

## Silence that Speaks: Recognising the Symptoms and Solutions of Anxiety Disorders in Early Childhood

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### Abstract

The problem of anxiety disorders in early childhood is an important focus in the study of mental health because of its significant impact on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. This study examines the main factors that cause anxiety disorders in early childhood and identifies effective solutions to deal with them. The methodology used was a systematic literature review with the PRISMA approach, analyzing 50 selected articles relevant to the topic. The results of the study revealed that anxiety disorders in children are influenced by internal factors, including genetics, irrational mindsets, and pent-up emotions, as well as external factors such as adaptation to new environments, traumatic experiences, and parenting. Some of the therapeutic approaches identified include play therapy, counseling guidance, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and hypnotherapy. The contribution of the novelty of research lies in the preparation of the integration of various therapeutic approaches that can be adapted to the individual needs of the child. This study provides an important reference for parents, educators, and practitioners in supporting children's mental health, as well as broadening understanding of effective interventions to address anxiety in early childhood. With the application of the right approach, it is hoped that there will be an improvement in the overall quality of life of children.

### Keywords

Anxiety disorders, early childhood, therapy

## INTRODUCTION

Anxiety disorders in children at an early age are a mental health problem that is now increasingly being paid attention to by academics and child education practitioners. This disorder is one of the most common mental conditions found in children and adolescents (Fadilah et al., 2023). Anxiety is defined as a series of emotions that arise when individuals face depression and internal conflicts (Fitria & Alpiyah, 2021). This feeling of anxiety is often related to worry, when a person feels uncomfortable, especially when imagining possible threats or pain (Puspitasari & Wati, 2018). In children in particular, this anxiety is recognized through the appearance of unpleasant feelings, discomfort, and worries that are difficult to overcome (Hasanah et al., 2017).

Furthermore, these anxiety disorders can have a negative impact on children. Disruptive reactions can arise due to anxiety at several levels, such as cognitive, psychomotor, and physiological, which include obstacles in thinking rationally, difficulty concentrating during learning, increased motor activity, the appearance of anxiety, and increased vital functions of the body (Fadilah et al., 2023).

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that 7.1% of children aged 3-17 years have been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. This condition

proves that anxiety is not only experienced by adults, but can also affect children, especially those who are still at an early age. Anxiety triggers in children can come from various sources, including genetic factors or violent experiences they have experienced (Puspitasari & Wati, 2018).

Symptoms such as motor tension (restlessness and trembling), hyperactivity (dizziness and rapid heartbeat), and fears related to expectations and thoughts can be seen in children with anxiety disorders (Nesia & Kurniawati, 2020). If left untreated, this condition can develop into an anxiety disorder that causes abnormal behavior (Nesia & Kurniawati, 2020). Some types of anxiety disorders that are often experienced by children include separation anxiety disorder (SAD), specific phobia (such as school phobia), social anxiety disorder (SOC) or social phobia, and selective mutism (Nesia & Kurniawati, 2020). Without early treatment, the symptoms of this anxiety disorder have the potential to continue into adulthood (Nesia & Kurniawati, 2020).

The problem of anxiety in children at an early age increasingly needs attention because of its impact on their quality of life in the future. This condition not only causes temporary fear or worry, but if not treated properly, it has the potential to develop into a more serious psychological disorder and continue into adulthood. A number of studies indicate that anxiety in children can interfere with their ability to adjust to the school environment, build relationships with peers, and develop healthy social skills (Nesia & Kurniawati, 2020). Even in some cases, children with anxiety disorders may have difficulty engaging in daily activities such as studying, playing, or socializing.

This article aims to examine the main factors that cause anxiety disorders in children at an early age and find the right approach or solution to deal with them. It is hoped that the results of this study can be a reference for parents, educators, and education practitioners in supporting the mental health of early childhood children, so that they can create an environment that supports their development optimally.

**METHOD**

This study applies the systematic review method, or Systematic Literature Review. This evidence-based method aims to identify studies related to specific research questions. Systematic review involves the stages of selection, evaluation, and synthesis of research results to respond to predetermined questions (Lusiana & Suryani, 2018).

The Google Scholar database is used as a reference source through the use of the Publish or Perish application. For the literature selection process, the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses) method was applied in December 2024.

Table 1: Search Strategy

Base	Keywords
Google Scholar	Anxiety Disorders, Early Childhood

A search through Google Scholar yielded 50 articles. The selection and evaluation process was then carried out to identify relevant articles, with an assessment based on the

criteria described in Table 2 below (Source: search results on Google Scholar, 50 articles found).

Table 2. Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
The selected literature is in the form of articles relevant to the research topic, namely, about anxiety disorders in early childhood	Literature in the form of articles that are not in accordance with the research topic, namely, about anxiety disorders in early childhood
Published in the range of 2018 to 2024	Published before 2018
The selected article must be available in full text and written in English or Indonesian, either in the form of journal articles or proceedings.	Articles cannot be accessed in full text rtikel and/or proceedings are not in English or Indonesian

After determining the search strategy and article eligibility criteria, the next stage is to carry out the selection process based on the predetermined criteria. A more detailed explanation of the selection process for this article is presented through the PRISMA Flow Diagram, as can be seen in Figure 1 below.

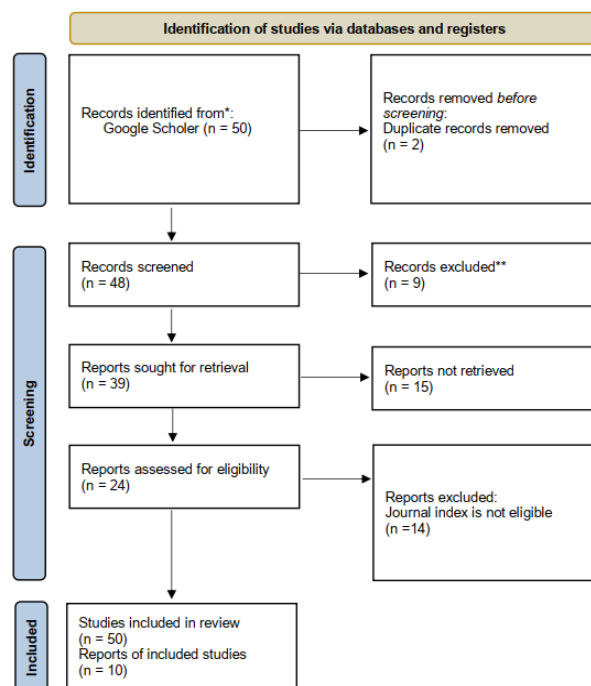


Figure 1. Selection process in PRISMA Flow Diagram

The analysis of research results was carried out using four systematic techniques, which include identification, screening, feasibility, and inclusion, where this systematic literature review process can be implemented routinely and continuously (Mahmud, 2020). Based on the application of the PRISMA method, out of the 50 journal articles that were initially identified, there were 2 articles that were eliminated due to data duplication, 9 articles that were not in accordance with the research topic, and 29 other articles that

did not meet the inclusion and exclusion criteria, so that only 10 journal articles were finally used in the results and discussion of this research.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Results

The table below shows the results of studies from various studies on the causes and approaches to solving anxiety disorders in early childhood. The information presented includes various anxiety-triggering factors, both from within the child and from the surrounding environment, which are analyzed through various theoretical perspectives. In addition, this table also describes a variety of methods, strategies, and handling techniques that can be implemented according to the characteristics of the disorder experienced by the child, in the hope of providing effective support for children in dealing with situations that cause stress or anxiety.

Table 3. Article analyst results

No	Researchers	Year	Findings
1	Puspitasari & Wati	2018	Genetic factors can cause anxiety in children, this factor explains the appearance of anxiety in children in the absence of obvious triggers
2	Musdalipa et al.	2019	Play therapy using traditional games of <i>Menggalenceng</i> . Through this therapy, children will train their numeracy skills and can stimulate the release of happiness hormones
3	Madyawati & Nurjannah	2021	The factors that cause anxiety in children are caused by several factors including adaptation to the new environment, rules that must be followed, treatment received by children, etc.
4	Prajogo & Yudiarso	2021	Through <i>Acceptance and Commitment Therapy</i> (ACT). This emphasis is more on psychological and behavioral processes that support individual well-being
5	Hidayati	2021	Using play therapy for children who have anxiety disorders can help children in overcoming it, one of which is channeling feelings and experiences that are difficult to express verbally
6	Sitompul et al.	2021	Dealing with anxiety disorders through counseling guidance using various techniques such as active, creative, effective and fun
7	Squirt	2022	Play therapy can help deal with anxiety disorders in children by using two approaches, namely the redefined and non-reactive approaches. And by paying attention to the child's developmental stage.
8	Odyssey	2022	Religious factors that can cause anxiety disorders are predisposing factors which are explained by several theories including psychoanalytic, interpersonal and behavioral theories. Then precipitation and psychosocial factors.

9	Sany	2022	The factors that cause anxiety disorders are influenced from internal which involves restrained emotions and external which includes the living environment that can form a mindset towards a person.
10	Silalahi et al.	2023	There are two factors that trigger anxiety disorders, namely bad experiences in the past and irrational thoughts. And through hypnotherapy can help overcome a person's psychological or physical problems.

Anxiety disorders are generally caused by a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors include latent emotions, genetic predispositions, and irrational mindsets that contribute to the onset of anxiety. Meanwhile, environmental conditions, difficulty adapting to new situations, and past trauma are external factors that can trigger these disorders. Various studies show that therapeutic interventions are effective in overcoming anxiety. Play therapy is recommended as the appropriate approach for the child population because it facilitates the indirect expression of emotions and traumatic experiences. Recent research confirms that play therapy that utilizes traditional games such as Gallaghing significantly increases the production of hormones related to feelings of happiness.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) emphasizes the psychological and behavioral aspects that contribute to individual well-being, while hypnotherapy can be used to overcome psychological and physical problems. To deal with anxiety disorders, counseling approaches that apply active, creative, and fun techniques have proven effective. It should be noted that the orientation of the study varied, with some studies focusing on the child population and others examining anxiety disorders in general. Although the causative factors show some similarities, the therapeutic approaches applied have variations tailored to the target and the context of the respective research.

## Discussion

Various external and internal factors affect the onset of anxiety in individuals. External factors such as the living environment play an important role in shaping a person's mindset about themselves and others (Nugraha in Sany, 2022). When a person experiences negative experiences or conflicts in their relationships with family, friends, or work colleagues, it often triggers feelings of insecurity towards the surrounding environment. Meanwhile, internal factors that contribute to anxiety include the suppression of unexpressed emotions. Individuals who are unable to manage their feelings well, especially those who harbor anger or frustration in the long run, are more likely to experience anxiety. The mutual relationship between physical and mental conditions can also trigger the appearance of anxiety symptoms.

Adler & Rodman identified two main factors that cause anxiety. The first factor is the negative experiences of the past, in which anxiety reappears as a result of unpleasant memories, specifically from repeated events. The second factor is related to irrational thinking, including excessive assumptions of failure, perfectionism, excessive desire to gain approval, and a tendency to make inaccurate generalizations (Silalahi et al., 2023). In

addition, several factors that can cause anxiety disorders include Predisposition Factors, Precipitation Factors, and Psychosocial Factors ([Ramaimah in Oktamarin et al., 2022](#)).

Individuals with anxiety problems generally exhibit symptoms such as panic attacks, tremors, and increased heart rate, as explained through various causative factors earlier. Anxiety conditions are influenced by a variety of factors, especially predisposing factors that include several theoretical approaches such as psychoanalytic, interpersonal, and behavioral theory. In addition, there is a precipitation factor related to the perception of threats that arise in the mind of people with anxiety disorders. Psychosocial aspects also contribute significantly, where anxiety disorders can develop due to vulnerability in psychological and social dimensions, including mental stress and obstacles in social interaction.

Anxiety in early childhood can be triggered by a variety of factors. The process of adjusting to the new environment, as well as the level of support from parents or families in the child's education process, are influential factors. The presence of unknown people around the child, the treatment received while at school, and the various rules and disciplines that must be followed can be triggers for stress, frustration, and anxiety. In addition, giving assignments or instructions from teachers can also cause anxiety. Children who feel burdened with difficult tasks and are not able to complete them well can experience negative emotional reactions that affect their psychological state ([Madyawati & Nurjannah, 2020](#)).

The hereditary factor also plays a role in the emergence of anxiety in children, as stated by Glover ([Puspitasari & Wati, 2018](#)). The anxiety that the mother feels during pregnancy can be transmitted to her child. This genetic explanation clarifies why anxiety symptoms sometimes appear without being triggered by a specific event. Understanding the various factors that cause anxiety is crucial in determining appropriate treatment methods and rehabilitation therapy ([Puspitasari & Wati, 2018](#)).

Overcoming anxiety disorders in early childhood can be done with several methods, one of which is play therapy. Play therapy allows children to express and project their anxiety through play activities ([Habibi, 2022](#)). This approach is carried out as part of the counseling process by a therapist or expert, using various games as a medium adapted to the child's preoperational cognitive development stage. Toys in the form of symbols are used to help children process information through activities such as symbolic games, drawing, or the use of spoken language ([Habibi, 2022](#)).

Play therapy has two main approaches to addressing early childhood anxiety. The directive approach (child-centered play therapy) developed by Carl Rogers emphasizes the development of a therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the child. In this approach, children are given the freedom to lead the therapy process while being encouraged to take responsibility for the resolution of their anxiety. The therapist plays a role in understanding children's anxiety by accepting and observing their expressions, then reconveying the child's statements objectively ([Habibi, 2022](#)). Meanwhile, the non-directive approach pioneered by Williamson is a therapist-centered method with a direct approach based on behavioristic principles. In this therapy, the child is given complete freedom of expression and play, while the therapist observes and provides feedback as needed. Therapists pay attention to children's facial expressions and behaviors to reveal their anxieties and problems through play activities, so that children feel cared for, happy



with their toys, and understood, which ultimately helps them recognize themselves and reduce anxiety (Habibi, 2022).

The effectiveness of play therapy in overcoming anxiety disorders is proven through research using traditional games (Musdalipa et al., 2019). These games not only serve as therapy but also as an educational medium, supporting Plato's theory that children more easily understand arithmetic concepts through play activities (Musdalipa et al., 2019). When children play Maggalenceng, they practice counting the seeds in each hole in a fun atmosphere, which triggers the release of endorphins from the pituitary gland and hypothalamus. This happiness hormone plays an important role in relaxing muscles and nerves, strengthening the immune system, relieving pain, and helping the body respond better to injuries, so that children can do activities comfortably (Musdalipa et al., 2019).

Through play therapy, children can express feelings and experiences that are difficult to express in words, lower emotional tension, and release fears that are a source of stress and negative emotions. When children play various roles in therapy sessions, they are able to find a way out of the problem at hand, so their anxiety or anxiety levels decrease. This therapy also supports the development of children's social, emotional, and behavioral abilities (Hidayati Nur Oktavia et al., 2021).

There are several methods that can be applied in the guidance and counseling approach to relieve anxiety disorders in early childhood. First, an active approach where the child is expected to participate directly in the counseling process, while the counselor also needs to be intensively involved during the session. Counseling programs are designed to encourage children's involvement in decision-making, expressing views, or engaging in various activities through a playful approach. Second, through creative counseling guidance techniques (Sitompul et al., 2021). According to Ausabel, creativity includes several main components such as smoothness, flexibility, originality, elaboration, and redefinition. Third, effective interventions should take into account the distinctive traits of early childhood that tend to like play. By utilizing the child's favorite play activities, counselors can apply counseling techniques that allow children to internalize the results of each activity carried out. Fourth, creating a fun atmosphere is essential to grab the child's attention and maintain their focus. A fun environment that provides a sense of security and comfort will activate the brain areas that play a role in the thinking process (neo-cortex), increase children's confidence, and optimize the learning process while playing during counseling sessions.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a form of therapy that originated from the third wave of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), which expands the scope of conventional cognitive therapy. In contrast to traditional approaches, ACT prioritizes psychological and behavioral processes that improve well-being, not just reducing psychological symptoms (Prajogo & Yudiarso, 2021). The main goal of the ACT is to develop psychological flexibility by paying attention to the verbal and social context of the individual. Hayes (in Prajogo & Yudiarso, 2021) explained that ACT consists of six main components: acceptance, cognitive defusion, awareness of the present (Being present), attention to oneself (Noticing self), value setting (Values), and committed action (Committed action). The combination of these six elements allows individuals to develop more optimal psychological flexibility.

Fourth, Hypnotherapy is a therapy method that utilizes hypnosis or suggestion techniques to reach the subconscious, which aims to help a person overcome psychological or physical problems. This therapy uses hypnosis to instill positive suggestions that affect the subconscious mind, thus supporting the healing process. Hypnotherapy techniques operate by providing suggestions that help clients relax and feel comfortable in a relatively short period of time. Physiologically, when a person is in a hypnotic state, their brain waves will transform into alpha waves (7-14 hertz) or even deeper into theta waves (4-7 hertz). This condition stimulates the formation of the hormones serotonin and endorphins, which produce sensations of comfort and relaxation, improve the body's metabolism, as well as balance autonomic nerve responses, which contribute to a decrease in blood pressure, heart rate, and respiratory frequency (Silalahi et al., 2023).

The various methods or approaches that have been described can be applied according to the specific needs and characteristics of anxiety disorders found in children. The application of appropriate methods is expected to enable them to manage and minimize the anxiety they face, as well as increase their capacity to deal with stressful situations.

## **CONCLUSION**

Anxiety disorders in early childhood are important problems that can negatively impact long-term cognitive, social, and emotional development if not treated promptly. Various internal factors, such as latent emotions, genetics, and irrational mindsets, as well as external factors, including trauma, parenting, and difficulty adapting to a new environment, are the causes of this anxiety disorder. Several intervention methods have been shown to be effective in helping children overcome anxiety, including play therapy, counseling guidance, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), and hypnotherapy. A holistic approach that takes into account individual needs is indispensable so that interventions can be tailored to the characteristics and levels of anxiety of each child. The findings of this study are expected to be a reference for parents, educators, and practitioners in developing an environment that supports children's mental health optimally.

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