

# Sandtray Therapy for Young Girls in A Shelter Home

Muhammad Razif Ismail<sup>1\*</sup>, Salleh Amat<sup>1</sup>, Ku Suhaila Ku Johari<sup>1</sup>, Zuria Mahmud<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Malaysia.*

\*Corresponding author. Email: [razifismail@icloud.com](mailto:razifismail@icloud.com)

## ABSTRACT

Sandtray therapy involves the use of verbal, audio-visual and touch sensory that will make counselling sessions more comprehensive. Researches executed the interview and observation method in this qualitative study which involved four teenage girls at a shelter home. The data was obtained through verbal communication in group counselling using sandtray therapy and images of miniature arrangement in the sandtray, and was analyzed using thematic process. The findings showed how sandtray therapy could help clients to visualize the issues more effectively and helped the counsellor to identify issues. Clients also showed positive emotional development and gained insights easier when they realized the negative emotions they held. Results of this study supported the use of sandtray therapy for girls in shelter homes.

**Keywords:** *Sandtray therapy, group counseling, young girls, shelter home*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

UNICEF (1990) with The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a 'child' is a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger. They should be treated fairly on any basis, whatever their race, religion and abilities, gender, language they are using or whether they are rich or poor. The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children (UNICEF, 1990). This particularly applies to budget, policy and law makers.

Eventhough the Children Rights Convention had been officially launched since 1989, the well being of children all over the world are still in a predicament. Children are still vulnerable to various economy threats, social, culture and political conflict in several poor and developing countries in Asia and Africa (Rena, 2007). Malaysia itself has shown an alarming numbers of children becoming the victims of abuse, neglect, exploitation, sexual harassment and children's trafficking. Some of the children were even left alone in unsafe places immediately after birth. Not to mention, as a result of poor parenting and family care, children were also in crime and antisocial behaviors. Data from Social Welfare Department showed that in 2016, a number of 4,886 children aged between 10-12 year old were involved in crime. Out of this, 4,607 were boys and 279 were girls. On the other hand, government data also showed that in 2014, a total of 4295 children (2,716 girls and 1,579

boys needed government protection and care (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2018). There are currently 13 government operated shelter homes for children, known as Rumah Kanak-Kanak (RKK) all over Malaysia, with total capacity of 1,300 residents.

Children who came into these shelter homes were referred by the Court Order under Paragraph 30 (1) (d) of the Child Act 2001. According to the Social Welfare Department (Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat, 2018), these children were the victims or potential victims of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse by their parents or guardians; or neglected and failed to be supervised by their parents or guardians, unmet basic needs, children with no parents or guardians, abandoned by the parents or guardians, involved with the custody fight, involved with idling, making a street show / offering anything for sale, and involved in harmful activities. Emotional neglect also takes place seriously against the child (Laaksonen et al., 2011).

The shelter homes, not only provide care but also encourage the children towards positive physical, mental and emotional development. Contemporary studies show a lot of support received during and after sexual abuse have the ability to scrape the negative impact on mental of abused individuals and help them to work with effective in life (Yancey & Hansen, 2010; Hyman, Gold & Cott, 2003).

Nevertheless, there were also reports in the media of a number of cases portraying infringement of child rights even at the shelter homes. For example, a death of 14 year old occupant from Sekolah Tunas Bakti Taiping at Mei 2008. A staff was remanded to help the investigation

(The Star, 8 Mei 2008). Next, at November 2009, 3 female teenagers lodged a report that they were sexually abused by their seniors. These incidents had raised questions from the public regarding the conduciveness of the shelter homes as a place to care and protect unfortunate children.

Keep in mind, that children at the shelter homes not only were traumatized in their early years before the rescue; they might also face challenges from other children and their institutional caregivers. Children's cognitive, emotion and behavior will be affected until they become an adult (Muhammed Sharif & Nur Diyana, 2012; Browne & Finkelhor, 1986; Lianny, 2004).

A conventional verbal counselling session might contribute to a many information sharing, however for young people experiencing trauma, this might lead to loss of words and confusion. When it involved significant people (their family members) or someone that had an official authorization towards them, children would hesitate to share. They used a longer time to prioritize which issues should they focus on, at the same time the counselor need to analyze the issue deeper and with more caution.

It is highly complicated, involving many parties and difficult to prove (Pipe, Lamb, Orbach & Cederborg, 2013). Many researches shown that the social support received by the sexually victimized children are still limited (Schobucher, Maier, Mohler-Kuo, Schnyder & Landolt, 2014).

Sandtray therapy in counselling process is an expressive therapy that gives the freedom to the children to arrange their miniature in the sandtray or sandbox to create the world that is linked with the event that they have gone through in their real life (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). In counselling, the approach of sandtray therapy was used to help client to have a better understanding about the issue that they were facing, through the visual image from the sandtray. Each object or toy and its arrangement that was created by the client in the sandtray was an expression and had their own meaning (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). The used of sandtray therapy can help clients to express their memory, emotion and change unconscious negative emotion to the conscious state (Nur Shakila Ibrarim & Ku Suhaila Ku Johari, 2015).

Sandtray therapy could help clients to reduce 'noise' in their issues. Which mean, client could prioritize their issues to avoid confusion due to the bulk of information that they wanted to share. This happened during the process of selecting miniature in the beginning of the session. The process of miniature's selection involved the visual and touch sensory where clients have to look, hold and finally choose their miniatures by holding it and put it in the sandtray (Nur Shakila Ibrarim & Ku Suhaila Ku Johari, 2015).

Next, the clients would arrange their miniatures and objects accordingly to the story that they want to visualize in the sandtray. They were be given the freedom

to do it. The client's storytelling from their sandtray would involve the use of symbolic and certain metaphor which needed to be understood by the counsellor by using basic skills in sandtray therapy (Nur Shakila Ibrahim & Ku Suhaila Ku Johari, 2015). The visualization of issues from the sandtray that have been faced by the client, would obviously help them to see their problems from different perspective which provided a better understanding about it.

Sandtray therapy also allowed the clients to use their multi-senses compared to the conventional counselling that focused merely on the spoken aspect (Goodwin & Boik, 2000). This kind of sharing experience, would help clients to expose and state their emotions in a much easier way (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011). The involvement of multiple senses would stimulate client's cognitive aspect to have a more rational thinking style and help to stabilize the client's emotion (Goss & Campbell, 2004).

## 2. METHOD

The purpose of this case study was to explore the counselling process that used sandtray therapy approach towards the children at the shelter home regarding their internal issues. The data collection method had been done through direct observation from the counselling session either it was by verbal or non-verbal.

The participants were four young girls aged from 10-17 years old living in a shelter home They were referred to the shelter house for a several reasons which included neglect, sexual abuse and were not supervised by their parents or guardians. They were invited to do just one session of sandtray therapy as a part from a few series of a counselling programme that were conducted in the home.

The data from this case study was collected through in-session observation, verbal and non-verbal communication, the analysis of the session's report and pictures taken from the session. It also involved the supervision from the expert of the sandtray therapy.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 Client A

From the beginning of the session, she was so excited to go and picked the miniatures that she felt interested to use. She was smiling while looking at all the toys and miniatures provided. She did take her time to choose the miniatures. At some time, she did put back a few miniatures that she took earlier when she found a new and more suitable toys to be used

During the process to arrange the miniatures in the sandtray, she was singing slowly while taking her time to put and design her sandtray. After she finished with the arrangement, she alerted me to take a look at her sandtray.

As a result, she did arrange her sandtray with a half square line of various vehicles from a truck to a small

car. It is symbolic of the outside world for her. There were a lot of people with different purposes of living. A layer inside, she arranged a monster and a rhinoceros to guard the place. It represented their warden. From the explanation, she felt scared and hate towards them because they were fierce.

She put several craftsman tools next to the monster and rhinoceros. It showed that she could learned new vocational skills at the shelter home. The last layer was the princess sitting in her guarded room. She explained that it was herself being in the only place that she likes at the home which was her room.

### **3.2 Client B**

She was happy when had a chance to pick the miniatures from the box provided. While choosing the miniatures, she thought and chose the miniatures carefully while showing a sense of happiness on her face.

While she was arranging the toys that she had chosen, the researcher could hear that she made a sound that related to the toys or miniatures that she was holding at that time. She did make a sound of fighting Batman and an aeroplane.

From the sandtray, we could see a Batman with a big sword is guarding the place. Next to the Batman was a bomb. She explained that Batman and a bomb represented their warden which was well known as a very fierce person with strict rules. If someone broke the rules no matter if it was a small or a big case, they would all get their punishment as symbolised by the bomb.

The place was fully gated and next to the outside gate, there were 2 aeroplanes. She said she wanted to go far from the shelter home if she had a chance, because she told the researcher that she was unhappy staying there. Inside the gate, there was only a person which symbolised by the character of The Smurf. She felt so lonely even there were around 80 children that were staying there.

### **3.3 Client C**

This child took the miniatures in just a seconds. She knew what she wants, she told the researcher. When she was sitting to arrange her miniatures in the sandtray, she does not make any sound or noise. The only expression that researcher can recognize from her face was serious.

She also used only a few minutes to arrange her miniatures. When finished, she did not give any signal to the researcher. The communication with her would usually came from the researcher first. In her sandtray, there were a lot of venomous and dangerous animals such as snake, tiger, spider and crocodile at the outer part in the sandtray.

She explained that those were the threats that she had to face in her life. Her warden also included as one of the dangerous animals described in the sandtray. She did not feel relaxed when staying at the shelter home but at the

same time, she also knew that outside world was dangerous for her. She put herself as a cannon in the middle of the sandtray, surrounded with the wall and those animals. The cannon gave her a sense of power to protect herself and it could give big impact if exploded.

### **3.4 Client D**

She took her time to choose the miniatures that she wanted to use in her sandtray. Her movement was slow but the researcher could see a happy face while she was picking the miniatures. During the session, she was focused on putting all the miniatures that she had chosen in the sandtray. Again she moved slowly and there was no hesitation that the researcher could see in her action.

She put a chicken inside a small cage at the very corner of the sandtray. It showed herself as a child trapped inside the shelter home, alone. Outside from the cage, she put the miniatures of Hulk and Power Ranger pushing Ultraman to another corner. She explained that was her thought about the outside world, full with people that wanted to bully others.

Just next to the cage, there were two ice cream sticks representing the grave of her parents. She was an orphan since she could remember. There were also a car and two persons standing beside it, which shown a normal life that she wanted to have outside of the shelter home. She also put miniatures of seashells, birds, a lobster and a few rocks to symbolise the place that she loves the most which is the sea.

## **4. DISCUSSION**

### **4.1 Pre Session**

The researcher had done the structural process at this very first stage of session and had explained the procedures and ethics in counselling. At the same time, the researcher also emphasized on the children's responsibility as a client so that the session would become meaningful. They were also informed about the steps that will be taken in the therapy process.

At this stage, the children were convinced to put their trust to the researcher and all issues that been discussed will be associated with the ethic of secrecy. The researcher had to repeat the explanation a few times to make sure that the children understand what was going to happen. At that time, their attention already switched to the miniatures and toys in the middle of the hall.

When we first met, the children did not have a positive feeling about this session. For them, they had been involved with so many programmes previously and at the end of the day, they would be left as usual at the shelter. The researcher had explained to the children that this programme would be different because it would lead to a continuation for the next week and a few more dates that would be informed later. After that, they felt more relaxed and agreed to continue and contribute to the sessions on the sandtray therapy.

## 4.2 Creation of The Relationship

Having a good relationship between the researcher and the children for this session was very crucial. To make that happened, researcher sat together on the floor with the children. We had chosen a place that had a suitable distance from other groups so that they wouldn't listen to the discussion of other persons.

The researcher also used a warm facial expression and a language that was suitable with children. To create a good relationship, basic counselling skills like listening, asking the open and closed questions, paraphrase, content and feeling reflection the researcher gained information about the children's background, thinking style and their behaviours.

## 4.3 Exploration and Identification of Problems

From the sandtray therapy that was used, the exploration and identification of problems found that the children did not feel happy over their living at the shelter home. They felt like they were living in a prison, plus they also were treated like a prisoner by their warden. To make it worst, they have no one that they can share this problem when it occurred. At some stages, they would relate these experience with their past and it would bring the traumatic feeling to come alive inside them again.

Having friends with almost the same background did not help them to feel any better. Some of them had their own best friend but they would easily feel hurt if their best friend did some mistake, even if it was just a silly mistake. They would create a stigma that everyone in this world is just the same. From that, they would avoid any relationship because it would upset them later.

They wanted to go out from the shelter home badly, but at the same time they also did not have any preparation to ensure that they could live their life outside. They felt like living a lifeless life, with no aspiration and reason that they could hold on to.

## 4.4 Identification of Client's Insights and The Direction of the Counseling Session

The sandtray therapy approach helped the researcher to identify the issue faced by the children appropriately because it was already visualized in the sandtray. The negative emotions felt by the children caused by the unhealthy environment that they have to encounter every day from the warden's harsh attitude.

The negative feelings and emotions that they had felt for a long time also contributed to their insecure cognitive thinking. They could not share it with their warden and they also did not have the trust to share it with their friends.

This approach has helped children to express their emotion clearly with no hesitation regardless of any issue including about their warden. On the other hand, it helped the researcher to have a better thought about

children's problems through the visual expression and exploration that had been done.

## 4.5 Discussion on Alternatives

The children realized that they should know about two important aspects in their life. Those are; the things that they can control; such as their attitude, emotion, action, planning and the other one, the things that they cannot control; such as their warden's attitude, people's perception and their past experiences.

They voiced out their plan to focus more on the things that they could control. They wanted to have a positive mind set and emotions, and the plan to enhance their skills to prepare for the moment when they would be ready to face the outside world when they get released from the home someday.

About their warden, they wanted to try to speak about it to their Principal since she is a good person for them. But to do that, they have to plan their action well to avoid misunderstanding that could lead to a worst situation.

They will try to forgive their parents or guardians who abandoned them because through forgiveness only they can live a better life. They also realized that they were not in their parents or guardians shoes, so it is unfair for them to give a negative judgement until they know the whole situation.

## 4.6 Actions that will be taken

The children had learnt how to gain and give trust from the session with researcher. They wanted to apply the same concept after the session with their selected friends starting with sharing daily conversation and routine. From there, they hope it can help them to reduce the burden that they had kept all this while.

They also realized that good communication started by using a good command of language. They will try to adjust their use of language. Perhaps from that, it can help them to improve their relationship with their warden.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Overall, the sandtray therapy that had been used could help researcher or counsellor to identify and handle emotional problems that were faced by the clients effectively and more focused. This approach helped to speed up the recovery process of emotional and behavioral damages of the children. As they have to meet their wardens and friends every day, it was really helpful.

The reduction of the information that were shared in the session really helped the researcher to go straight to the main issue. It saved a lot of time and really was suitable for the children as they would easily lost their attention if the counselling session was lengthy. A combination of multi senses used during the therapy also helped the children to stay focused during and after they had completed their sandtray.

As long as the negative emotion and thought of children still remained unfinished, it would always be a

disturbance for them from fulfilling their duty as a good and productive member to the society. Thus, the process of eliminating the disturbances is needed to be done in a proper yet fun way as sandtray therapy approach did.

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