio-demographic characteristics.

Table (2): clarifies that there is no statistical significant difference between the study group and control group regarding level of children separation anxiety as perceived by mother pre-test while there is a highly statistical significant difference between the study group and control group post-test at p-value (0.001) and also clarifies that in the study group the moderate and severe level of separation anxiety pretest are decreased from 34% for moderate level and 10% for sever level respectively to 0.00% post-test.

Figure (1): shows that there is reduction on the level of separation anxiety post play techniques program than pre play techniques program as reported by the studied mothers in the study group.

Table (1): Socio-demographic characteristics of the studied children in the study and control groups (N = 100):

Socio -demographic characters	Study group (N=50)		Control group (N=50)		Test of sig.	P value
	No.	%	No.	%		
Age / years (Mean ±SD)	3.61±0.81		3.41±0.62		t-test 1.39	0.168(NS)
Gender					χ^2 0.370	0.544(NS)
- Male	23	46.0	20	40.0		
- Female	27	54.0	30	60.0		
Grade					χ^2 2.24	0.134(NS)
- Kg1	28	56.0	25	50.0		
- Kg2	22	44.0	25	50.0		
Birth order					χ^2 1.78	0.410(NS)
- First	25	50.0	22	44.0		
- Middle	12	24.0	18	36.0		
- Last	13	26.0	10	20.0		
Number of sisters and brothers (Mean ±SD)	1.46±1.14		1.66±1.23		U 0.760	0.451(NS)
Range	0 - 5		1 - 5			

U: Mann Whitney test NS: non-significant

Table (2): Level of separation anxiety among children as reported by the studied mothers among study and control group pre and post-test (N=100):

Children separation anxiety as perceived by mothers		Studied children				χ^2	P value
		Study group (N=50)		Control group (N=50)			
		No.	%	No.	%		
Pre	No	0	0.00	0	0.00	0.050	0.976(NS)
	Mild	28	56.0	29	58.0		
	Moderate	17	34.0	16	32.0		
	Sever	5	10.0	5	10.0		
Post	No	22	44.0	0	0.00	44.0	0.001(HS)
	Mild	28	56.0	28	56.0		
	Moderate	0	0.00	16	32.0		
	Sever	0	0.00	6	12.0		
Mc Nemar test		44.0		0.11			
P value		0.001(HS)		0.947(NS)			

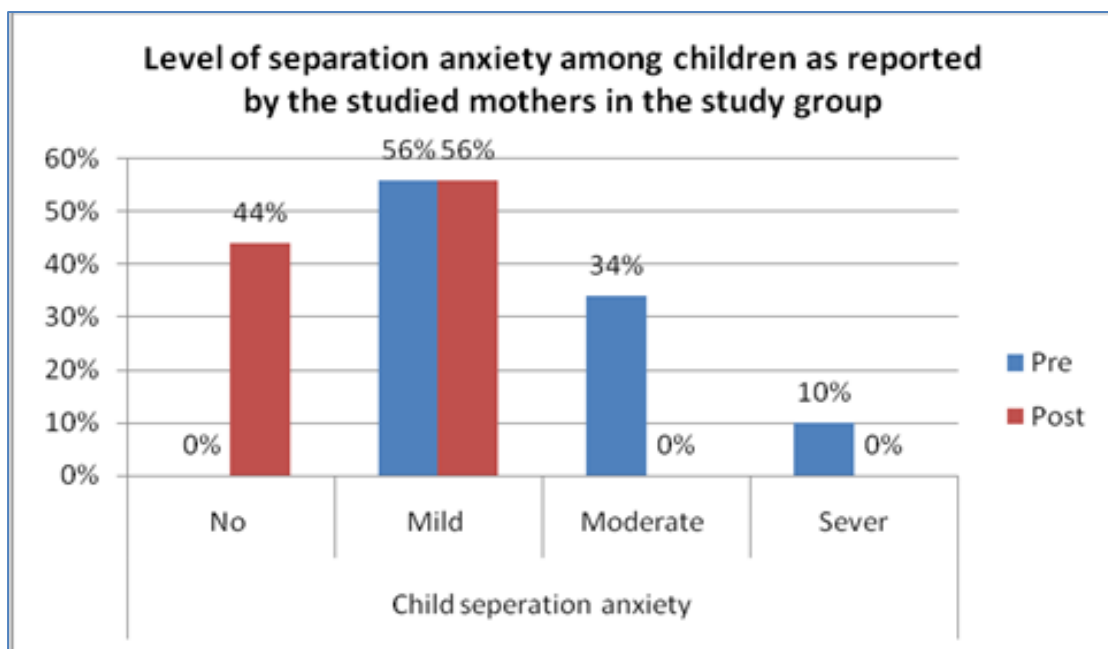


Figure (1): Level of separation anxiety among children as reported by the studied mothers pre and post -test in the study group (n=50).

4. DISCUSSIONS

"Early childhood stage or preschool age is considered the most important stage in the child's life. That is because the child acquires the correct consistency with the external environment. This stage also affects the child's behavior later on because what is rooted in childhood is hardly uprooted. It also becomes the distinct style of the person's character. Attending the kindergarten is necessary for every child because it provides the child with experiences, which may not be available in the same way at home, which help in his growth and consistency. However, the child may feel frightened or afraid when joining the kindergarten. This phenomenon is known as separation anxiety. Its causes may be the overprotection for the child, his dependence on the elderly people, keeping the child under too much dread by his parents. Therefore, those children need care and help through preparing counseling" [9] .

The results of the current study revealed that the mean age of the children included in the study group was (3.61± 0.81) years old and the mean age of the children included in the control group was (3.41± 0.62) years old .This could be due to the preschool children at this age are more prone to separation anxiety disorder as it is considered the first time child is separated from his mother and contact with strange environment in kindergarten.

The current study reflected that more than half of the children included in the study and control group were females. This could be due the number of female children in both kindergarten was higher than male children. This result was contradicted with [10] who reflected that more than half of the children included in the study were male.

Regarding birth order, about half of the studied children were first birth order. This could be due mother's attachment for her first child was more than other children. This result was consistent with [11] they revealed that " half of the studied children were first birth order .In other hand [12] who studied" birth order and parental time: evidence from Norway ", they found that, "approximately more than half of his observations were first-born children". Also, [13] they conducted a research about " Birth Order and Child Outcomes: Does Maternal Quality Time Matter? " they found that "more than one third of the sample was first, near to half was second, and the minority was third, and 5th-borns".

The present result reflected that there was no statistically significance difference between levels of separation anxiety among the study group compared to control group as reported by mothers in pre- test. This might be due to lack of knowledge of both groups about how to deal effectively with their children and how to prepare them to kindergarten in pre-test. This result was in the same line with a study done by [14], who conducted a research about "An investigation of the effect of puzzle design on children's development areas ". They recognized that "no significant differences between experimental- and control-group children's pre-test".

The present result revealed that all children of the study group had no and mild level of separation anxiety post -test and no one had moderate or severe level of separation anxiety post- test. Results also reflected that there was highly statistically significance difference between level of separation anxiety among studied children as reported by their mothers in pre and post- test. This means that play techniques were effective in reduction of children separation anxiety. This may be due to the increasing mother knowledge and awareness regarding how to follow up their children and manage their separation anxiety and using the effective playing techniques to release the children's anxiety or helping them express their anxiety and cope effectively. This result was consistent with [15], who conducted a research about "The effectiveness of game therapy on reducing separation anxiety disorder in children" and illustrated that game therapy was effective in reducing separation anxiety disorder. Also [16], who study "The effectiveness of story therapy and clay therapy on children's anxiety" and concluded that story therapy and clay therapy were effective in reduction of children's anxiety. Moreover [17], conducted a research about "The effect of teamwork game therapy on preschool anxiety". They found that "teamwork game therapy was effective in treating anxiety disorders as separation anxiety than other traditional therapy as talking". In the same line, [18], conducted a research about" comparing the effect of the paint and clay therapy on the symptoms of separation anxiety disorders in preschool children", and illustrated that "paint and clay therapy as a technique of play therapy were effective in reducing separation anxiety disorder among preschool children". This result was also in harmony with the findings of [19] who concluded that about two third of the participant children had not experienced anxiety and the rest had mild level of anxiety post- test.

The present result revealed that the moderate and severe level of separation anxiety pre-test were decreased from 34% for moderate level and 10% for sever level respectively to 0.00% post-test. This may be due to the effectiveness of play techniques program on releasing tension or anxiety in a safe therapeutic environment. This point of view supported by [19] who concluded that "the moderate and mild level of separation anxiety pre-test were decreased from 52% for moderate level and 32% for mild level respectively to (64%) had not experienced anxiety and the rest (36%) experienced only mild anxiety post-test".

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the finding of this study, it was concluded that the play techniques had a great effect in reducing separation anxiety disorder among preschool children

6. RECOMENDATIONS

Generalize the application of play techniques to all preschool age children to reduce their separation anxiety. Provide in-service training programs for the nurses who are actually working in kindergarten about the psychological consequences of separation anxiety disorder and the scientific base of managing it.

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