



PRESS RELEASE

Returning to School: Separation Problems and Anxiety in the Age of Pandemics

Around the world, particularly in COVID-19 hot spots, parents and school staff are anxious about reopening schools. In addition to concerns about contracting and spreading the virus, returning to school after an extended period of confinement may be stressful in itself, even as the timing remains uncertain in many areas.

In their July 15 article, [“Returning to School: Separation Problems and Anxiety in the Age of Pandemics,”](#) child psychologists Martha Pelaez and Gary Novak offer recommendations based on scientific studies for parents and teachers to prevent or minimize difficulty in parent/child separation. The article appears in a special issue of Behavior Analysis in Practice, a journal of the Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI).

According to Pelaez and Novak, the months-long stay-at-home orders are likely to make separation anxiety worse than usual. There is a strong connection between children’s school anxiety and parenting behavior; studies have shown that partial attention to the early stages of child protests and mismanagement of them only make protests stronger. Per the authors, “A child’s separation protests are routinely cued by a parent’s preparation to leave the child in school. The protests may take the form of grabbing the parent’s body or clothes, clinging, pleading or throwing a loud tantrum, and refusal to leave the parent.” The results of these interactions may include disrupting the classroom; upsetting the parent, teachers, and other students; and reinforcing the child’s unwillingness to remain at school.

Pelaez and Novak provide a number of practical steps for parents to reduce anxiety and its associated protests, and to deal with them when they do occur:

- Learn the school’s COVID-19 distancing and safety rules and review them with children.
- Develop plans with teachers to ease children’s return and engagement. Share your plans with teachers.
- Before the first day of school reopening, help children understand what is happening and provide reassurance.
- Observe carefully what children say and how they feel and act about returning to school, including any worries.
- Model being calm, and encourage children to be calm as well.

- Help children learn about classroom changes and rehearse the COVID-19 rules, and encourage them to engage with teachers and other children before you depart.
- Announce your departure for school without making a fuss.
- Explain to children what is occurring and when to expect you back.
- Depart without vacillating.
- Don’t return if children begin to protest.
- Behave consistently, so children learn this will be the norm.
- Decrease stress by maintaining routines.

The authors also encourage teachers and parents to remember that children are always observing and learning from others. Children’s social and emotional behavior will mirror adults’ distress and anxiety.

About the Association for Behavior Analysis International

The Association for Behavior Analysis International (ABAI) contributes to the well-being of society by developing, enhancing, and supporting the growth and vitality of the science of behavior analysis through research, education, and practice. Established in 1974, ABAI has become the hub of the behavior analysis community, with more than 9,000 members worldwide, and affiliated chapter membership of more than 28,000. Among ABAI’s services to the field are events, online learning, and publication of peer-reviewed journals that promote dissemination of the science. Services to members include job placement and support of more than three dozen special interest groups and 93 affiliated chapters worldwide. Go to www.abainternational.org for more information.

Press Contact

Katie Mahaffy, Ph.D.
550 West Centre Avenue, Ste. 1
Portage, Michigan 49024
(269) 492-9310
kmahaffy@abainternational.org