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KNOWLEDGE OF PARENTS TOWARDS SEPARATION ANXIETY DISORDER IN SAUDI ARABIA

Psychiatry

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ABSTRACT

Background: Anxiety is a common condition among young children that can be detected in the early years of life. Separation anxiety is a subtype of anxiety that can affect young children and negatively influence their physical and intellectual development. Hence, the knowledge of parents about separation anxiety is crucial to reduce its incidence among children,

Objective: This survey analysis aims to investigate the knowledge of parents living in Saudi Arabia towards separation anxiety, its causes, risk factors diagnosis, and treatment.

Design and Setting: A self-administered structured survey was sent to the public online targeting parents. The survey included questions to collect data on parents' demographics, their children, their knowledge about separation anxiety, and any children with separation anxiety. Data analysis was excuted through SPSS program version 26.

Results: 1090 parents responded to this online survey, with 27.9% of them were in the age group between 36 to 45 years old, and 29.4% had two children aged less than 18 years old. As for the knowledge of patients regarding separation anxiety, 23.6% knew about the disease. 29.4% of parents strongly agreed that separation anxiety is a medical condition; 21.6% strongly agreed that these children are anxious and avoid going to school. As for parents who have children with separation anxiety, 7.6% of the parents had children with separation anxiety, and 7.3% had children with an age onset of the disease at less than four years old. As for treatment, 42.4% of the responders strongly agreed that separation anxiety should be treated as soon as possible to prevent mental health problems, and 73.2% of parents agreed that it could be achieved through family therapy, while only 4.2% of parents thought that there is no treatment for separation anxiety. The parents' average knowledge score was 4.6±3.6, with a minimum score of zero and a maximum score of 27. Factors that can significantly influence knowledge towards separation anxiety are gender, age group, nationality, marital status, educational level, employment status, place of residence, and having children less than 18 years old at p-value <0.001.

Conclusion: The knowledge of parents towards childhood separation anxiety is considered unsatisfactory and requires improvement. Awareness campaigns in public areas should be held for this purpose.

KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

Anxiety is a common condition, especially in childhood [1]. Additionally, separation anxiety is considered one of the most common disorders, particularly in pediatrics aging under 12 years old [2]. Some psychological models have shown the impact of some cognitive and family contributors on separation anxiety [3]. Hence, it is crucial to understand the reasons and relievers of separation anxiety [4].

Some adults' cognitive models have proposed that individuals with anxiety will selectively show avoidance of threatening situations [5]. Furthermore, recent studies on separation anxiety had comparable findings to these cognitive models. It has been revealed that children with separation anxiety usually have a higher social anxiety risk [6]. Additionally, there were cognitive biases detected in both separation and social anxiety in children [7].

The medical literature has also explained the influence of development in childhood anxiety [8]. It has been demonstrated that the failure to acquire inhibitory control on development can increase the risk of anxious children to develop attentional biases related to their anxiety [9].

There are multiple risk factors have been attributed to separation anxiety [10]. Some of these factors could be linked to parental behavior towards their children, such as being overprotective, significantly correlated to separation anxiety [11]. Accordingly, parents can play a significant role in the development and treatment of separation anxiety [12].

Parents' knowledge of separation anxiety can help them avoid exacerbating behaviors for this condition [13]. However, parents' knowledge of separation anxiety in Saudi Arabia is still unclear and requires further exploration.

Therefore, this investigation aims to explore the knowledge of parents towards separation anxiety in childhood in Saudi Arabia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study design:

This is a cross-sectional qualitative study carried out in Saudi Arabia through an online questionnaire distributed to the public. Only parents who filled the survey were included in the analysis.

Data collection:

An online self-developed questionnaire was distributed online to parents in Saudi Arabia. The survey mainly focused on collecting demographic data, number of children, knowledge about separation anxiety, age of onset, symptoms, and separation anxiety treatment.

Statistical analyses:

Data were described in the form of frequencies and percentages for categorical variables, while means and standard deviations were used to describe numerical variables. One-way ANOVA analysis was used to compare means among different groups. All P values < 0.05 were considered statistically significant. IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science; IBM Corp, Armonk, NY, USA) was used to perform all statistical calculations, version 26 for Microsoft Windows.

Ethical considerations:

Ethics board approval was acquired before conducting any study procedure. Confidentiality of the identity of responders was kept during the study. The participation of parents in the survey was entirely voluntary.

Results

One thousand and ninety parents responded to this online questionnaire. Only participants who completed all the questions in the questionnaire were included. The demographics of parents and the analysis of the questionnaire are shown below.

General Characters of responders:

Out of 1090 participants, 51.7% were females. Age was categorized into six age groups starting from 16 to 25 and ending with more than 65. 27.9% of the parents were in the age group between 36 to 45 years old. Additionally, 92.8% were Saudi, and 76.2% were married.

Regarding educational level, 57.2% of parents had a bachelor's degree, and 55.3% were employed. All the characters of the parents are shown in table 1.

Table 1. shows characters of responders to the questionnaire.

		Count	Percent
Gender	Male	527	48.3
	Female	563	51.7
Age group	16-25	249	22.8
	26-35	302	27.7
	36-45	304	27.9
	46-55	173	15.9
	56-65	57	5.2
	More than 65	5	0.5
Nationality	Saudi	1012	92.8
	Non-Saudi	78	7.2
Marital Status	Single	191	17.5
	Married	831	76.2
	Divorced	53	4.9
	Widowed	15	1.4
Educational Level	Primary school	22	2.0
	Secondary school	324	29.7
	Intermediate education	67	6.1
	Bachelor	624	57.2
	Masters	45	4.1
	Doctorate	8	0.7
Employment status	Unemployed	388	35.6
	Employed	603	55.3
	Retired	99	9.1

Parents were also asked about their place of residence. 48.4% of the parents were from the Western region, while only 2.3% were from the northern region, as shown in figure 1.

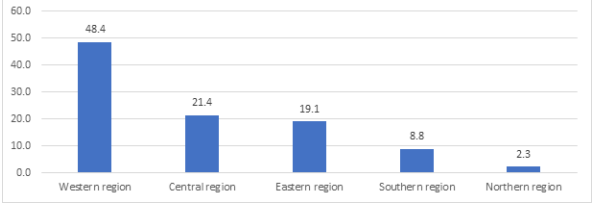

Figure 1. Place of residence.

Characters of children

Parents were also asked about their children. 66.2% of the parents had children, where 14.7% had two children, and 29.4% had two children aged less than 18 years old, as shown in table 2.

Table 2. Characters of children

		Count	Percent
Do you have children younger than 18 years old?	Yes	722	66.2
	No	368	33.8
How many children do you have?	1	94	8.6
	2	160	14.7
	3	140	12.8
	4	127	11.7
	5	114	10.5
	More than 5	128	11.7
How many children under 18 years old do you have?	1	183	24.7
	2	218	29.4
	3	172	23.2
	4	92	12.4
	5	76	10.3

Knowledge about separation anxiety

Parents were asked about their knowledge of separation anxiety. 23.6% of parents knew about separation anxiety. About a quarter of the responders strongly agreed that separation anxiety is a medical condition (29.4%) and that children with separation anxiety suffer from unjustified and excessive anxiety regarding separation from the home or parents. Additionally, 18% of the parents strongly agreed that separation anxiety is characterized by persistent crying when parents leave and is not calm by others, and 17.5% strongly agreed that they could act violently or harm themselves, and 21.6% strongly agreed that these children are anxious and avoid going to school, as shown in table 3.

Table 3. Knowledge about separation anxiety

		Count	Percent
Do you know about separation anxiety?	Yes	257	23.6
	No	833	76.4
Separation anxiety is a medical condition	Strongly agree	320	29.4
	Agree	548	50.3
	Neutral	190	17.4
	Disagree	26	2.4
	Strongly disagree	6	0.6
Do you think that a child with separation anxiety disorder suffers from unjustified and excessive anxiety regarding separation from the home or parents?	Strongly agree	271	24.9
	Agree	534	49.0
	Neutral	215	19.7
	Disagree	67	6.1
	Strongly disagree	3	0.3
A separation anxiety disorder characterized by intolerable or persistent crying when parents leave, and is not calm by others	Strongly agree	196	18.0
	Agree	465	42.7
	Neutral	351	32.2
	Disagree	76	7.0
	Strongly disagree	2	0.2
Children with separated anxiety disorder act violently and may harm themselves if they are separated from their parents or home.	Strongly agree	191	17.5
	Agree	443	40.6
	Neutral	359	32.9
	Disagree	84	7.7
	Strongly disagree	13	1.2
Children with a separated anxiety disorder will feel anxious and avoid going to school, nursery school, or kindergarten	Strongly agree	235	21.6
	Agree	525	48.2
	Neutral	253	23.2
	Disagree	69	6.3
	Strongly disagree	8	0.7

Parents with children having separation anxiety

Participants were asked about the age of their children when they got separation anxiety. 7.3% of parents had children with separation anxiety at the age of less than four years old, while only 0.5% of parents had children with separation anxiety at the age of 13 to 15 years old, as shown in figure 2.

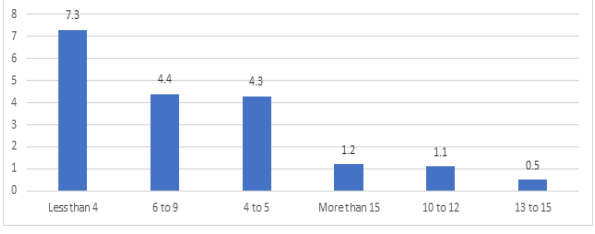

Figure 2. Age of onset of separation anxiety

Parents were also asked about the symptoms of their children. 7.6% of the parents had children with separation anxiety. Additionally, almost half of the parents described their children as secure when they are at home. While only 7.3% of parents always found their children having difficulty when going away from home for several hours. Also, 2.9% of parents found that their children always keep something in their bag to protect themselves.

Furthermore, 5% of the parents always found their children having extreme stress when they leave home and have nightmares when separated from their parents and feel reluctant and refusing to go to school, fearing separation.

Additionally, more than 10% of the parents described their children as always having trouble to sleep alone in a separate room, and better sleep when light is lit. However, only 3.7% of parents reported that their children always have physical symptoms when separated from parents, as shown in table 4.

Table 4. Parents' knowledge about their children's symptoms

		Count	Percent
Do you have a child with separation anxiety?	Yes	83	7.6
	No	769	70.6
	I do not know	238	21.8
Does your child feel more secure when at home, close to their parents, siblings, and grandparents?	Always	571	52.4
	Usually	312	28.6
	Sometimes	112	10.3
	Rarely	24	2.2
	Never	71	6.5
Does your child have difficulty going away from home for several hours?	Always	80	7.3
	Usually	163	15.0
	Sometimes	332	30.5
	Rarely	237	21.7
	Never	278	25.5
Does your child carry something in his purse or bag to protect himself or feel safe and at ease?	Always	32	2.9
	Usually	35	3.2
	Sometimes	123	11.3
	Rarely	120	11.0
	Never	780	71.6
Does your child have extreme stress when leaving home to go on a long trip?	Always	54	5.0
	Usually	86	7.9
	Sometimes	221	20.3
	Rarely	189	17.3
	Never	540	49.5
Does your child have nightmares or dreams about being separated from parents or home?	Always	44	4.0
	Usually	57	5.2
	Sometimes	178	16.3
	Rarely	184	16.9
	Never	627	57.5
Does your child appear reluctant or refusing to go to school or work or any regular activity in fear of separation?	Always	54	5.0
	Usually	87	8.0
	Sometimes	224	20.6
	Rarely	146	13.4
	Never	579	53.1
Does your child talk a lot to keep in contact with the parents, family, and friends around him?	Always	124	11.4
	Usually	172	15.8
	Sometimes	278	25.5
	Rarely	188	17.2
	Never	328	30.1
Is your child having trouble sleeping in a separate room alone at night?	Always	152	13.9
	Usually	150	13.8
	Sometimes	145	13.3
	Rarely	347	31.8
	Never	296	27.2
Does your child sleep better when the house lights or bedrooms are lit?	Always	141	12.9
	Usually	181	16.6
	Sometimes	300	27.5
	Rarely	191	17.5
	Never	277	25.4
Does your child complain of any physical symptoms (such as headache, stomach pain, nausea, or vomiting) when separation from parents or parents occurs, or when such separation is possible?	Always	40	3.7
	Usually	72	6.6
	Sometimes	233	21.4
	Rarely	184	16.9
	Never	561	51.5

Parents' thoughts on separation anxiety

Parents were also asked about their thoughts on separation anxiety. More than a third of the responders strongly agreed that separation anxiety should be treated as soon as possible to prevent mental health problems and that a doctor is needed if a child has symptoms of separation anxiety, and that stresses and losses can increase the risk of separation anxiety in children. Additionally, 46.2% of parents knew that separation anxiety could be diagnosed at the age of 6 to 9 years old, as shown in table 5.

Table 5. Parents' thoughts on separation anxiety

		Count	Percent
Do you think separation anxiety disorder should be treated as soon as possible to prevent any mental health problems or resort to drug and alcohol use in adulthood?	Strongly agree	462	42.4
	Agree	347	31.8
	Neutral	178	16.3
	Disagree	54	5.0
	Strongly disagree	49	4.5
Do you think that the way parents interact with their children has a significant impact on the occurrence of separation anxiety disorder in children?	Strongly agree	218	20.0
	Agree	445	40.8
	Neutral	342	31.4
	Disagree	28	2.6
	Strongly disagree	17	1.6
Separation anxiety disorder is more common in children	Males	185	17.0
	Females	169	15.5
	No difference	736	67.5
If separation anxiety disorder is not treated, it may lead to such consequences as depression, drug addiction, and suicide at puberty?	Strongly agree	276	25.3
	Agree	385	35.3
	Neutral	333	30.6
	Disagree	68	6.2
	Strongly disagree	28	2.6
At which of the following ages can a child's separative anxiety disorder be diagnosed?	2 to 5	400	36.7
	6 to 9	504	46.2
	10 to 15	139	12.8
	16 to 18	47	4.3
Do you think you should see a doctor if you see symptoms of separation anxiety disorder in your child?	Strongly agree	420	38.5
	Agree	445	40.8
	Neutral	161	14.8
	Disagree	42	3.9
	Strongly disagree	22	2.0
Do you think that stresses of life, loss of separation (such as the death of a family member or a divorce of parents) could lead to an increased risk of separative anxiety disorder in children?	Strongly agree	414	38.0
	Agree	463	42.5
	Neutral	175	16.1
	Disagree	22	2.0
	Strongly disagree	16	1.5
Do you think environmental factors, such as exposure to natural disasters, can be associated with a higher risk of developing separation anxiety disorder in children?	Strongly agree	246	22.6
	Agree	426	39.1
	Neutral	314	28.8
	Disagree	88	8.1
	Strongly disagree	16	1.5
Do you think that children with a family history of anxiety disorder are more likely to develop separation anxiety disorder?	Strongly agree	250	22.9
	Agree	457	41.9
	Neutral	301	27.6
	Disagree	64	5.9
	Strongly disagree	18	1.7

Parents were also asked about the treatment of separation anxiety. 73.2% of parents agreed that it could be achieved through family therapy, while only 4.2% of parents thought that there is no treatment for separation anxiety, as shown in figure 3.

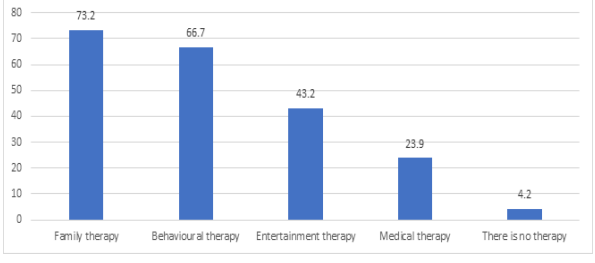

Figure 3. Treatment of separation anxiety

Knowledge towards separation anxiety

The correct answers score was calculated, where every correct answer or responses with " strongly agree" or "always" were given one point. The total score was then calculated and compared over different demographic variables using one-way ANOVA at the level of significance p-value < 0.05. The average score was 4.6±3.6, with a minimum score of zero and a maximum score of 27.

It has been shown that gender, age group, nationality, marital status, educational level, employment status, place of residence, and having children less than 18 years old were all factors affecting parents' level of knowledge towards separation anxiety at p-value <0.001 significantly.

Non-Saudi Male parents, in the age group between 16 to 25 years old, who were divorced, and had an intermediate level of education, unemployed, and lived in southern area, without children in the age group less than 18 years old, all of them had significantly higher scores compared to their peers as shown in table 6.

Table 6. Comparison of knowledge score over different demographic variables

		Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum	P-value
Gender	Male	4.7	3.6	0.0	20.0	<0.001
	Female	4.6	3.6	0.0	22.0	
Age group	16-25	5.1	3.8	0.00	22.00	<0.001
	26-35	4.7	3.7	0.00	20.00	
	36-45	4.3	3.5	0.00	20.00	
	46-55	4.5	3.6	0.00	19.00	
	56-65	4.8	3.3	0.00	14.00	
	More than 65	4.0	3.7	1.00	10.00	
Nationality	Saudi	4.6	3.6	0.0	22.0	<0.001
	Non-Saudi	4.7	3.6	0.0	16.0	
Marital Status	Single	4.6	3.5	1.0	9.0	<0.001
	Married	4.6	3.6	0.0	17.0	
	Divorced	5.4	3.9	0.0	22.0	
	Widowed	5.3	2.7	0.0	16.0	
Educational Level	Primary	4.7	3.6	0.0	12.0	<0.001
	Secondary	4.3	3.4	0.0	20.0	
	Intermediate	5.7	3.8	0.0	16.0	
	Bachelor	4.7	3.7	0.0	22.0	
	Masters	4.8	3.4	0.0	16.0	
	Doctorate	5.1	4.3	1.0	12.0	
Employment status	Unemployed	4.8	3.8	0.0	20.0	<0.001
	Employed	4.6	3.5	0.0	19.0	
	Retired	4.6	3.5	0.0	22.0	
Place of Residence	Eastern region	4.7	3.6	0.0	20.0	<0.001
	Western region	4.5	3.6	0.0	20.0	
	Middle region	4.9	3.5	0.0	22.0	
	Southern region	5.0	3.8	0.0	17.0	
	Northern region	4.9	4.2	0.0	20.0	
Do you have children less than 18 years old?	Yes	4.5	3.5	0.0	22.0	<0.001
	No	4.8	3.7	0.0	20.0	

*p value at level of significance < 0.05.

DISCUSSION

Separation anxiety is a common type of anxiety, particularly in childhood [14]. Patients with separation anxiety usually feel insecure and may progress to a severe condition that can present with physical symptoms in some cases [15]. Separation anxiety can also affect a child's development [16]. Accordingly, parents must understand the symptoms and treatment of separation anxiety to reduce the incidence of this condition and improve the quality of life of children [17].

The present investigation aimed to examine parents' knowledge in Saudi Arabia towards the symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of childhood separation anxiety. The study demonstrated that 23.6% of the parents knew about the disease. 7.6% of the parents had children with separation anxiety, and 7.3% had children with an age onset of the disease at less than four years old, and 29.4% of parents strongly agreed that separation anxiety is a medical condition.

Regarding the symptoms and treatment of separation anxiety, 42.4% of the responders strongly agreed that separation anxiety should be treated as soon as possible to prevent mental health problems, and 73.2% of parents agreed that it could be achieved through family therapy.

Knowledge of parents was objectively evaluated through a score for the best answers, with one point for each question. The parents' average knowledge score was 4.6±3.6, with a minimum score of zero and a maximum score of 27. Factors that can significantly influence knowledge towards separation anxiety are gender, age group, nationality, marital status, educational level, employment status, place of residence, and having children less than 18 years old at p-value <0.001. Childhood separation anxiety has been evaluated in different settings. Silove et al. [18] explored the different features of separation anxiety on an international level. Through surveying 38993 participants, Silove et al. [18] demonstrated that the prevalence of separation anxiety is 4.8%, and traumatic events usually accompany that separation anxiety.

In the present study, it has been shown that 7.6% of the responding parents had children with separation anxiety, and 7.3% had children with an age onset of the disease at less than four years old. Additionally, 38% of parents strongly agreed that life stressors, such as the death of a family member or divorce, could lead to an increased risk of the childhood of separation anxiety.

Also, Battaglia et al. [19] examined childhood separation anxiety in pre-school children. Battaglia et al. [19] surveyed 1933 families and demonstrated that most children developed separation anxiety at the age of a year and a half. However, they were expected to recover by family therapy at the age of 4 years old.

Although the present study illustrated that most common age of onset of childhood separation anxiety was less than four years old, 73.2% of parents agreed that it could be achieved through family therapy and 38.5% of the parents strongly agreed that they should see a doctor if their child showed symptoms of separation anxiety.

Furthermore, Paulus et al. [20] evaluated childhood separation anxiety in pre-school children by examining 1342 children aged between 4 and 7. Paulus et al. [20] demonstrated that separation anxiety is common among this age group, with a higher prevalence in girls than boys. Also, Paulus et al. [20] described family therapy as one of the best treatment modalities for this type of anxiety.

The findings of Paulus et al. [20] supports the outcomes of the present study. Additionally, the present study showed that parents' knowledge towards separation anxiety is significantly influenced by their gender, age group, nationality, marital status, educational level, employment status, place of residence, and having children less than 18 years old.

Additionally, the present study had some limitations; the parents' responses in this study depends mainly on their honesty and their subjective opinion which might affect the reliability of the findings from this study. This is the first study to evaluate the knowledge of Saudi parents towards childhood separation anxiety.

CONCLUSION

The knowledge of parents towards separation anxiety is considered unsatisfactory, where the score of knowledge questions was below-average level. This lack of knowledge requires increased government efforts through awareness campaigns in media and public events on the detection of separation anxiety and how parents should deal with it. Meanwhile, governments should provide support for children who have separation anxiety through the training of psychiatrists and psychologists on the management and support of these patients.

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