

The Role of Group Play Therapy in Improving Adolescents' Social Interaction

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Abstract

The global pandemic Covid-19 is affecting individuals' health, physically and financially. During the outbreak, a state of lockdown significantly impacted adolescents' social interaction. Being alone is a common phenomenon. However, avoiding social interaction due to low self-esteem or insecurities eventually will lead to psychological problems in the long run. Hence, this research has a two-fold view. First, to improve communication skills using group play therapy, and to enhance adolescents' acceptance in building new relationships with others and their age group. This research employed an action research process from the cycle process planning until the reflecting stage from two volunteer adolescents and referred by the class teachers. This study examines group play therapy through five-session activities to trigger social interaction during ice breaking, expressing feelings, sharing a common interest, friendship chains, and values others. Throughout the sessions, it was found that adolescents developed their social interaction with new people involving communication skills. In fact, self-acceptance was constructed based on analyzing the participants' and friends' revelations in the interviews. Thus, it can be implied from the research findings that group play therapy improved positive social interaction and was used to avoid social awkwardness.

Keywords

Play Therapy, Self-Esteem, Social Interaction, Communication Skills, Adolescent

1. Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic affects people mentally, emotionally, and overall health.

Aristovnik et al. (2020) stated that besides bringing to the fore many (existing) problems and challenges in the area of health; the Covid-19 pandemic has created unanticipated turbulence and the economy unexpectedly. Hence, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 to as a global emergency.

Rahman et al. (2021) Covid-19 outbreak and lockdown required people to stay at home, avoid any face-to-face social interactions, schools have been closed where teaching and learning are conducted online. Few studies show that the absence of a structured school setting for adolescents disrupts routine and a lack of fresh ideas for engaging in various academic and extracurricular activities (Liu et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020). Due to this matter, adolescents show these criteria because they cannot play outside of their house, do not meet, engage with friends, and be involved in school activities.

2. Research Background

The dynamic of the play therapy technique provides clients to express themselves fully and explore their feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors. Play therapy facilitates the medium of communication, growth, and development, especially among children. Moreover, play is fun, enjoyable to relieve feelings of stress and boredom, and stimulates creative thinking and communication skills (Russ, 2003). Therefore, the essence of play therapy accommodates communicating with others and resolving problems (Carmichael, 2006).

Applying play therapy as an intervention to improve social interaction after post-Covid-19 helps clients become more responsible for their behaviors and experience to regulate their emotions, learning new skills, and communicating better with peers, siblings and family (Lin & Bratton, 2015; Ray et al., 2015). Therefore, the positive effect of play therapy intervention was found to potentially improve children's and adolescents' growth and development and expand self-expression, self-knowledge, self-actualization, and self-efficacy.

The constraint of movement had an impact on adolescents' overall psychological well-being. Parents might face difficulty sending their adolescents to school after the lockdown because adolescents become more dependent and clingy to their parents due to the long-term shift in their daily routine. It is also presumed that adolescents might have issues in establishing rapport with their teachers and peers after the school reopens (Singh et al., 2020).

Singh et al. (2020) asserted that staying at home long-term could impact adolescents' socialization and physical activity opportunities. Thakur et al. (2020) stated that adolescents staying at home due to lockdown spend more time in front of the TV and internet, which can lead to psychosocial problems. Adolescents will have issues with assertiveness and social growth if they keep being isolated from meeting and interacting with people for a long time. They also might have problems making new friends and interacting with people and develop social awkwardness once the schools reopen in the future.

Therefore, this study aims to help adolescents who have an issue with social adjustment to improve adolescents' social interaction that has been affected by the implementation of the Movement Control Order. Thus, the research objectives are to:

- 1) Improve the communication skills using group play therapy among adolescent.
- 2) Improve adolescent acceptance in building new relationships with new people from the group play therapy approach.

3. Methodology

Reflection-pre action was employed for data gathered through a needs assessment report. Results indicated that most of the students want to know how to improve their social skills. In addition, an observation was conducted during the relief class session and found similar concerns.

Purposive sampling was employed with specific criteria that could provide the relevant insight needed for the current study. Two participants (as illustrated in **Table 1**) were recruited for this study.

In this study, the research process and procedure were conducted based on the action research cycle, displayed in **Figure 1**.

4. Results and Discussion

Stage 1: Planning Stage

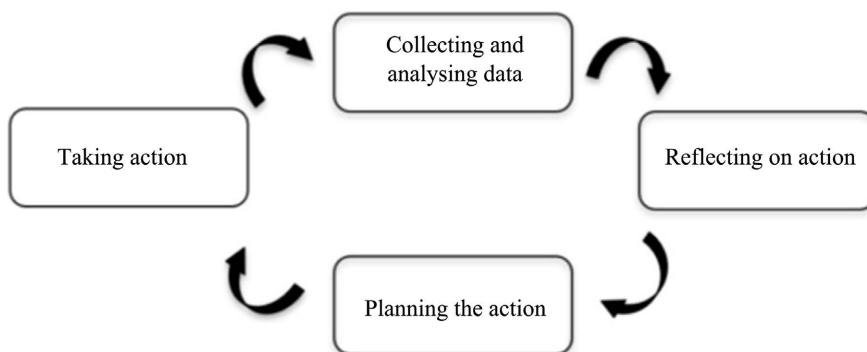


Figure 1. Action research process and procedure.

Table 1. Research samples.

| Sample 1 | Sample 2 |
|---|--|
| Age: 13 years old | Age: 14 years old |
| Number of Siblings: 0 | Number of Siblings: 2 |
| Appearance: Neat and clean | Appearance: Neat |
| Behavior: Minimal response, rarely make eye contact | Behavior: Able to follow command |
| Attitude: Cooperative, apathetic | Attitude: Cooperative, easily distracted |
| Level of Consciousness: Delay respond | Level of Consciousness: Alert |
| Speech and Language: Not clear | Speech and Language: Clear with appropriately placed inflections |

- Conducted Needs Assessment Report among secondary students. Counseling needs assessment is the process of figuring out what programs and services students need by getting information from them and figuring out what that information means. The results of the survey will help school counselor learn more about what students at the school need and come up with ideas for what kinds of programs are most needed to meet those needs and make good changes at the school. Also, needs assessments can help improve the quality of counseling services in schools. Aside from that, the need assessment gives the counseling unit hard evidence and gives students a reason to come to counseling if they wonder why they were called there. The information can always be used as a reference by the researcher. 77.9% of the students chose self-confidence as the topic they want to learn the most about. This shows that some students have low social skills due to self-confidence issues.
- Observation during relief classes and short interview session with sample's classmates was done, in which the researcher decided to do a quick observation during the ice breaking session with a few classes. Then, the samples were picked from the students that match with some of the criteria that were required for this study. Based on the problems and issues, researchers decided to come out with a few interventions to tackle this issue. The use of play in the school setting, specifically by school counselors, can help students as they strive to overcome many challenges that may impede social and academic growth and success (Ray et al., 2015). The school counselor will interview a few students from the samples' classmates to see the difference before and after this study. Then, they will give some comments and feedback regarding the social interaction.

Stage 2: Acting Stage (Interventions)

Session 1: Ice Breaking

1) Sand Play Therapy

With the aid of little toys and colored sand, a person can create their microcosm through sand play treatment. The scene produced mirrors the individual's life and offers the chance for conflict resolution, obstacle removal, and self-acceptance. Markos et al. (2008) stated that treatment through this activity was focused on active communication and interactions between the therapist and child. The therapist adopted an inclusive attitude and provided affirmations to help the child increase their emotional stability, strengthen their self-identity, balance the nurse-child interpersonal relationship and establish an appropriate level of self-awareness. As the participants play it under the researcher's observation, it also boosts their social and emotional skills since both create a conversation. It also is a great way to teach the samples to share and communicate with each other. Playing with sand is a social activity that requires speaking and listening, which helps develop interaction skills.

Session 2: Express the Feelings

1) Expressive Art Therapy

Enhancing cognitive, fostering self-esteem and self-awareness, emotional resilience, cultivating insight, improving social skills, reducing and resolving disputes and discomfort, and advancing societal and ecological change are all achieved through art therapy. Client may express all her feelings using the color she wanted to use to explain all her wanted and unwanted feelings. Art as expressive language gives an entry point into a relationship with adolescents by tapping into their creativity and providing a method of communication that is non-threatening and under their control. When clients enter the art therapy room, they find a table with drawing supplies and various forms of media. They are invited to draw anything they like and express their sentiments about being in the therapeutic setting through visuals.

2) Emotion Ball

This session will start by teaching about feelings once rapport has been established. This game was specifically created to observe the samples throughout the study. It is simple to move into and out of. It is a ball with different feeling words (happy, sad, angry, scared, etc.) and touches (good, bad, confusing, scary). The researcher and the clients can play this together. The word at the top of the ball is read out loud when the ball is rolled. If the word is a feeling word, the clients must tell about a time they felt that way. If it is a touch that the ball lands on the client, they have to explain what that touch is. It is a chance to educate the adolescents and see how much they know. It is also a good practice bonding tool for a group. Awareness of our emotions helps us be healthy and gives us a peaceful mind and soul. When we are aware of our emotions, we work on them and modify them; we are clear about why we are feeling them and how they can be turned into positive feelings. By tackling their emotions, the researcher also can observe how the samples communicate their feelings and express them in words.

Session 3: Communication Skills

1) Got Something in Common!

During this session, each client needs to share their hobby and interest. A student's sense of accomplishment and the praise they get from researchers significantly impact their self-esteem. Having a hobby is a great way to help the students develop a sense of accomplishment that doesn't depend on what other people think. Sharing hobbies with others can help them gain confidence in a safe, comfortable, and familiar setting. By working on an activity together, students will also improve their social skills and learn how important it is to build a team and work together to reach shared goals.

From the sharing session, they will notice that they got something in common that they can discuss after this. Then, they will list up the things that are common between them. The researcher may also share her interests and hobbies to have more conversations and discussions with them. Harackiewicz et al. (2008) mentioned that interest could help people learn by making them pay more attention and get more involved. In this activity, the clients will share the hobby and goods with their partner and find commonalities. As a result, they might pay

more attention and get more involved. If that interest turns into a personal one, the student is more likely to keep coming back to the material and learn more about it.

Session 4: Caring about Yourself and Others

1) Friendship Chain—Puppets

During this session, both clients need to share something they never thought they would share with each other using puppets. They will try to give their opinion to understand each other and act like they are puppets. Researchers also can share their thoughts about the issue using the chosen puppets. The puppets were selected according to the people's personalities. Giesen (2018) mentioned that one of the most incredible benefits of puppetry is that adolescents can learn how to interact with others by watching puppets do it and putting on a puppet show together. For example, when learning about fairness, taking turns, and speaking up, adolescents can observe how their peers handle these essential elements of belonging to a group through cooperative puppet play. Puppets can also help samples develop in many ways, like their ability to hear and speak. Previous study found that puppets can help people to learn how to communicate more clearly and control how fast they talk. So, to improve their social skills, the clients also can improve their communication skills and as well mental health (Asghari, 2011).

Session 5: Appreciate Each Other

1) You've Got Mail!

This session required the clients to write a letter for themselves and their partner. They are required to explain what makes their partner unique to them. This activity emphasizes self-acceptance, in which the samples will try to accept the flaws of themselves and others. Confidence comes from feelings of well-being, acceptance of your body and mind, and belief in your ability, skills, and experience (Ciarrochi et al., 2011).

Stage 3: Developing

Session 1: Ice Breaking. Through this sand tray therapy, the researcher decided to trigger the samples to share about the microcosm that was already created by the samples. This is because the participants also resisted sharing about her family. Since participant 1 only nodded and shook her head slowly without a single word. So, this intervention may help the researcher observe the activities since they managed to use the sand play therapy as a mediator to share their stories. How the researcher interacts with the participants at this time and their perspective on the purpose and meaning of the sand picture is primarily determined by her therapeutic orientation. Participant 2 also resisted answering a few questions in the first place, but the sample managed to share them during the sand therapy activity (Figure 2).

Session 2: Express the feelings. The participants were given a piece of paper and some colors. They are required to do anything that they want using the colors. There might be something that the samples desire to do better at, but dwelling



Figure 2. Sand tray therapy session.

too much on their past mistakes can be a barrier to progress. They will be able to see the best approach to take to overcome their weaknesses in any endeavor if they communicate with their inner self. During this activity, researchers can see how the participants try to communicate while expressing their art. However, participant 1 limits her words in describing the art. While participant 2 excitedly shared about the painting that had been done through the emotion ball activity, it can be seen that both of the samples enjoy picking up the ball with different emotions. The researcher noticed that both of the samples put a lot of effort into sharing their stories based on the activity given (**Figure 3**).

Session 3: Communication Skills. During the activity, the participants try to figure out their hobbies and interests; this is the opportunity for them to develop new interests of their own. Not only that, they will get to experience something new, and both will also be learning new skills and gaining knowledge simultaneously. For example, participant 1 tried to share more about the hobby when participant 2 asked her. While participant 2 shared a lot of things about her interests and tried to influence participant 1 to join her.

Session 4: Caring about yourself and others. The first step is to give the students a choice of puppets; the researcher watches how they react to the puppets, and asks them to come up with and share about them and their partner using the puppets. The second step is for the participants to make puppet shows and show them to the researcher. Then, the researcher talks to the puppets and asks them open-ended questions about them. For example, participant 1 managed to share about herself, but she couldn't share much about her partner (participant 2), while participant 2 shared everything about herself and her partner. Through this activity, the participants tried to care about themselves and others because they needed to find the puppets that suit their character too (**Figure 4**).

Session 5: Appreciate each other. This activity made them realize their strengths and weaknesses and try to accept them. During this activity, participant 1 showed an unhappy face because researchers were already informed that

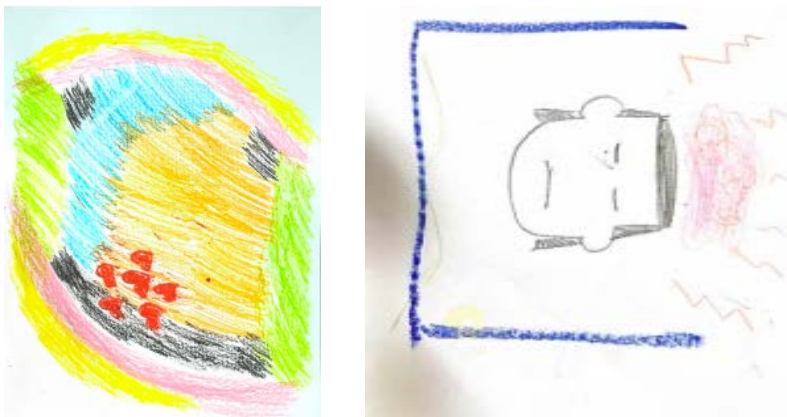


Figure 3. Expressive art therapy.



Figure 4. Puppetry session.

this was their last session. So, both of the participants wrote a long letter to give to their partner. They also promised to befriend even though all these sessions had already ended.

Stage 4: Reflection

Ice Breaking—This session is a crucial and essential part of this study. Activity 1 managed to break the ice successfully. Both samples get to know each other, and some get comfortable sharing their interests and favorite things. Throughout express feeling activities; this session focused on helping group members acknowledge their emotions and feelings. In activity 1, art therapy was used in this session where both samples needed to use colors to express their feeling and emotion. During this activity, it can be seen that both samples were well aware of their emotions especially during this pandemic of Covid-19. Both of them feel sad and scared regarding the pandemic. However, they looked very excited to show their artwork to each other, and they seemed very proud of their artwork. In activity 2, both samples were having fun playing with the emotion ball and shared their stories following the emotion stated in the ball.

In the communication activity; this session focused on enhancing adolescents' communication skills. Both group members got to be comfortable with each other throughout the session. The participants did both very well. Each of them looked very excited when they shared their interest with their partner and could share opinions about their goods. Finally, in the activity caring about yourself and others; this session also focused on caring for each of the participants. During this session, it can be seen that both participants know what to do when they are in a situation where their friends need them. For example, participant 1 knows what to do if one of his friends feels sad. She will give a hug and comfort his friend. Next, during the activity, both participants managed to list out all kinds of acts they know from their daily activities and observe other people's gestures of kindness.

5. Conclusion

After all five sessions with group members, each group showed positive changes in their attitude and behavior. They managed to get along with each other and adapt to the situation very well. All group members commit to the research, which helps the study achieve the goals of the group play therapy. All classmates of the group members admit that there were changes in their children's behavior after the five sessions.

This study found that group play therapy helps children improve their social interaction and adjustment. Three themes which are children's communication skills and children's self-acceptance in building new relationships were constructed based on the analysis of the participants as well as friends' revelations in the interviews. For future action research, a different activity with various goals should be added to help children with different kinds of issues. Next, the researcher might choose samples with issues such as disability or disorder to broaden the research knowledge in the future. To conclude, children need to learn social interaction in secondary school to ensure positive social development and avoid social awkwardness in the future.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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