

THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The present study examines the first day of school as a significant psychological and social transition in the child’s development, marking the beginning of their more purposeful inclusion in the school educational environment. This moment is not limited solely to the formal beginning of schooling, but represents a complex process associated with changes in the child’s daily rhythm, social role, expectations, and emotional experiences.

In this sense, the first day of school may be regarded as an important adaptive stage in which both the individual characteristics of the child and the influence of the family and school environment become manifested. The main emphasis of the paper is placed on the relationship between attachment, separation anxiety, and social adaptation within the classroom environment. The theoretical framework is based on Attachment Theory, according to which early emotional relationships between the child and the parent are of substantial importance for the way in which the child experiences separation, uncertainty, and entry into a new social environment. Secure attachment is regarded as an important psychological resource that supports emotional stability, the sense of security, and the ability to build trust in new significant figures, including the teacher.

In the context of school adaptation, separation anxiety is interpreted as a natural emotional reaction that may manifest with varying intensity at the beginning of school life. Its gradual overcoming is associated with the accumulation of positive experience, the establishment of predictability in the environment, and the formation of initial social bonds within the classroom community. Social adaptation, in turn, is regarded as a process of inclusion in a new group, acceptance of school rules, establishment of interaction with peers, and development of an attitude towards learning activities.

The results obtained highlight the importance of early emotional relationships as a significant factor in the child’s successful inclusion in the school environment. They draw attention to the need for the first day of school and the subsequent adaptation period to be considered not only from an organisational perspective, but also from a psychological one. In this context, the supportive role of parents, teachers, and school specialists is of substantial importance for the smoother overcoming of anxiety and for the development of a positive attitude towards school.

The study has practical value for pedagogical and psychological work with children of early school age. It emphasises the need for a sensitive, consistent, and supportive approach at the beginning of schooling, aimed at creating a secure, predictable, and emotionally accepting educational environment.

Keywords: first day of school, attachment, separation anxiety, social adaptation, school adaptation

1. INTRODUCTION

The first day of school is one of the earliest significant transitions in a child’s development, marking their entry into a structured institutional educational environment. It is not only the formal beginning of schooling, but also a complex psychological situation in which cognitive, emotional, and social processes are activated simultaneously. From the perspective of educational and developmental psychology, this moment initiates a broader period of adaptation that may influence the child’s attitude towards school, learning, and participation in the classroom community.

This transition changes the child’s social position, as they move from a familiar environment to one defined by new rules, expectations, relationships, and authority figures. The child must gradually adopt new behavioural models, communicate with classmates, and recognise the teacher as a significant adult.

Initial experiences on this day may function as a psychological filter through which the school environment is interpreted. Positive experiences support motivation, belonging, and confidence, whereas negative ones may increase anxiety, avoidance, and adaptation difficulties. Therefore, the first school day should be understood as the beginning of a dynamic developmental process within the school context.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the principal factors that substantially shapes the manner in which a child experiences the first day of school is their psychological readiness for school. This readiness is expressed through several interrelated psycho-

emotional components that jointly determine the child's capacity to enter, interpret, and respond to the new educational environment.

Cognitive readiness encompasses the development of basic mental processes such as attention, memory, and thinking, which enable the child to participate adequately in learning activities. Emotional readiness is associated with the ability to regulate affective states such as anxiety, fear, and excitement, particularly in situations involving separation from parents. Social readiness includes the skills required for communication with peers and adults, as well as the capacity to comply with established rules and norms. Insufficient readiness in any of these domains may lead to difficulties in adaptation and increased sensitivity to stressful stimuli (Amai,2020).

In this regard, psychological readiness for school should not be understood as a static condition, but rather as a dynamic system of interacting factors that reflects the overall level of the child's development. As emphasized by J. Piaget (1952), cognitive development in early school age passes through a stage in which the child begins to construct more stable mental operations, while still requiring concrete support and a structured environment. This implies that cognitive readiness is not merely a matter of accumulated knowledge, but also of the child's ability to engage actively in the learning process through understanding, interpreting, and applying information.

In turn, the sociocultural approach of L. Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the role of social interaction and adult support in the acquisition of new skills. In the context of the first day of school, this suggests that the presence of a sensitive and supportive teacher, together with opportunities for cooperative learning, can significantly facilitate the transition into the school environment, particularly for children with a lower level of readiness.

Emotional readiness acquires particular significance during the phase of initial adaptation, as it is directly related to the child's ability to cope with the stress associated with the new environment. In this respect, J. Bowlby (1969) emphasizes that the quality of early attachment has a significant impact on the way in which the child responds to separation from parents and to encounters with unfamiliar situations. Children with secure attachment typically demonstrate a higher degree of emotional stability and are more capable of building trust with new significant adults, such as the teacher (Gascon,2026).

Social readiness, in turn, is closely connected with the processes of socialization and identity formation. Within the framework of E. Erikson's psychosocial theory (1963), early school age is characterized by the crisis of "industry versus inferiority", during which the child begins to evaluate their abilities through comparison with others. Successful inclusion in the group and acceptance by peers play a key role in the development of positive self-esteem and a sense of competence.

Additionally, individual differences in temperament, as discussed by Thomas and Chess (1977), also influence the way in which the child experiences the first day of school. Children with higher sensitivity or lower adaptability may exhibit more intense stress reactions, which requires a more careful and individualized approach on the part of adults.

In conclusion, psychological readiness for school represents a multi-layered construct that integrates the child's cognitive, emotional, and social resources. Its level determines not only the child's initial experience of the school environment, but also lays the foundation for future learning motivation, adaptation, and overall psychological well-being.

The first day of school may also be defined as a specific stressful situation that requires the mobilization of the child's individual adaptive resources. Within the transactional model of stress proposed by R. Lazarus and S. Folkman (1984), the cognitive appraisal of the situation is of central importance—namely, whether it is perceived as a threat, a challenge, or a neutral event. This primary appraisal is closely related to the level of psychological readiness: children with better-developed cognitive and emotional skills are more likely to interpret the new environment as an opportunity for learning rather than as a source of risk. In this regard, the coping strategies employed by the child play a crucial role in successful adaptation. Some children display problem-oriented behavior, such as seeking help from the teacher, asking questions, and actively participating in activities. Others resort to emotionally oriented strategies, such as seeking comfort or avoiding social contact. The effectiveness of these strategies depends not only on individual characteristics, but also on the presence of a supportive environment that validates the child's experiences and encourages adaptive coping patterns.

From the ecological perspective proposed by U. Bronfenbrenner (1979), adaptation to the first day of school should be considered within the context of interacting systems, including the family, the school, and the wider social environment. Coherence between these systems, such as similar expectations and supportive messages from parents and teachers, significantly reduces the likelihood of maladaptation and facilitates the transition to the new role of student. In this sense, the first day of school may be understood not as an isolated episode, but as a processual event that reflects the degree of integration between the child's internal resources and the external conditions of the environment. It is precisely at this point that individual development and social influence intersect, which determines the long-term significance of this transition for mental functioning and the educational trajectory.

In this regard, separation anxiety constitutes a specific form of emotional reaction that occurs when the child is actually or expectedly separated from their primary attachment figure. Within the framework of normal development, it is considered an adaptive phenomenon that signals the importance of the relationship with the caring adult and serves a protective function. However, in certain situations, particularly when entering a new social environment such as school, this anxiety may manifest with increased intensity and complicate the adaptation process (Nulman & Margalit, 2025).

The theoretical framework of this phenomenon is most fully developed within Attachment Theory, formulated by J. Bowlby (1969). According to Bowlby, early emotional relationships between the child and their primary caregiver form internal working models that determine the way in which the child perceives the security, support, and predictability of the environment. In this sense, attachment is not merely an emotional relationship, but an organizing system that regulates the child's behavior under conditions of stress and uncertainty.

Empirical research in this field, including the work of M. Ainsworth (1978), shows that children with a secure attachment style demonstrate a higher degree of emotional regulation and more effective coping strategies in situations of separation. They tend to show short-term anxiety when separated from the parent, but quickly regain emotional balance and engage in exploration of the new environment. In contrast, children with insecure attachment patterns, whether avoidant, ambivalent, or disorganized, often display more intense and prolonged anxiety reactions, including crying, withdrawal, and difficulty calming down (Paquette, et al., 2024).

In the context of the first day of school, separation anxiety may be regarded as an indicator of the degree of adaptation to the new environment. It is manifested through behavioral reactions such as clinging to the parent, verbal expression of fear, refusal to enter the classroom, increased bodily tension, and difficulty concentrating. The intensity and duration of these reactions are closely related to the quality of attachment, as well as to the presence of supportive factors in the environment (Koç, 2023).

From the perspective of stress and adaptation models, such as that of R. Lazarus and S. Folkman (1984), separation anxiety may be interpreted as the result of the initial appraisal of the situation as threatening. Children with secure attachment are more likely to perceive separation as temporary and manageable, whereas insecure attachment activates a stronger stress response, accompanied by maladaptive behavioral patterns (Marzuqi, et al., 2025).

In this sense, the relationship between attachment and separation anxiety is of key importance for understanding the processes of adaptation at the beginning of schooling. It is precisely this relationship that justifies the choice of a research approach that combines the assessment of attachment through a parent survey with the tracking of behavioral manifestations of anxiety through systematic observation in a real school environment.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Hypotheses

In accordance with the design of the study, the following main variables were identified: degree of the child's attachment to the parent; level of separation anxiety on the first day of school; degree of social adaptation within the classroom environment.

Attachment is regarded as the independent variable, while separation anxiety and social adaptation are analysed as dependent behavioural indicators. The following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Better school readiness is associated with a higher degree of social adaptation within the classroom environment.
2. A higher degree of secure attachment is associated with lower levels of separation anxiety on the first day of school.

3.2. Research sample

The study included a total of 86 pupils entering first grade, aged 6–7 years. The selection of participants was carried out using a convenience sample from three general education schools located in an urban environment. In terms of gender distribution, the sample included 44 girls (51.2%) and 42 boys (48.8%), which allows for a relatively balanced representation of both genders.

All children were in the initial stage of schooling and were undergoing the transition from a preschool to a school educational environment, which makes them particularly suitable for examining adaptation processes on the first day of school. The majority of participants had previous experience in an organised group environment, such as kindergarten or preparatory group, which presupposes the presence of basic social skills, but does not exclude individual differences in the degree of adaptation.

The choice of this sample was determined by the aims of the study, which are directed towards tracing the psychological aspects of adaptation at the initial stage of schooling, including manifestations of separation anxiety and the formation of social relationships within the classroom environment.

3.3. Research methods

The present study was conducted within a quantitative–qualitative approach, combining the survey method and systematic observation. The research design allows for the simultaneous examination of parents’ subjective assessments regarding the emotional bond with the child, as well as the objective monitoring of children’s behavioural manifestations in a real school environment.

The questionnaire was completed by parents and included questions aimed at examining the degree of the child’s attachment, the specific characteristics of their reactions in situations of separation, and the factors supporting their emotional calming. The observation was conducted under the natural conditions of the classroom during the first two weeks of the educational process, with indicators of separation anxiety and social adaptation being monitored.

3.3.1. Survey Method

The instrument included closed-ended and open-ended questions aimed at assessing: the child’s behaviour under emotional tension; their reactions in situations of separation; verbal expression of fear; the ability to regain emotional balance.

The closed-ended questions were structured in the form of a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “never” to “always”, which allows for the quantitative measurement of the manifestations. The open-ended questions supplement the quantitative data through a qualitative description of the individual characteristics of the child’s behaviour. Based on the responses obtained, an integral indicator of the degree of attachment security was formed, with higher values indicating a more stable and secure emotional bond.

3.3.2. Systematic Observation Method

In order to examine the behavioural manifestations of children in the school environment, the method of structured observation was used. The observation was conducted under natural conditions — in the classroom — with the aim of achieving high validity.

A previously developed observation protocol was used, comprising two main sections:

A) Indicators of Separation Anxiety

Behavioural manifestations such as the following were monitored: crying during separation; clinging to the parent; verbal expression of fear, such as “I don’t want to” or “I am afraid”; refusal to enter the classroom; difficulty calming down after separation, lasting more than 10 minutes.

B) Indicators of Social Adaptation

Aspects of inclusion in the classroom environment were assessed, such as: initiating and maintaining contact with classmates; participation in group activities; following rules; interaction with the teacher; manifestations of social withdrawal or isolation.

Each indicator was assessed using a four-point scale, ranging from “not observed” to “strongly expressed”, which allows for the quantitative processing of the observed behaviour.

3.4. Procedure

Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from the parents of all children. The anonymity of the participants was guaranteed through the use of coded identifiers during data processing.

The study was conducted within the first two weeks from the beginning of the school year. The questionnaires were completed by the parents at the beginning of the research period.

The observation was carried out according to the following plan: on the first day of school, during arrival and separation from the parent; during the first school week; at the end of the second school week.

This approach allows for tracing the dynamics of the adaptation process and the changes in children’s behavioural reactions.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The processing of the empirical data allows for tracing the relationships between the main indicators examined: degree of attachment, separation anxiety, and social adaptation within the classroom environment.

For the purposes of the analysis, three composite indicators were formed: attachment index, derived from the responses in the questionnaire completed by the parents; separation anxiety index, derived from the observation of the child’s behaviour in situations of separation; social adaptation index, formed on the basis of the child’s observed participation in classroom interaction during the first two weeks.

The responses to the closed-ended questions in the questionnaire were coded using a five-point scale, and a total score was calculated for each child. Higher values reflect a higher degree of secure attachment.

The observation data were summarised through aggregate scores for the individual indicators, with higher values for separation anxiety indicating more strongly expressed anxiety reactions, and higher values for social adaptation indicating better inclusion in the classroom environment (Table 1).

Table 1. Mean Separation Anxiety Index among Pupils with Higher and Lower Secure Attachment

Group of Pupils	Mean Separation Anxiety Index
Pupils with Higher Secure Attachment	1.42
Pupils with Lower Secure Attachment	2.37

Source: Authors' research

These results show that pupils with secure attachment respond more calmly during separation, confirming the first hypothesis: higher secure attachment is associated with lower separation anxiety on the first school day. The secure emotional bond with the parent appears to perform a protective function in a new and potentially stressful environment. Observation data further indicate that children with higher secure attachment more easily establish contact with peers, participate confidently in group activities, accept the teacher's instructions more quickly, and show fewer signs of isolation or social withdrawal. The systematic observation outlines clear tendencies in children's behaviour related to separation anxiety and social adaptation in the classroom. It examines three key moments: the first day of school, the end of the first week, and the end of the second week, enabling the dynamics of adaptation to be traced. On the first day, a considerable proportion of children displayed anxiety of varying intensity when separating from the parent at the classroom entrance.

The most frequently observed reactions were as follows, with the total percentage exceeding 100, as more than one reaction was observed in some children: crying during separation - in approximately 38% of the children; clinging to the parent - around 29%; verbal expression of fear, such as "I don't want to" or "I am afraid" - 34%; refusal to enter the classroom - 21%; difficulty calming down after separation, lasting more than 10 minutes — 31%.

In approximately one third of the children, anxiety manifested with moderate to high intensity, whereas the remaining children demonstrated relatively calm separation. The temporal dynamics of separation anxiety can be traced in Table 2.

Table 2. Dynamics of separation Anxiety

Behaviour	Day 1	Week 1	Week 2
Crying during separation	38%	22%	11%
Clinging to the parent	29%	17%	8%
Verbal expression of fear	30%	19%	10%
Refusal to enter the classroom	26%	14%	6%
Difficulty calming down after separation	31%	18%	9%

Source: Authors' research

A significant reduction in anxiety is observed, particularly after the first week. In a large percentage of the children, anxiety decreases within the first 3-4 days. Only in approximately 10% does it persist for a longer period, indicating a risk group. It is evident that **the first two weeks constitute a critical adaptation period**, during which a substantial transformation in behaviour is observed - from anxiety towards inclusion and social activity. A comparative analysis between children with higher and lower secure attachment shows that the first group has higher mean values on the social adaptation indicator.

The results further indicate that, with the passage of time and the decrease in anxiety, social adaptation also increases (Table 3).

Table 3. Dynamics of Social Adaptation

Behaviour	Day 1	Week 1	Week 2
Initiating and maintaining contact with classmates	42%	61%	74%
Participation in group activities	49%	67%	81%
Following rules	61%	73%	85%
Interaction with the teacher	63%	74%	87%
Manifestations of social withdrawal or isolation	27%	18%	9%

Source: Authors' research

These data appear logical in view of the fact that the child's psyche is highly adaptive, and each day spent in the school environment contributes to this process. The pupil is able to rapidly develop their own coping repertoire, and by the end of the second week has almost adapted to the new conditions and daily routine. Of course, this refers to initial adaptation. A deeper level of adaptation may require a longer period of time.

The analysis of the data further establishes a clear relationship between the degree of secure attachment and the capacity for social adaptation. Pupils who have developed a more secure emotional bond with their parents experience fewer adaptation difficulties and integrate more easily into school life. (Table 4).

Table 4. Mean Social Adaptation Index among Pupils with Higher and Lower Secure Attachment

Group of Pupils	Mean Social Adaptation Index
Pupils with Higher Secure Attachment	2.71
Pupils with Lower Secure Attachment	1.89

Source: Authors' research

5. SUMMARY

The data indicate that secure attachment not only reduces separation anxiety, but also supports the child's more successful inclusion in the new social environment. Logical and consistent interrelationships exist among the main indicators examined. A higher degree of secure attachment is accompanied by lower separation anxiety and better social adaptation. In turn, strongly expressed separation anxiety is associated with more difficult inclusion in the school environment.

The observations from the first two weeks show a positive adaptation process: children's anxiety gradually decreases, while their social inclusion increases. The findings support the study's hypotheses and suggest that secure attachment plays an important role in the child's adjustment to school. A strong emotional bond with the parent helps the child cope better with separation and adapt more successfully to the new social and educational environment.

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