



## A Person-Centered Therapy Approach in Counseling for Early Childhood Children Experiencing Separation Anxiety at School

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### Abstract

This study aims to describe the application of the Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) approach in counseling to help early childhood children experiencing separation anxiety while attending school in Lubuk Linggau City. Separation anxiety arises when children feel afraid and insecure when separated from their parents, characterized by crying, refusal to go to school, and a desire for parents to accompany them. This study used a qualitative approach with a case study method through observation, interviews, and documentation of children, teachers, parents, and school counselors. The results showed that the application of PCT, which emphasizes empathy, unconditional acceptance, and authenticity of the counselor, can create a safe and comfortable counseling atmosphere for children. Through this process, children learn to recognize, express, and manage their feelings better. This approach is effective in reducing separation anxiety, increasing self-confidence, and helping children adapt to the school environment. The success of this approach lies not only in the counseling technique, but also in the quality of the empathetic relationship between the counselor, child, teacher, and parent. With the support of an accepting environment, children can develop a sense of security, self-confidence, and readiness to adapt to the school environment.

**Keywords:** *Person-Centered Therapy, Early Childhood Counseling, Separation Anxiety, School Adaptation*



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### INTRODUCTION

Early childhood is a significant period in human life, as it is during this period that the foundations of personality, emotions, and social skills begin to form (Siswanto, Zaelansyah, Susanti, & Fransiska, 2019). Generally, early childhood spans the ages of 0–6, a time when children experience rapid growth and development, both physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally (Faizah, Hamzah, Farantika, Utama, & Anggia, 2024). During this period, a child's early experiences – such as parenting styles, peer interactions, and educational environments – will have a long-term impact on the development of their personality and character (Utama, Arif, & Maharsi, 2024). For example, children who grow up in a loving and secure environment are more likely to develop self-confidence and positive social interaction skills (Agustia, Ismaraida, &

Nofianti, 2022). Conversely, negative experiences such as rejection, lack of attention, or an unsupportive environment can hinder a child's emotional and social development and even impact their future behavior and adjustment.

According to Elizabeth B. Hurlock, early childhood is the most important period to pay attention to in individual development, because it is during this stage that very rapid growth and change occur both physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually (B. Hurlock, 2010). Hurlock emphasized that the experiences a child undergoes during this period will leave a deep impression and become the foundation for the formation of the child's personality, attitudes, and behavior in adulthood (Hurlock, 2002). In other words, early childhood is a time that determines the direction of a child's development in the future (Sari, 2023). Therefore, it is important for parents, educators, and the surrounding environment to provide positive experiences, a sense of security, affection, and appropriate stimulation so that a child's potential can develop optimally (Yusuf, Utama, & Rachmad, 2025).

One of the challenges that often arises in early childhood is separation anxiety. Separation anxiety is a condition in which a child feels afraid, anxious, or uncomfortable when separated from a primary attachment figure, such as a parent or close family member (Nesta & Razzaq, Abdur Fitri, Hartika Utami, Yoesoep Edhie Rachmad, 2024). This condition generally arises because at an early age, children are at a developmental stage where emotional attachment to their parents is very strong, while their ability to understand that separation is temporary is still limited (Arini, Mudjito, & Hariyati, 2021). When children start school or are in a new environment without their parents present, they will sometimes cry, resist separation, or show signs of emotional distress (Han, Wang, Qian, & Shi, 2023). According to John Bowlby's theory of attachment, separation anxiety is a normal response to the threat of losing an attachment figure who provides a sense of security (Bowlby, 1979). If handled properly through an empathetic approach and emotional support, children will learn that separation is only temporary and will still feel safe even if their parents are not always by their side (Marrone, 2014). However, if ignored or handled incorrectly, separation anxiety can develop into a more serious emotional disorder and hinder a child's ability to adjust to their social environment. Therefore, an effective counseling approach is needed to help children manage feelings of anxiety and build a sense of security when facing a separation situation with their family (Amnah, Muhammad, & Jefri, 2022).

Separation anxiety in early childhood is normal, but if not properly managed, it can negatively impact a child's emotional development and learning process (Lücke et al., 2021). Children experiencing separation anxiety tend to have difficulty concentrating in school because their thoughts are focused on worries about their parents or their home environment (Tabei, Hasani, Negahban Bonabi, Kargar, & Tamadon, 2025). Furthermore, children may become reluctant to interact with peers, withdraw from social activities, and even refuse to go to school (Nicoară, Marian, Petriș, Delcea, & Manole, 2023). These impacts can hinder the development of independence, self-confidence, and social adaptation skills (Alyahyan, 2024). Separation anxiety has been found in early childhood children in the Lubuk Linggau area of South Sumatra. Based on initial observations at several early childhood education institutions, several teachers reported that many children still cry, are reluctant to attend class, and constantly search for their parents in the early days of school. Some children even exhibit behaviors such as refusing to eat, withdrawing from peers, or asking to go home before the end of the school day. This suggests that

some children in the area are having difficulty adjusting to the new school environment, primarily due to a fear of separation from their parents.

Therefore, an effective counseling approach is needed to help children understand and manage their feelings of anxiety. Through counseling, children can be guided to recognize their emotions, learn to calm themselves, and build a sense of security and trust in their environment outside the family (Amnah et al., 2022). One approach that can be used is Person-Centered Therapy, which emphasizes unconditional acceptance, empathy, and warmth from the counselor to help children feel accepted and safe. With the right support, children will be better able to adjust and face the separation situation more calmly.

Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) was developed by Carl R. Rogers. This approach focuses on empowering individuals through a warm, empathetic, and accepting counseling relationship. Rogers emphasized that in the counseling process, the relationship between counselor and client must be based on three main conditions: empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness. In the context of children experiencing separation anxiety, applying this approach allows counselors to create a safe and supportive environment, where children can express feelings of fear, sadness, or anxiety without fear of judgment (Rogers, 2008). Through the counselor's empathy and acceptance, children will feel understood and accepted for who they are, so they can gradually develop a sense of security and confidence in facing separation situations. Furthermore, through the counselor's authenticity and sincerity in interactions, children learn that new environments such as school can also be comfortable and positive places. Thus, Person-Centered Therapy helps children develop emotional resilience and the ability to adapt more healthily to change and separation (Masi, Mucci, & Millepiedi, 2001).

Research on the use of Person-Centered Therapy in counseling children experiencing separation anxiety is important to examine, as it can provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the fields of early childhood education and counseling. Theoretically, this research enriches the study of counseling psychology regarding the effectiveness of a humanistic approach in addressing children's emotional problems. Practically, the results of this study are expected to serve as a reference for teachers, school counselors, and parents in assisting children experiencing separation anxiety, thus optimizing their adaptation to the school environment.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study. This approach was chosen because the researcher wanted to understand in depth how the application of Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) in the counseling process can help children experiencing separation anxiety when starting school. Qualitative research is naturalistic and aims to describe the phenomena that occur in the field as they are, making it highly relevant to explore children's subjective experiences and the views of teachers, counselors, and parents regarding the counseling process (Behmanesh, Alhosseini, & Azadi, 2023). This research was conducted at an early childhood education institution in Lubuk Linggau City, South Sumatra. This location was chosen because, based on initial observations, several children showed signs of separation anxiety at the start of the school year, such as crying, refusing to enter class, or constantly seeking the presence of their parents. The research was planned to last for

three months, covering the preparation stage, data collection, data analysis, and the preparation of the final research report. The main subjects in this study were early childhood children experiencing separation anxiety at school. In addition, this study also involved several supporting informants, namely class teachers, parents, and counselors or Guidance and Counseling (BK) teachers who played a direct role in the process of implementing Person-Centered Therapy. The selection of subjects and informants was carried out using purposive sampling, namely based on the consideration that they have experience and understanding relevant to the phenomenon being studied.

This study used three main data collection techniques: observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to observe children's behavior before, during, and after counseling sessions, particularly when children interacted at school without their parents present. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers, parents, and counselors to gain broader information about the children's emotional state and the effectiveness of the counseling approach used (Sun et al., 2023). Meanwhile, documentation techniques were used to collect various supporting documents, such as counseling notes, teacher reports, and photographs of relevant learning activities. The collected data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive data analysis techniques. The analysis process followed the interactive model by Miles and Huberman, which includes three main steps: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data reduction stage, researchers selected and simplified data relevant to the research focus. Next, the reduced data was presented in narrative form, tables, or matrices for easier understanding. The final stage involved drawing conclusions based on field findings and verifying the validity of the data to ensure the research results could be accounted for.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) Approach**

The Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) approach is a humanistic counseling school developed by Carl R. Rogers in the 1940s. This approach is based on the view that every individual has the innate potential to develop positively and achieve self-actualization when placed in a supportive environment. Rogers believed that humans are fundamentally good, rational beings, and capable of making constructive decisions for themselves if given the opportunity to understand and accept themselves as a whole. In theory, Person-Centered Therapy is based on the concept of self-actualization, namely the natural drive of individuals to optimally realize their potential, talents, and abilities. Rogers believed that psychological disorders often arise when there is a discrepancy (incongruence) between self-concept (self-image) and actual experiences (Rogers, 2008). This discrepancy causes individuals to feel depressed, inauthentic, and have difficulty accepting themselves. Therefore, the main goal of PCT is to help clients achieve congruence, namely the harmony between self-views and life experiences through a process of self-understanding and self-acceptance.

In practice, this approach emphasizes the therapeutic relationship between counselor and client as the primary factor in change. Rogers proposed three core conditions that counselors must embody for the counseling process to be effective:

### ***Empathy***

The counselor's ability to deeply understand the client's feelings and perspectives as if he or she were in their shoes. Empathy is a key component of the Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) approach proposed by Carl R. Rogers. Empathy is defined as the counselor's ability to deeply understand the client's feelings, thoughts, and experiences, as if the counselor were in their own shoes, while maintaining the awareness that he or she is merely a companion, not a part of that experience. Through empathy, the counselor attempts to enter the client's inner world and understand how the client views and feels a situation from their own perspective. This goes beyond passive listening, but also includes the ability to feel what the client feels with sensitivity and sincerity (Martinez & Gomez, 2024). In the counseling process, empathy allows the counselor to provide warm, non-judgmental understanding, so that the client feels safe, accepted, and understood. This feeling of being understood is crucial because it helps the client become more open, honest, and reflective about themselves. Psychologically, empathy also helps clients develop self-awareness and acceptance of their emotions, which can ultimately accelerate the healing process and positive change. In the context of children experiencing separation anxiety, a counselor's empathetic attitude helps them feel heard and understood, thereby reducing their fear or anxiety and replacing them with a sense of security and trust.

### ***Unconditional positive regard***

Accepting clients as they are without judging, evaluating, or forcing change. In the Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) approach developed by Carl R. Rogers, this principle describes the counselor's attitude of fully accepting clients as they are, without judgment, criticism, or placing any conditions. In this context, the counselor does not demand that clients become "ideal" or conform to the expectations of others, but rather values their existence as unique individuals with all their strengths and weaknesses. An attitude of unconditional acceptance means that the counselor does not judge the client's feelings, thoughts, or behavior, but rather understands that each client's reaction and experience has meaning within the context of their life. The counselor shows genuine concern, empathy, and respect for clients without forcing change, thus creating a safe and supportive emotional environment. Through this attitude, clients will feel accepted and valued without fear of rejection or blame, which ultimately encourages them to be more open in expressing personal feelings and experiences. This state is very important for building a strong and trusting therapeutic relationship between counselor and client. In the context of children experiencing separation anxiety, unconditional acceptance helps them feel safe to express their fears or anxieties without fear of being criticized or perceived as weak. The counselor's warm and accepting attitude provides significant emotional support, allowing the child to learn to accept themselves and begin to develop confidence in facing new situations.

### ***Genuineness or sincerity (genuineness/congruence)***

Honesty and authenticity from the counselor in interacting with the client. One of the important principles in the Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) approach emphasizes the importance of honesty, openness, and authenticity from the counselor in establishing a relationship with the client. Carl R. Rogers emphasized that the counselor must be present as a real person, not just playing a professional role or

pretending to understand the client. In other words, the counselor shows himself as he is, without using a "mask" or fake attitude in the counseling process. Authenticity means the counselor aligns his inner feelings (inner experience), self-awareness, and behavior shown to the client. When the counselor acts congruently or in harmony between what is felt and what is displayed, the client can feel this honesty and sincerity, resulting in a warmer and more trusting relationship. This authentic attitude also helps the counselor become a role model for the client in terms of emotional honesty. The client learns that expressing feelings openly is not wrong, as long as it is done in a healthy way. Through authentic interactions, counselors can foster a humane counseling atmosphere, where clients feel understood and don't need to hide their feelings. In the context of children experiencing separation anxiety, the counselor's authenticity is crucial because children are highly sensitive to sincerity and nonverbal communication. When the counselor is genuinely present with warmth and honesty, the child will feel safe and trusting, making it easier to open up and manage their anxious feelings. Thus, authenticity helps create an effective therapeutic relationship and supports the child's emotional recovery process.

By implementing these three conditions, counselors create a safe, warm, and trusting environment, allowing clients to feel free to express their feelings without fear or rejection. In this atmosphere, clients can recognize their own feelings, accept themselves, and gradually change their perspective to be more positive and realistic. Rogers also introduced the concept of the organismic valuing process, which is an individual's ability to assess experiences based on their suitability to their needs and values. By developing self-awareness through the counseling process, clients learn to trust themselves in making decisions and finding their direction in life without relying too much on the judgment of others.

In the context of children experiencing separation anxiety, PCT is particularly relevant because this approach does not force children to change, but rather encourages them to understand and accept their feelings. The counselor acts as an empathetic listener and provides a sense of security, allowing children to channel their fears and anxieties in healthy ways. When children feel accepted and understood, their self-confidence increases, and they are more likely to adjust to new situations, such as being separated from their parents to go to school. Therefore, Person-Centered Therapy focuses not only on immediate problem-solving but also on empowering children to face situations with greater understanding and self-acceptance. This approach helps children build a strong emotional foundation, ultimately supporting healthy personal, social, and emotional development in the future.

### **Therapy for Early Childhood Children Experiencing Separation Anxiety**

Based on observations, interviews, and documentation conducted at an early childhood education institution in Lubuk Linggau City, data was obtained indicating symptoms of separation anxiety in several children at the beginning of the school year. Observations showed that several children appeared to cry when their parents left them at school, refused to be released from their parents' embrace, and were reluctant to enter the classroom despite being coaxed by the teacher. Several children also exhibited behaviors that refused to participate in learning activities, such as staying still, hiding behind the teacher, or constantly asking for company. From interviews with teachers and parents, it was discovered that this behavior occurred almost every morning during the first few weeks of school. The teacher explained that these children

needed more time to adjust to the new environment and interact with their peers. As shown in the interview data below:

*"In the first few weeks of school, some children seemed to struggle with being separated from their parents. Some cried at the classroom door, and others refused to join their friends. One child even hid behind me frequently and only sat down after much coaxing. These children usually take longer to adapt, especially since they're not used to the new environment without their parents."*

Meanwhile, parents mentioned that their children often showed signs of anxiety at home, such as crying while getting ready for school or expressing a desire not to go.

*"Every morning, my son cries when I take him to school. He even said the night before that he didn't want to go. When we arrived at the gate, he asked me to stay and stay with him in class. I think he's still experiencing separation anxiety because he's not used to being left in a new place without his family."*

This condition indicates that the child is experiencing fear, insecurity, and is not yet emotionally ready to be separated from their primary attachment figures, namely their parents. The crying that occurs every morning and the refusal to go to school are expressions of the child's anxiety and discomfort in a new situation that they do not yet fully understand. Even the emergence of refusal since the previous night indicates that this anxiety is not only situational, but has been embedded in the child's mind as an anticipation of the experience considered stressful, namely separation from parents. The child's request that parents not leave them at the gate and accompany them to class indicates a need for security (a sense of security). The child does not yet have confidence that the school environment is a safe and pleasant place without the presence of parents. In the early stages of development, emotional attachment to parents is still very strong, so the process of adapting to a new environment requires time and appropriate emotional support.

In the context of counseling, the child's behavior and feelings can be understood through a Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) approach. According to Carl R. Rogers, every individual—including children—has a natural tendency toward positive development (actualizing tendency), but this can be hindered when they feel unaccepted or unsafe. Therefore, counselors need to create a warm, empathetic, and unconditionally accepting counseling environment so that children feel free to express their fears without being judged. Through this approach, children can be helped to recognize and express their emotions, such as fear, longing, or discomfort during separation. Counselors can also use play therapy techniques based on PCT principles to help children express these feelings naturally. Gradually, children will begin to feel safe, understand that separation from their parents is temporary, and begin to build self-confidence in the school environment.



**Figure 1. PCT in Early Childhood**

To help children overcome these feelings of anxiety, school counselors implement a Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) approach in individual and small group counseling sessions. Counselors create a warm, safe, and accepting atmosphere so children feel comfortable expressing their feelings. During the counseling process, children are given the opportunity to share their feelings about school, their parents, and the separation experience. Counselors demonstrate empathy by actively listening without judgment and providing unconditional acceptance of all forms of child expression.

The results of this approach showed positive changes in the children after several counseling sessions. Children who had previously cried frequently began to show courage to enter the classroom without being accompanied by their parents. They also began interacting with their peers and engaging enthusiastically in learning activities. Teachers reported that the intensity of crying and refusal to leave significantly decreased after two weeks of counseling. Furthermore, interviews with parents indicated that they began to understand the importance of providing appropriate emotional support. Through communication with the counselor, parents were taught not to overindulge their children and were encouraged to establish a positive goodbye routine before their children left for school. The changes in children's behavior were not only visible at school but also at home, where they appeared more independent and confident.

The research results show that the application of the Person-Centered Therapy Approach is effective in helping young children overcome separation anxiety. This is in line with the theory put forward by Carl R. Rogers, that in the counseling process, the most important factor is not the technique used, but rather the quality of the relationship between the counselor and the client (Rogers, 2008). The three main principles of PCT—empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness—have been shown to be a strong foundation in creating a sense of safety for children to open up and express emotions. In the context of early childhood, this approach helps children learn to recognize and manage their feelings in a healthy way. When counselors demonstrate empathy and unconditional acceptance, children feel that their feelings are understood and accepted, thereby reducing fear and anxiety. This

approach also helps foster children's self-confidence and independence because they feel valued as valuable individuals.

Field findings also indicate that school and family support play a crucial role in successful counseling. Teachers and parents who are able to collaborate with counselors to understand their children's emotional states will accelerate their adaptation process at school. In this regard, PCT not only benefits children as counselees but also serves as an educational approach for parents and teachers in building empathetic relationships with them. The results of this study support findings from several previous studies showing that a humanistic approach, particularly Person-Centered Therapy, is effective in addressing emotional issues in children, including separation anxiety and fear. This approach is not coercive or directive, but rather helps children find a sense of security through supportive and accepting relationships.

Thus, the application of Person-Centered Therapy in early childhood counseling in Lubuk Linggau has been proven to help children better manage separation anxiety. Children become more independent, confident, and able to adjust to the school environment. Furthermore, this study also confirms that the success of counseling is determined not only by the method used, but also by the quality of the interpersonal relationships between the counselor, child, teacher, and parents in creating a healthy and supportive emotional environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of research on the application of the Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) approach in counseling children experiencing separation anxiety at an early childhood education institution in Lubuk Linggau City, it can be concluded that separation anxiety experienced by early childhood arises as a form of emotional reaction to new situations that require children to be separated from their primary attachment figures, namely their parents. Symptoms that appear include crying every morning, refusing to go to school, and requests that parents stay with them in class. This condition indicates that children do not yet have a sense of security and sufficient self-confidence in facing the school environment. The application of the Person-Centered Therapy approach has been proven effective in helping children overcome separation anxiety. The counselor creates a warm, safe, and accepting counseling atmosphere so that children feel comfortable expressing their feelings. Through empathy, unconditional acceptance, and authenticity from the counselor, children learn to recognize and express their feelings openly. This process helps reduce fear and increases children's ability to adapt to the school environment. Positive changes are seen after several counseling sessions. Children who previously often cried and refused to go to school began to show independence, courage, and enthusiasm in participating in class activities. In addition, the involvement of teachers and parents in providing consistent emotional support also strengthens the results of counseling and accelerates the child's adjustment process at school. The results of this study confirm that the successful implementation of Person-Centered Therapy depends not only on the counseling technique itself, but also on the quality of the interpersonal relationships between the counselor, child, teacher, and parents. An empathetic and accepting relationship forms the basis for the growth of a child's sense of security and self-confidence. Therefore, the Person-Centered Therapy approach can be used as an effective alternative counseling strategy in addressing separation anxiety in early

childhood, as it not only helps children manage their emotions but also builds independence, self-confidence, and readiness to adjust to the school environment.

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