



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Anxiety in early childhood: Comparing preschoolers and first-grade students

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2025, 27(02), 1874-1879

Publication history: Received on 18 July 2025; revised on 24 August 2025; accepted on 26 August 2025

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2025.27.2.3010>

Abstract

The article examines anxiety and its relationship with emotional and behavioral responses in children aged 5 to 7, comparing preschoolers and first-grade students. Using a mixed-methods approach, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with teachers, preschool educators, and school psychologists, while quantitative data were collected via online parent surveys. Statistical analysis using SPSS assessed anxiety differences between the two groups and explored symptom prevalence by gender. Findings confirm that anxiety significantly influences emotional regulation and behavior across educational settings, with notable differences linked to school transition and social expectations. The results offer practical insights for educators, psychologists, and caregivers to better support children's emotional development in early education.

Keywords: Anxiety; Preschool children; First-grade schoolchildren; Emotional regulation; Early childhood education; Child psychology; educational psychology

1. Introduction

Early childhood anxiety and stress play a crucial role in shaping children's emotional, social, and academic development. The transition from kindergarten to primary school represents a particularly sensitive period, during which children must navigate new environments, unfamiliar social expectations, and heightened academic demands. This stage can be a significant source of stress, as children begin to internalize norms of communication, behavioral expectations, and disciplinary structures—often without full conscious awareness. Such changes can intensify feelings of anxiety, reduce concentration, and impede academic performance.

Emotional well-being and psychological stability are fundamental to healthy development, influencing not only learning outcomes but also peer relationships and self-confidence. Research highlights that children who receive adequate emotional support during school transitions are more likely to demonstrate resilience, adapt effectively, and engage positively in the learning environment. Consequently, understanding the psychological challenges associated with school entry is essential for educators, psychologists, and parents alike. By fostering a supportive environment and promoting emotional coping strategies, caregivers can facilitate smoother adaptation, encourage social competence, and lay the foundation for long-term academic and personal success.

2. Anxiety and Adaptation During School Transition

The transition from preschool to formal schooling constitutes a pivotal developmental milestone, frequently accompanied by heightened emotional and behavioral challenges. Children aged 5 to 7 are particularly vulnerable to stress and anxiety as they navigate unfamiliar environments, adapt to evolving social expectations, and assume new academic responsibilities. [1] Early childhood mental health—especially emotional regulation and social competence—

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plays a crucial role in successful school adaptation. When these psychological needs are unmet, children may exhibit maladaptive behaviors, including regression, sleep disturbances, or somatic complaints [2]. The availability of emotional support from caregivers profoundly influences children's coping skills and the development of long-term resilience.[3] Furthermore, early learners are still developing stress management skills and strategies for expressing their emotions, which increases their susceptibility to anxiety-related difficulties. Consequently, effective communication among children, educators, and parents is essential for fostering emotional security and promoting school readiness. Addressing these dynamics is critical for supporting children's holistic development amid the socio-emotional and academic demands of early schooling.

In contemporary educational and family contexts, the ways in which parents and teachers communicate with children are evolving. The internal and emotional states of preschool-aged children are strongly expressed yet inherently unstable. Their emotions can shift rapidly—they may become easily frustrated or frightened—reflecting the vulnerability typical of early school-aged children. At the same time, positive emotions are readily elicited. Notably, the emotional states of parents, caregivers, and peers are easily transmitted to children, significantly shaping their mood and overall emotional experience.[4]

Stress factors can negatively impact an individual's mental, emotional, and cognitive functioning. In particular, stress reactions and the intensity of anxiety play a significant role in personality development. In school-aged children, several key factors contribute to the manifestation of anxiety and stress, including adaptive responses, the dual nature of stress (both positive and negative), and coping strategies. When faced with a perceived threat, a child becomes mobilized to respond—an instinctual reaction that promotes survival. This response also influences cognitive development, as the child learns to adapt to a changing environment. Such reactions are considered biologically adaptive, helping the child build resilience and resistance to potentially harmful factors. [2]

Children may exhibit negative manifestations of stress, such as:

- Headaches
- Abdominal pain
- Sleep disturbances
- Excessive crying
- Eating problems. [2]

One of the primary sources of stress in children is the daily challenges they encounter within the academic environment. Pascoe's meta-analysis indicates that students often experience high levels of academic stress. Such stress can have detrimental effects on both mental and physical health, contributing to reduced learning ability, lower academic performance, and diminished motivation to engage in learning. [1]

For preschool-aged children, interactions with peers and engagement in social activities are essential, as these experiences help develop key social skills, including behavioral and emotional functioning. During this stage, children learn to regulate their emotions and behavior, which in turn supports their adaptation to the school environment and adjustment to unfamiliar settings. [5]

It is important to highlight the concept of social competence, which refers to a child's ability to communicate effectively and engage actively with others. This definition emphasizes the extent to which a child can establish connections and collaborate with peers. Social competence also reflects a child's ability to regulate their behavior in unfamiliar social situations and the frequency with which they interact with others.[6]

2.1. Research Design

The aim of this study is to examine and compare levels of anxiety in preschool-aged children and first-grade students from both emotional and behavioral perspectives, incorporating the perspectives of parents, teachers, and school psychologists.

The target group for this study consists of preschool-aged children (5–6 years old) and first-grade students (6–7 years old), with a primary focus on the aspect of anxiety.

In the qualitative phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with kindergarten teachers, school teachers, and school psychologists to gather detailed insights into anxiety manifestations in children.

In the second phase, a quantitative research approach was employed to identify the frequency and intensity of anxiety symptoms among preschool and first-grade children. A standardized, validated, and adapted instrument—the Preschool Anxiety Scale Revised (PAS-R)—was used. The questionnaire was administered online via Google Forms and completed by parents of 5-, 6-, and 7-year-old children. This tool aimed to assess different types of anxiety and their severity levels within the target age groups. Quantitative data analysis enabled identification of prevalent anxiety types and their frequency in both cohorts. Participants were selected using a random sampling method to ensure representative data.

The questionnaire consisted of 28 items, each rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (“does not apply at all”) to 4 (“applies very frequently”). The items were designed to assess the presence and frequency of anxiety in daily life, as well as in school and kindergarten settings. This structured format facilitated accurate data collection and supported robust quantitative analysis.

2.2. Quantitative Analysis of Anxiety Levels in First-Grade and Preschool-Aged Children

According to parental responses, the study sample included 54.5% preschool-aged children (48 children) and 45.5% first-grade students (40 children). The majority were male (54.5%, 48 boys), while 45.5% (40 children) were female. Regarding age distribution, 5-year-olds accounted for 43.2% (38 children), 6-year-olds for 31.8% (28 children), and 7-year-olds for 25% (22 children).

The survey used structured questions to collect demographic data, including child’s level of education (preschool or first grade), age (5, 6, or 7 years), and gender (female or male).

An important focus of the study was anxiety related to seeking help from adults, such as teachers. Most parents (45.5%) reported that their children had no difficulty asking for assistance, indicating trust in teachers and comfort in expressing their needs. However, 12.5% of parents stated that their children often showed signs of anxiety in such situations, suggesting that some children continue to face challenges.

Another aspect examined was anxiety associated with self-expression, such as speaking in front of peers during activities like “show and tell.” Results were mixed: 14.8% of children experienced anxiety very frequently, while 45.5% displayed no signs of anxiety. These findings suggest that for most children, positive classroom environments and supportive peer relationships reduce anxiety and facilitate self-expression.

Separation anxiety during school or kindergarten transitions was also analyzed. Parental responses indicated diverse experiences: 48.9% of children sometimes felt anxious when apart from parents, 28.5% often expressed separation anxiety, and 22.7% did not show anxiety. These results highlight individual differences in emotional adjustment among children.

The study also explored social initiative and willingness to engage with peers. Nearly half of the parents (48.9%) reported that their children did not experience anxiety in group settings, while 40.9% indicated that anxiety rarely occurred. This suggests that most children feel comfortable participating in group activities and initiating peer interactions.

Anxiety in unfamiliar or novel situations was another key focus, particularly as expressed through nervousness. The majority of parents (80.7%) reported no anxiety when their children encountered new environments, but 19.3% indicated frequent anxiety. This suggests that some children require additional time and support to adapt to unfamiliar contexts.

Emotional responses to mistakes or imperfect performance were also examined. Results showed that 27.3% of children often became irritated when making errors, whereas 72.8% rarely experienced emotional stress, highlighting individual differences in self-regulation and tolerance for imperfection.

Shyness around unfamiliar people was another relevant factor. Parents reported that 36.3% of children frequently exhibited shyness, while 45.4% did so occasionally, indicating that social anxiety is present for a notable portion of children, particularly in new interpersonal situations.

Finally, the study examined differences in anxiety by gender and school level. Girls had an average anxiety score of 43, compared to 32 for boys, suggesting higher anxiety levels among girls. However, the p-value of 0.161 indicates this

difference is not statistically significant. Comparison by school level showed an average score of 34 for preschoolers and 42 for first-grade students, with a p-value of 0.368, also not statistically significant.

In summary, parental responses revealed trends of higher anxiety among girls and first-grade students compared to boys and preschoolers. While these findings are noteworthy, the lack of statistical significance means they should be interpreted cautiously and limited to the study sample.

2.3. Qualitative Insights into Anxiety Types and Management in Preschool and First-Grade Students

During the semi-structured interview with the preschool educator, the focus was on several key aspects: the frequency of anxiety in kindergarten, the relationship between anxiety and attachment to the mother, and the strategies employed by teachers to alleviate anxiety in children.

The results revealed that anxiety is quite common among preschool-aged children. Separation from the mother was strongly associated with emotional distress, as children initially struggle to adapt independently to the preschool environment. Even children who do not show distress on their first day often begin to express anxiety in subsequent days, sometimes refusing to return to kindergarten without their parent. The initial absence of visible anxiety is often explained by novelty, curiosity, and excitement, but by the second or third day, as the newness fades, anxiety becomes evident.

"Anxiety is quite common. On their first visit to kindergarten, children find it difficult to separate from their mothers and show signs of attachment. Out of 20 new children, approximately 15 cry. It is rare for a child not to be anxious. Even those who do not initially show anxiety may not want to return by the second or third day." (Preschool teacher, female)

The study also explored the methods used to build trust and reduce emotional distress. Findings indicated that there is no universal approach; rather, individualized strategies are essential. Core elements such as warmth, emotional support, and acceptance of the child's emotional state were consistently highlighted.

Some children, however, do not respond to direct attention or support, preferring their mother exclusively. In such cases, giving children space and avoiding pressure was found to be most effective.

"There are children who neither need nor seek warmth from you. They just want their mother and refuse to accept my support. In such cases, we give them time to deal with it independently because no strategy works. Ignoring visible anxiety and reducing attention has been effective. Every child requires an individualized approach that meets their emotional needs." (Preschool teacher, female)

Behavioral expressions of anxiety varied. Many children initially exhibited indirect forms of anxiety, such as aggression or protest toward peers rather than the teacher. Over time, these behaviors generally diminished as children adapted. On average, it took approximately two months for children to fully acclimate to the preschool environment.

"Children express anxiety and emotional tension in various ways—sometimes by acting aggressively toward their peers. They create discomfort for other children because they are afraid to direct their feelings toward the teacher. I remember a few cases where children, in moments of distress, even bit their classmates." (Preschool teacher, female)

To examine anxiety in first-grade students, a semi-structured interview was conducted with a homeroom teacher. The discussion focused on children's behavior during school integration and strategies used to create a supportive classroom atmosphere.

Creating a positive, joyful, and welcoming environment on the first day of school was emphasized as critical. Children were encouraged to associate the beginning of the school year with excitement rather than fear. Sharing personal experiences and validating emotional states helped students recognize that anxiety is normal and temporary. Allowing students to explore the school and hear from older students who faced similar challenges reinforced a sense of shared experience and trust.

"On the first day, we create a very cheerful and warm atmosphere. If a child is anxious, I talk to them and share my own experience, explaining that these feelings are normal and they will adjust. I show them around the school and share stories of older students who had similar experiences." (First-grade teacher, female)

The teacher also noted that group activities and collaborative work can trigger anxiety, particularly due to perceived responsibility. Some children preferred working independently to avoid stress associated with mistakes or evaluation.

"They have difficulty participating. Even though they begin to communicate with peers, they feel a strong sense of responsibility, leading to anxiety. Some students prefer working independently to maintain control and accountability." (First-grade teacher, female)

Based on ten years of experience, the teacher identified separation anxiety from the mother as a primary cause of school-related anxiety. Children from unstable or chaotic home environments were especially vulnerable. Typically, the adaptation period lasted approximately three months—the duration of the first semester—with the possibility of extending up to a year in rare cases.

"One of the most significant causes of anxiety is missing their mothers. They struggle with separation. It takes the first three months to fully understand the new environment and adapt to the routine." (First-grade teacher, female)
"The first semester is emotionally difficult. Children need special emotional support and stronger connections. In rare cases, this period may extend up to a year." (School psychologist, female)

The school psychologist highlighted the importance of preparing children before their first official visit. Familiarization with the school environment, guided discussions about rules, expectations, and routines, and consistent collaboration among parents, teachers, and psychologists were identified as essential strategies for reducing anxiety and promoting emotional well-being.

3. Discussion

The present study provides valuable insights into the manifestation of anxiety among preschool-aged children and first-grade students during the transition to formal schooling. Quantitative findings indicated a higher frequency of anxiety symptoms among preschoolers compared to first-graders, suggesting that prior exposure to structured learning environments may help buffer initial stress responses.

Qualitative data enriched these findings by identifying the predominant types of anxiety—primarily separation anxiety and performance-related fears—and emphasizing the critical role of parental involvement and teacher support in facilitating emotional adjustment. Participants frequently highlighted strategies such as play-based activities, emotional validation, and the establishment of consistent routines as effective in reducing anxiety symptoms.

These results are consistent with developmental theories that underscore the importance of secure attachment and gradual adaptation in early childhood. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for early identification of emotional difficulties and the provision of proactive psychological support within educational settings. Overall, the findings contribute to a deeper scientific understanding of early childhood anxiety and point to specific, context-sensitive interventions that can promote children's emotional well-being during school transitions.

Limitation of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample included only neurotypical children, excluding those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), which limits the applicability of the results to broader developmental profiles. Second, the sample size was relatively small and geographically constrained, reducing the generalizability of the findings. Future research would benefit from a larger, more diverse sample to better capture the full range of childhood anxiety expressions and coping mechanisms.

4. Conclusion

The manifestations of anxiety in preschool children and first-grade students represent a significant and widespread issue. The emergence of anxiety is often inevitable during the process of integrating into the school environment. It is therefore essential to provide detailed information about the specifics of anxiety symptoms in order to alleviate emotional stress in children.

Quantitative analysis revealed the frequency of anxiety manifestations in preschool and first-grade children from an emotional-behavioral perspective, highlighting the presence and impact of anxiety in their daily lives. Statistical analysis of survey responses further examined differences based on gender, showing that boys exhibit significantly lower levels

of anxiety compared to girls. For comparative purposes, the frequency of anxiety manifestations was also assessed across preschool and first-grade children using a scoring system combined with statistical evaluation.

Qualitative findings provided insight into the types and levels of anxiety present in schools and kindergartens, emphasizing the critical role of attachment to parents. The study identified effective methods for preventing high anxiety levels during school integration and outlined strategies used by educators to reduce anxiety in kindergarten settings. Additionally, the research determined the average duration of adaptation to school and kindergarten environments.

Overall, the hypothesis that anxiety levels in preschool and first-grade children significantly influence their emotional and behavioral responses was confirmed.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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