

Screening Process on Children's Emotional and Behavioral Well-being Using the Play Therapy Approach

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ABSTRACT

Play therapy is a counseling approach to children and involves a dynamic and therapeutic relationship between children and counsellors through the natural communication of 'playing', which helps children express their emotions and experiences more effectively. This study is to explore the use of the play therapy approach as a screening process in identifying children's emotional and behavioural well-being. The screening process was conducted as part of a counseling intervention in a primary school setting. Three counselors-in-training who have been trained in play therapy were selected to conduct the screening process to identify children with emotional and behavioural issues and required further intervention. The study identified behavioural concerns at an early stage and provided timely intervention.

Keywords: School counseling, play therapy, screening process

1. INTRODUCTION

According to the Child Act (2001) under section 2 of Act 611, children have been defined as individuals aged 18 and under. Children are not comparable to adults in their verbal, cognitive and physical abilities. However, they too, like adults, encounter emotional and mental stressors in life.

At this present time, our country is burdened with widespread adolescent misconduct. Various attempts have been made to curb and reduce cases of misconduct but have been futile. The strategies that have been implemented thus far mostly focus on the concept of non-preventative treatment. This approach only reduces the impact of something that has already occurred. A more effective strategy would be to inculcate good behavior from early childhood to prevent adolescent misconduct from happening in the future. Early childhood experience is very important in shaping the behaviour, mentality and emotions of these future adolescents and adults.

Among the risk factors for children to develop behavioural problems are trauma, depression, emotional disturbances, and family conflict. This, in turn, may affect their well-being and academic achievement. The Emotional and Behavioral Wellness Screening Model (MS-KET) was developed as a holistic model for the care of the emotional well-being and health of children in primary schools. The MS-KET model introduces play therapy in counseling, that will act as a screening

tool of the emotional well-being and behaviour of children.

Play therapy is a counseling approach to children and involves a dynamic and therapeutic relationship between children and counsellors through natural communication. It helps children express emotions and experiences more effectively (Landreth, 2012). A meta-analysis study conducted by Bratton, Ray, Rhine and Jones (2005) found that play therapy interventions had a major impact on psychological treatment of children. Play therapy has been proven effective for over six decades by foreign researchers in many countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada.

Walen, Bratton and Kottman (2014) conducted a study on primary school students in the United States aimed at identifying appropriate counseling interventions to help students who experience behavioural disorders in the classroom. This study showed that there was decreased number on the behavioural problems among the school students. Another study by Baggerly and Parker (2005) that included 22 African American male students in a primary school used play therapy to see emotional and behavioral problems of children, such as low self-esteem, depression and aggression. The results showed that play therapy had a positive impact on behaviour and emotion.

A study by Blanco and Ray (2011) was conducted in primary schools to see the difference in the level of achievement of students who underwent play therapy

and those who did not. The study involved 43 students from the United States who had to answer the Youth Children's Achievement Test (YCAT) before and after play therapy. The results showed that students who underwent play therapy had higher scores than students who did not. Play therapy is also seen as one of the indicators in helping to boost student confidence in school. These findings demonstrate the effectiveness and functionality of the play therapy approach that encompasses all aspects of a child's well-being.

In Malaysia, studies on play therapy are very limited as they are still in the early stages of development (Ku Suhaila, Bruce, & Mohamad Isa, 2014). A study by Zuria et al. (2011) used the therapeutic approach to play and found it to be very effective as one of the interventions in the counseling of children from divorced parents. Through the play therapy approach, parents are able to identify issues and problems of their children.

For counsellors to effectively assist children in play therapy, it is imperative that the counsellors themselves are competent in communicating with children. In a study by Ku Suhaila et. Al., it was noted that the level of counsellor competence in assisting children was especially low. The counsellors were then sent for a three-day therapeutic training workshop. The training of 116 counselors and related professionals in six zones across Malaysia found that their level of competence and knowledge increased drastically (Ku Suhaila et al., 2014). Therefore, it is very important that counsellors be given exposure and training in ins Institute of Higher education order to be able to carry out their roles and responsibilities as a counsellor effectively.

Landreth, Ray and Bratton (2009) have provided a practical module for developing play therapy programs where counsellors should have the skills to involve parents and teachers in play therapy. The approach is known as filial therapy. This teaches parents and teachers the concept and application of play therapy in their relationships with children. Filial therapy has helped to bridge the relationship between parents and children. In fact, parents have also learned the right way to deal with children by using children's play methods (Taylor et al. 2011).

In addition, a phenomenological exploratory study was conducted by Wickstrom and Falke (2013) to study the experiences of nine parents who have been given complete training on filial therapy. The results of the study found that through the training given to parents, they have learned to improve their ability of applying basic skills in child-to-child affiliations and to create positive relationships, not only with their own children but with the people around them. The parents also better understood the benefits obtained if the time given to their children was well-spent. Therefore, this study proves that parents should be properly trained on filial therapy as it promotes better parent-child relationships.

According to Sepulveda, Garza and Morrison (2011), studies on early intervention in building relationships between children and teachers are limited and research is needed to determine the most appropriate protocol in helping teachers identify the socio-emotional and behavioural needs of problematic students. They conducted a study on 10 children and kindergarten teachers to apply Child Teacher Relationship Training to help build positive relationships between the child and the teacher. They also studied the impact of this method on the emotions and behavioural development of kindergarten children. It was found that this therapy helped to foster good teacher-child ties, had positive changes to the child's attitudes, inculcated good values, and increased confidence in the teacher's classroom management.

2. METHOD

This is a qualitative study with a case study design. The study was conducted in a primary school in Selangor with 3 counsellors-in-training. 103 primary school students aged 7 to 12 years had volunteered to undergo the screening process, which lasted for eight months. The data was compiled from screening sessions, individual counseling sessions conducted using the play therapy approach, and counseling reports provided by the counsellors-in-training. The results of the case study were analyzed using the thematic process to determine the types of issues and problems of the respondents in a descriptive form.

2.3 Protocol of Data Collection

2.3.1 University as the Provider

Based on the SM-PT model, the university provided the basic training of play therapy to counsellors-in-training who will be placed in the selected primary school for their internship. During that period, the counsellors-in-training assisted the existing school counsellors, who were burdened with time constraints and high counsellor to student ratio that limited them from providing adequate counseling to the students. This helped to maximise the functionality of counseling services. A counsellor educator supervised these trainee counsellors throughout their placement.

While undergoing their internship, the main role of the counselors-in-training was to conduct a screening session and follow up by using play therapy to help identify issues and problems experienced by the children. The screening process involved primary school students from Standard 1 to Standard 6 voluntarily.

2.3.2 School Involvement and Collaboration

The selected primary school must have at least one school counsellor who is also a registered with the

Malaysian Counsellor Board for on-site supervision purposes. The school counsellor provided information to all students regarding the play therapy approach and encouraged them to undergo the screening process. Students who volunteered had their personal and family background information obtained through a standard form before the screening process was conducted.

During the screening process, students who showed to have no problems or areas for concern were categorized into the termination group, and required no further intervention. Students who were identified to have emotional or behavioural concerns were categorized into the treatment group. In cases of ambiguity regarding existence of emotional and behavioural issues, screening was done for a second time before the student was assigned to either group.

During the screening session, the counsellors-in-training identified any concerns or issues via verbal communication and non-verbal cues. The choice of toys, category of play themes, play behaviours, emotions and behaviour were the main aspects that were observed during the screening process. In addition, the information obtained from the session reports and video recording during the session were collected and used as the main data to determine the progress of the emotional well-being and behaviour of students.

3. FINDINGS

The screening process on children's emotional and behavioural well-being demonstrates the involvement and collaborative effort between universities and schools in ensuring emotional and behavioural well-being of primary school children. Within the eight-month internship period, 103 primary students volunteered to participate in the screening process using the play therapy approach. This showed the willingness of many primary school students to partake in the study within a relatively short time span. Indirectly, play therapy is able to attract the students to explore themselves. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the respondents.

'Play' is a natural language for children. They are able to effectively express their struggles through play. Children often struggle with the conversational form of counseling because of their verbal limitation. Through play, the counselors-in-training were able to easily understand the child's concerns, and at the same time, children were able to express and heal. There were 77 students (74.76%) that were identified to have emotional or behavioural issues, while 26 students (25.24%) had no areas for concern. Table 2 shows the breakdown of students into the termination group and treatment group following the screening process. This result shows that through play therapy as a screening tool, counsellors are able to identify emotional and

behavioral issues among the children and intervene appropriately.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents (N=103)

Demographic	N	%
Gender		
Male	52	50.49
Female	51	49.51
Race		
Malay	101	98.06
Indian	1	0.97
Chinese	0	0.00
Others	1	0.97
Age		
7-8 years old	44	42.72
9-10 years old	8	7.77
11-12 years old	51	49.51

Table 2: Category of the Screening Process (N=103)

Category Screening	N	%
Terminated	26	25.24
Treatment	77	74.76
Total	103	100

Through the screening process, two predominant play themes were seen in children who were categorized into the Termination Group. These themes were creativity and positive imaginary. In the Treatment Group, 19 play themes were identified and observed by the counsellors-in-training during the play therapy screening process.

Table 3 shows that the types of play themes identified and the frequency in which they occurred. These findings from table 3 show that the number of play themes exceeds the number of students in the treatment group (113 play themes identified from 77 students). This means that children in the treatment group may have experienced more than one area for concern. The most common play theme in the treatment group was lack of nurturing (33.77%), followed by low self-esteem (31.17%). Other play themes that were identified were control, power, abandonment, dependency, protection, revenge, anxiety, loss, self-sufficiency, relationship, separation, hopelessness, helplessness, safety, mastering, perfectionist, and instability.

Table 3: Play Themes for Category Terminated (N=26) and Treatment (N=77)

Category	Themes	N	%
Terminated	Creativity	26	100
	Positive Imaginary	3	11.54
	Total	29	
Treatment	Lack of Nurturing	26	33.77
	Low Self-esteem	24	31.17
	Control	12	15.58
	Power	11	14.29
	Abandonment	6	7.79
	Dependency	6	7.79
	Protection	4	5.19
	Revenge	4	5.19
	Anxiety	3	3.90
	Loss	3	3.90
	Self-sufficiency Relationship	2	2.60
	Separation	2	2.60
	Hopelessness	2	2.60
	Helplessness	2	2.60
	Safety	2	2.60
	Mastering	1	1.30
	Perfectionist	1	1.30
	Instability	1	1.30
	Total	113	

4. DISCUSSION

Based on the play therapy screening session, the findings show that children in the school setting are already experiencing issues and show areas for concern that are affecting their quality of life. The issues and problems that have occurred have affected the development of children's emotions and behaviour.

Emotional stress experienced by children has translated into aggressive and unacceptable behavior, such as hitting their peers, not completing schoolwork, copying during tests, and delinquency or dropping out from school. Therefore, there is an imperative need to address the issues and problems experienced by children before they impact their social life and academic achievement.

Landreth et al (2009) described the use of play therapy as an effective approach for children because 'play' is a natural language while the toys used are their words. The play therapy approach helps children to express their emotions and experiences. Through play, children are able communicate their struggles and concerns (Landreth, Ray, & Bratton, 2009). In fact, the use of a therapeutic approach of play in school settings can help children express themselves without cultural barriers and verbal limitations (Drewes, 2009).

According to Ginsburg (2007), play is an activity that is synonymous and fun for children. It is an important activity that can optimize the development of

children's lives. Additionally, play provides a lot of benefits for children. According to Landreth (2012), play is a unique medium that helps facilitate language development, communication skills, social skills, decision-making skills, emotional development, and cognitive development in children. In fact, play can also help children explore their inner self. During play, children will often express feelings, emotions and problems that are being experienced through which children will receive therapeutic emotional support (Hunt, 2010).

Based on the use of play therapy in the screening process, it is proven that children find it easier to share and express their issues and problems through play. Hall, Kaduson and Schaefer, (2002) say play therapy is an interpersonal process involving professionally trained counsellors to help children deal with the problems of emotions and traumatic experiences. In the counseling profession, play therapy is recognized academically and clinically as an effective intervention to help improve the mental health of children (Landreth, 2012). Many studies have shown that the positive impact of using play therapy in the counseling profession is helping children with difficulties in their lives (Hunt, 2010; Kagan & Landreth, 2009; Kao & Chang, 2007; Lindo et al., 2012; Shen & Herr, 2003).

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the use of play therapy as a screening process was able to help identify any behavioural issues amongst primary school children. Lack of nurturing is a major area of concern and should be addressed accordingly. Most children are found to have problems stemming from inadequate attention from their parents.

The placement of counsellors-in-training in schools for their internship is a good concept, as it helps the school system deal with issues and problems in primary school children, as well as maximises the function of the trainees themselves. Issues and problems encountered by the child are seen to be addressed and acted upon accordingly with the counseling services provided at the school setting. Integrating play therapy into counseling sessions provides an enjoyable and relatable environment for children to express themselves, thereby empowering the therapeutic efficacy of this modality.

The care and protection of our children's emotional, mental and behavioural well-being is important as they are the future of the nation.

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