

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY A 'GOOD' SEPARATION? ADULT LANGUAGE, ROUTINES, AND INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS

Arlene Zhao, Class of 2028, Psychology
Dr. Anna Shusterman, Department of Psychology

INTRODUCTION

Separation and drop off from a caregiver is an important part of childcare. Decades of attachment research tell us why: children read the adults around them to figure out how worried they should be, and how a caregiver handles the goodbye and the reunion shapes how secure that child feels (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Field, 1984; Klinnert et al., 1983; Sorce et al., 1985). But if that research is not systematically integrated in policy and practice, how do we actually support children, rather than just get them through the day? The first step of doing that is understanding adult behavior at drop off: the language, routines, and instituional expectations that shape it, not just the effect on the child.

This gap matters now. Limited paid leave means US children enter center-based care earlier than before (Ahnert et al., 2004), and expanding programs like NYC's 3-K and 2-K mean more children face daily separation before providers have the staffing or training to support it well (Elfer et al., 2012; Laewen et al., 2011).

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this project is to examine how parents, teachers, and program directors understand and manage early childhood separation, and whether those understandings align with developmental research. Attachment research measures children's experiences of separation but rarely examines the adult perspectives, routines, and expectations that shape the child's experience of separation, and whether those are supportive according to developmental literature.

The questions at the core of this study:

- What do parents, teachers, and directors believe constitutes a good separation, and what outcome are they optimizing for?
- How do they align with, or diverge from, developmental literature?

METHODOLOGY

Design: Semi-structured interviews, thematically coded (hybrid deductive/inductive coding against a literature-derived codebook).

Participants: 14 adults across 3 early childhood programs in NYC and Connecticut:
8 parents
2 lead teachers
4 program directors (including 1 consultant, treated as key informant)
Programs varied in pedagogy: Montessori, community-based (YMCA), university-affiliated lab school.

Procedure: One 30–45 minute interview per participant (in-person or Zoom), covering: typical drop-off routines, separations that went well/badly, language used, interpretation of child distress, and origin of each practice. Closed with a role-specific vignette.

Analysis: Transcripts coded in Dedoose. 360 coded excerpts across 36 codes (12 generated inductively). Coding performed by a single researcher; no second coder, so intercoder reliability was not established.

Challenges/lessons learned: Recruitment fell short of the planned 30 participants across 6 programs (teacher recruitment especially, only 2 of several invited agreed). Coverage was uneven across sites.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Huge thanks to the Laidlaw Foundation for making this possible, Dr. Anna Shusterman and Samantha Archontis for the mentorship, the Barnard Toddler Center for the home base, and all the families and staff who let me in on their goodbyes.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

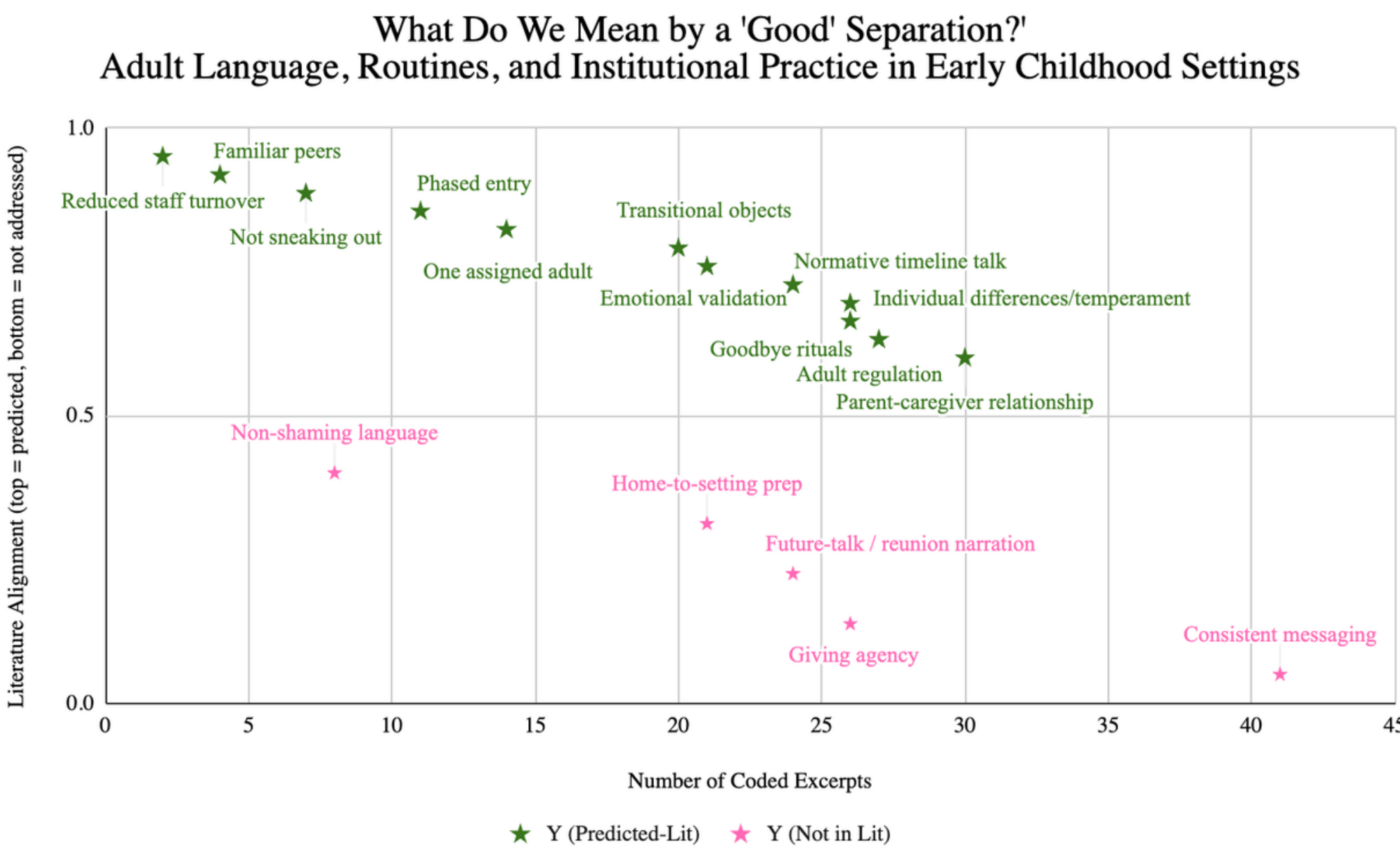
Key finding #1 — Consistency of message appeared in all 14 transcripts (41 excerpts), more than any other code, yet has no corresponding construct in the separation literature. Participants describe it as the condition that makes other techniques work.

Key finding #2 — Orientation divided by role:
Parents narrated future reunions (22 of 24 excerpts)
Teachers engaged children through their interests
Directors reasoned about context and individual differences

Key finding #3 — Definition split: Parents define a "good separation" by the absence of distress at drop-off. Staff define it by the child's recovery from distress.

Two additional inductive findings without literature precedent stood out: non-shaming language ("don't cry" alternatives) was coined entirely by participants, and parents' narration of future reunions persisted despite developmental evidence that episodic future thinking doesn't reliably emerge until age 3–4

Practices well-supported by literature but rarely mentioned: peer familiarity (4), nap/sleep transitions (3), staff turnover (2) — likely reflecting interview protocol gaps, not absence of belief.



CONCLUSION

Parents, teachers, and directors converge on useful practices, both represented and missing (consistency of message, agency), but in what "good" separation means. This has direct policy implications: the practices best supported by research, phased entry, key-person continuity, require staff time and lower ratios that under-resourced programs and lower-income families are least likely to have (Elfer et al., 2012; Laewen et al., 2011). A program doesn't just skip phased entry because staff doesn't believe in it; it skips it because one teacher covering ten children has no room to run it, and parents don't have the flexibility to participate.

As cities expand access, including NYC's 3-K and 2-K, policy focused only on seat count risks missing the quality of what happens inside them. Developmental research tells us that this is critical.

Next steps:

- Pair interviews with observation to test if beliefs match practice
- Isolate consistency of message as its own variable
- Expand beyond three demographically narrow programs
- Translate findings into staffing and training guidance for city-funded expansion

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