Arrival Time Behavior of Two-Year-Olds in Child Care

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ABSTRACT: Twenty two-year-old children enrolled in a full day child care program were observed as they entered each morning to determine their behavior as they separated from their parents. Over 50% of the entrances involved children showing signs of contentment by waving and smiling. Fifty-five percent of the separations involved children using materials that were available in the classroom, most often sensory materials such as sand, water, and playdoh. The second most frequent separation aid was the use of transitional objects such as stuffed animals, blankets, and other toys brought from home. As a result of the observations, recommendations are made to assist caregivers in making arrival time easier for children, parents, and teachers.

Child care and daily separations from parents have become a common occurrence for many young children. One of the most common separations during the day is the transition from home to the child care center (Cummins & Beagles-Ross; 1984; Provence, Naylor, & Patterson, 1977). While some researchers have focused on the separation and attachment between parent and child (Caldwell, 1970; Cummins, 1980; Farran & Ramey, 1977) and others have examined factors influencing children's responses to separation (Bloom-Feshbach, Bloom-Feshbach, & Gaughran, 1980; Gross, 1970, Miller, 1968; Weinraub & Lewis, 1977), little consideration has been given to the strategies used by children as they enter the child care environment during arrival time. The purpose of this article is to examine the arrival time behavior of two-year-old children in a full-time child care program.

Method

Subjects

Twenty children, eight girls and 12 boys, between the ages of 24 and 36 months who attended a university-operated full-day child care program were observed. The children's parents were university students, faculty, and staff. The children were enrolled in the child care center approximately six weeks prior to the beginning of the observations; consequently, all of the children were familiar with the teachers and other children in the center. The children were no longer

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experiencing obvious signs of initial separation anxiety that is often associated with entering an unfamiliar environment.

Data Collection

The children were observed for 15 consecutive days as they entered the child care program during arrival time. An observational technique, event sampling, was used to gather data.

Prior to the actual collection of data, the observers developed a coding system. The system was developed by using videotapes of children entering a preschool classroom and separating from a parent. The coding system included defining the event and categories to be observed as well as setting guidelines for determining how each event was coded.

As a result, the event, arrival time, was defined as: the parents entering the classroom with the child; the child separating to a material or person; and the parent leaving the room. Observations were recorded by two observers and the correlation of agreement was .84. Observations were coded in three areas: entrance behavior; separation behavior; and separation patterns. Entrance behavior was described as the parent and child entering the classroom. Separation behavior was the parent leaving the room and the parent and/or child acknowledging that the parent was leaving. Separation patterns were the methods that children used to leave their parents and gain entrance into the classroom.

Entrance and separation behaviors were coded using the descriptors: exuberance, contentment, reluctance, discomfort, disinterest, and aggression. Exuberance was recorded when the child entered the classroom showing obvious signs of excitement and joy. One might say that the child “bounds into the room.” Contentment, a milder form of pleasure, was coded when the child was observed kissing, hugging, waving, or smiling at the parent. In several cases, children made statements such as: “Goodbye, see you tonight” or “Goodbye, I love you, Mom.” Reluctance was coded when the child demonstrated an unwillingness or hesitation in entering the classroom. Children were described as showing discomfort if they were crying, whining, sulking, or clinging to a parent. If the child ignored or did not attend to the parent, the child's behavior was coded as disinterest. Aggression was coded if the child showed signs of hostility such as kicking, yelling, or screaming. The separation patterns used by the child were coded as: separates to peers; separates to adults; separates by being alone; separates to materials that were prepared by the teacher and available in the classroom; and separates by using transitional objects or materials brought from home such as stuffed animals, dolls, and favorite toys.

To avoid confusion when coding each particular behavior, the observers set guidelines for coding each event. For example, only the child's initial response to each category within the event was coded. Therefore, if a child moved into an area where materials and a teacher were both available, we coded the behavior based on whether the child approached the material or teacher first. Some children would go to a table with both materials and a teacher and most often would begin to interact with one or the other initially. This type of situation occurred infrequently since there was usually only one teacher available during arrival time. The teacher spent most of the time greeting children and parents.