

Play Therapy as an Interventional Strategy for Emotional Disorders in Primary Students: A Dual Case Study Examination

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of play therapy interventions on the emotional well-being and behavior of elementary school students. Through structured interviews with class teachers and analysis of pre- and post-intervention Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) scores, the research focused on two students, S and G, who exhibited significant behavioral challenges prior to the intervention. Initial assessments indicated that student S engaged in solitary activities such as drawing, and student G showed minimal interest in classroom engagement. Following the sand tray play therapy sessions, both students displayed remarkable behavioral improvements: S showed a willingness to listen to the teacher for short periods, and G participated actively in classroom learning. The intervention resulted in a substantial decrease in SDQ scores, suggesting improvements in emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer relationship issues, and hyperactivity. These findings support the efficacy of play therapy in not only addressing behavioral and emotional difficulties but also in fostering an environment conducive to learning and student participation. The results underscore the potential of this therapeutic approach as a beneficial tool in educational settings, aligning with Jungian theories on the therapeutic power of play.

Keywords: Play Therapy, Emotional Regulation, Emotional Well-being, Behavioral Change.

1. Introduction

Child development is a multifaceted process, influenced by an intricate interplay of genetic, environmental, and experiential factors. Renowned developmental theories, notably those of Freud and Jung, emphasize the profound impact of early experiences and the environment in shaping a child's evolving personality. These theories contend that the foundational experiences of childhood serve as critical determinants in the manifestation of cognitive, emotional, social, and moral development (Gross, 2015; Santrock, 2014). As such, understanding the psychological landscape of childhood is paramount, yet adults often grapple with interpreting the cognitive and emotional processes of children.

In the quest to bridge this comprehension gap, play therapy has emerged as an insightful and therapeutic avenue. It leverages the natural medium of play to facilitate children's expression of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Landreth, 2002). Play therapy not only aids children in confronting and resolving their challenges but also fosters creativity and nurtures the development of enriching interpersonal connections. Furthermore, the application of developmental principles, as postulated by Freud and Jung, significantly enriches the therapeutic context of play therapy, offering a lens through which the child's inner world can be understood and engaged with effectively.

Amidst the educational advancements, play therapy has gained prominence as an innovative strategy to assist children with emotional disturbances. Its integration within the educational milieu, as seen in settings like Sekolah Cendekia Harapan – Children's House, underscores the growing recognition of its value. By providing a supportive and creative outlet, play therapy facilitates the articulation of emotions and accelerates the coping mechanisms against anxiety, depression, and behavioral concerns. This introduction of play as a therapeutic modality in educational environments represents a progressive step towards fostering emotional resilience and psychological well-being in children.

2. Literature Review

The impact of play therapy on children's emotional well-being has been the subject of numerous scholarly inquiries. A consolidation of empirical studies reveals that play therapy contributes significantly to the diminution of aggression and hyperactivity in children, enhances self-esteem, and addresses a variety of behavioral issues (Kahrizi, Moradi, & Momeni, 2015; Yang, 2014). Moreover, it has been documented as a potent modality for healing trauma and alleviating childhood grief (Webber & Mascaria, 2008). Such findings underscore the therapeutic potency of play therapy in facilitating emotional and psychological resilience in children.

In the context of developmental psychology, the theories of Freud and Jung provide a theoretical substrate for the application of play therapy. Freud's psychosexual theory highlights the developmental trajectory of personality structures—id, ego, and superego—detailing the profound influence of early childhood experiences on adult personality. Within the therapeutic milieu, Freud's concepts of transference and countertransference, alongside his delineation of defense mechanisms, serve as instrumental tools in play therapy, allowing for an intricate understanding of children's internal conflicts and coping strategies (Freud, 1912).

Contrastingly, Jung's analytical psychology introduces the construct of the collective unconscious, enriched by archetypes that govern behavioral patterns. His emphasis on individuation and symbolic experiences affords a distinctive lens through which children's self-concept and emotional difficulties can be explored and ameliorated (Jung, 2014).

Despite their divergent perspectives on the nature of personality and development—Freud's focus on psychosexual stages versus Jung's emphasis on archetypes and the collective unconscious—both theories converge on the tenet that early life experiences and environmental factors are seminal in shaping a child's personality. Such a synthesis of psychoanalytic and analytical psychology provides a robust framework for play therapy, promoting exploration and self-discovery as mechanisms for understanding oneself.

Extending these theoretical insights to the realm of emotional management, play therapy serves as a bridge connecting the child's inner experiences with outward expression and coping. Specifically, when addressing anger management, play therapy enables children to navigate and modulate their emotional responses. Through the structured yet flexible nature of play, children learn to identify triggers, understand the sequence of their emotional reactions, and develop strategies to manage anger constructively. In this therapeutic space, the child's encounters with anger are not merely managed but transformed into opportunities for emotional growth and self-regulation.

In sum, the literature underscores the multifaceted role of play therapy in the context of child development. It stands as a testament to the enduring relevance of Freud and Jung's theories in modern therapeutic practices, particularly in fostering emotional regulation and personal development in children.

3. Research Methodology

This investigation adopts a qualitative research paradigm to scrutinize the efficacy of play therapy in enhancing emotional well-being among primary school students. Conducted at Sekolah Cendekia Harapan – Children's House, Bali, this study is based on intervention given to two second-grade students, referred to as Participants S and G. These students engaged in a series of eight play therapy sessions initiated in September. Both of participants will continue the sessions until 12-14 sessions, yet after 7-8 meetings and mid SDQ progress discussion with the teacher, all sessions are running well and the new SDQ of both students are completely improved on emotional problems.

The assessment of behavioral changes post-therapy was conducted using a triangulation method. This involved semi-structured interviews with the students' classroom teachers, which were aimed at capturing qualitative insights into the behavioral and emotional shifts observed in the classroom setting. Additionally, a standardized instrument, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), was employed. The SDQ is a robust psychometric tool that measures multiple dimensions of a child's behavior, including emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship issues, and prosocial behavior.

This multi-faceted approach to data collection was designed to yield a holistic understanding of the impact of play therapy on the students. The qualitative data from teacher interviews offer nuanced perspectives on the students' social interactions and emotional regulation in a naturalistic environment. Simultaneously, the quantitative data derived from the SDQ provide an empirical basis for evaluating changes in specific behavioral domains. The integration of these data sources will facilitate a comprehensive evaluation of the therapeutic benefits of play therapy for young students grappling with emotional challenges.

4. Result and Discusssion

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) serves as a pivotal evaluative tool, charting the emotional and behavioral contours of children engaged in play therapy. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the SDQ findings, pinpointing specific emotional and social competencies that can be addressed during therapy sessions. When SDQ scores suggest atypical emotional functioning, it prompts the tailoring of therapy sessions to meet the unique emotional needs of each student.

This personalized adjustment is crucial for developing strategic interventions aimed at enhancing emotional regulation. By identifying particular areas of emotional difficulty through the SDQ, therapists are equipped to focus their efforts on fostering better emotional management. The findings from this research underscore the efficacy of play therapy as a mechanism for targeted interventions, with a special emphasis on improving emotional management. This approach ensures that the therapeutic process not only addresses behavioral challenges but also strengthens the emotional resilience of students, which is vital for their overall development and success within the educational framework.

	Score	Category	Range
SDQ TOTAL SCORE	28	Abnormal	0-13 = Normal 14-15 = Borderline 15-40 = Abnormal
Conduct	7	Abnormal	0-2 = Normal 3 = Borderline 4-10 = Abnormal
Hyperactivity	7	Abnormal	0-5 = Normal 6 = Borderline 7-10 = Abnormal
Emotional	5	Abnormal	0 -3 = Normal 4 = Borderline 5-10 = Abnormal
Peer	6	Abnormal	0-2 = Normal 3 = Borderline 4-10 = Abnormal
Prosocial	3	Abnormal	6-10 = Normal 5 = Borderline 0-4 = Abnormal

Table 1. Benchmark Norm of Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

Based on these reference values, the researcher conducted an analysis of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) completed by the students' class teachers before and after participating in play therapy sessions. The analysis revealed significant changes in the students' behavior. Some aspects showed a decrease in scores, while others exhibited improvements. Specifically, for student S, there was a decrease in scores in the emotional, peer, and conduct aspects. Meanwhile, for student G, there was a decrease in scores in the emotional, peer, conduct, and hyperactivity aspects. These changes reflect the positive impact of the play therapy on the students' behavior, providing strong support for the effectiveness of this method within the context of this study.

Table 2. Results of *Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire* (SDQ) score before and after intervention

Date of SDQ Submission	Student Initials	Aspects of Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)					Total
		Emotional	Peer	Conduct	Prosocial	Hyperactivity	
08/08/2023	S	6	5	5	3	5	24
	G	5	6	7	3	7	28
30/10/2023	S	2	1	3	5	6	17
	G	3	2	5	5	6	21

The observed improvements in emotional, peer, conduct, and hyperactivity aspects suggest that play therapy with sand tray can effectively address a range of behavioral issues commonly encountered by elementary school students. This intervention method has the potential to create a safe and supportive environment for students to express themselves, explore their emotions, and work through challenges they may face.

Furthermore, the qualitative data gathered through interviews with the students' class teachers corroborate these findings. Teachers reported noticing positive changes in the students' behavior, increased self-confidence, and better emotional regulation following their participation in play therapy with sand tray sessions. These outcomes underscore the importance of integrating play therapy with sand tray into the educational context as a valuable tool for promoting students' emotional well-being and addressing behavioral difficulties.

In conclusion, this research provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of play therapy with sand tray in promoting the emotional well-being of elementary school students. The positive changes observed in the students' behavior, as supported by both quantitative and qualitative data, highlight the potential of this intervention method to contribute to the development of psychological intervention strategies within educational settings. This study serves as a strong foundation for directing focused and efficient counseling interventions, ultimately fostering a more supportive environment for students' psychological development.

Based on these reference values, the researcher conducted an analysis of the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) completed by the students' class teachers before and after participating in play therapy with sand tray counseling sessions. The analysis revealed significant changes in the students' behavior. Some aspects showed a decrease in scores, while others exhibited improvements. Specifically, for student S, there was a decrease in scores in the emotional, peer, and conduct aspects. Meanwhile, for student G, there was a decrease in scores in the emotional, peer, conduct, and hyperactivity aspects. These changes reflect the positive impact of the play therapy with sand tray counseling intervention on the students' behavior, providing strong support for the effectiveness of this method within the context of this study.

Student S exhibited a better emotion regulation after 9-10 minutes. In contrast, student G demonstrated a keen interest in listening to and actively participating in the learning process. This shift reflects the positive impact of the play therapy in enhancing student engagement and participation in classroom learning.

Empirical data supports the effectiveness of the play therapy counseling intervention in modifying student behavior. Notable behavioral changes were observed in students S and G, who previously exhibited emotional issues, peer interactions, conductive behavior involving social norm violations, and hyperactivity. Post-intervention, these students developed a desire to participate and engage in classroom learning processes. These findings affirm that the sandtray play therapy counseling intervention is not only effective in addressing student behavioral issues but also in fostering their learning motivation. This indicates a positive and lasting impact of this approach on student development.

The observed changes can be attributed to the freedom granted to students S and G during the play therapy sessions to express their feelings and emotions. This process allowed them an opportunity to vent emotions and feelings that might be difficult to articulate in a conventional classroom context. Such freedom provided a space for students to confront and understand their emotions, ultimately leading to positive behavioral changes. Research by Schaefer & Millman (1981) supports this view, demonstrating that through play therapy, students can overcome social, emotional, behavioral issues, and enhance their learning skills. From a Jungian theoretical perspective, play therapy allows students to manifest their feelings and emotions symbolically. Students S and G were able to explore hidden aspects of themselves, including emotions difficult to express during the counseling process. This facilitated a deeper self-understanding and helped them manage emotional discomfort and confusion

5. Conclusion

The play therapy intervention that were carried out for S and G at Cendekia Harapan Elementary – Children's House has been demonstrated to be highly effective in altering student behavior and improving the emotional regulation as well as enhancing their emotional well-being. This conclusion is supported by research findings indicating behavioral changes in two second-grade students undergoing 8 (eight) play therapy sessions.

These changes were evident from the results of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) administered before and after the counseling process. Interviews with the students' homeroom teachers further corroborated these changes. Initially, both students displayed SDQ scores in the abnormal range for emotional symptoms, peer problems, conduct issues, and hyperactivity, signaling a pressing need for intervention to prevent further complications. However, following the play therapy intervention, there was a notable reduction in scores across several domains, reflecting the positive impact of the intervention. The play therapy also positively influenced the students' motivation to engage in learning. Previously disengaged and insular, they began to show increased interest and initiative in participating and following the classroom learning process.

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