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## Play Therapy-based Counseling Intervention on the Spiritual Wellness of Neglected Children: An Exploratory Study

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### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the views of counselor practitioners about conducting counseling interventions based on the Adlerian play therapy approach to improve the spirituality wellness of neglected children. This research was mainly carried out as a qualitative exploratory study. The participants in this study consisted of 10 counselors selected through purposive sampling. The participants selected must have more than five years of experience as a practitioner who has used play therapy in the counseling setting. Data were collected by semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, which in turn, resulted in the following four emerging main themes: (i) the fact that the Adlerian play therapy approaches can be used to explore the spiritual wellness of neglected children; (ii) the willingness to accept neglected children's as a client; (iii) the challenges of using play therapy approach in counseling; (iv) recommendations. Findings of this study can inform the suitability of play therapy integrated into counseling sessions that involve children, considering that this therapy can effectively improve the spiritual wellness of neglected children.

**Keywords:** Adlerian Play Therapy, Spiritual Wellness, Neglected Children, Counseling Intervention

### Introduction

Holistic wellness is an important construct in ensuring a favourable outcome of human capital that is free from social illnesses. According to Rohany and Fatimah (2006), individuals who are happy and have no negative feeling are those who are satisfied with their lives. Chirico (2016) mentioned that spirituality is an important dimension to be included in the definition of wellness. Although, spirituality is an important element of wellness but often been neglected in previous studies.

Spirituality means something sacred in the soul and is associated with the searching for meaning, experience, awareness, and value of a life (Sumari, Tharbe, Khalid, & Nor, 2016; Hamid, 2016). Nevertheless, as viewed by Sumari et al. (2016); Alzgoool (2019), some of the previous

scholars may or may not have included divine aspects in the construct of spirituality. Meanwhile, Bryant-Davis et al. (2012); Khalid, Islam & Ahmed (2019) mentioned that spirituality and religiosity are related to each other. As Fong and Ismail (2016) pointed out, every aspect of human activities is saturated with the element of religious and spiritual belief. Religion is the doctrine of a belief in god, commitment, and involvement in religious life, which can be expressed in the form of spirituality in an attempt to get closer to the sacred (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012; Fong & Ismail, 2016; Umrani, Ahmed & Memon, 2015). Islam views life satisfaction as not only a development process but also a continuous passage of life satisfaction from “here and now” to the eternal life of the hereafter (Hamid, 2016).

In the context of Malaysia, the aspect of spirituality is also stated in the National Education and Development Plan (2013–2025), the purpose being to ensure that children are developed in holistic and positive ways. Thus, spirituality is a crucial component in understanding humans holistically. A spirituality construct exists internally in every individual and is one of the coping strategies of children in dealing with problems. However, studies related to the roles of spirituality among children are still limited. This gap necessitates an intervention that is suitable to the psychological needs of children.

Given the above points, the spirituality construct among children should be developed and strengthened (Mountain & Mountain, 2016). However, for children, spirituality is an abstract concept to comprehend (McAdams & Sweeney, 2006; Zin, & Ibrahim, 2020) because in order to understand spirituality, one needs a high level of abstract thinking skill. Children have the limitations in discussing about spirituality and in expressing their emotions related to spirituality. They are not able to communicate verbally like adults, considering their cognitive limitations and difficulties in expressing their emotions in words, which are part of their normal developmental processes (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016; Landreth, 2012). Therefore, counselors need to be creative in their interventions with issues related to children’s spirituality. A play therapy can be part of child counseling sessions because play is the natural “language” of children and toys are their words (Kottman & Meany-Walen 2016; Landreth 2012)

Child neglect is the most common type of children maltreatment (DePanfilis, 2006; Yusof, 2010; Zakaria, 2015). Neglected children comprise children who are maltreated due to various aspects, such as physical, emotional, educational, health, nutrition, and limited supervision (Allin, Wathen, & MacMillan, 2005; Goodvin, Johnson, Hardy, Graef, & Chamber, 2007; Yusof, 2010; Lane, Bair-Merritt, & Dubowitz, 2011; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & Ijzendoorn, 2013). In some cases, children who live in conditions of parental substance abuse and domestic violence are also considered as neglected (DePanfilis, 2006; Kantor et al., 2004). Children who had experienced traumatic events such as maltreatment may have difficulties in expressing their emotions in words (Anang, 2012). In other words, these children may face difficulties in verbalizing their traumatic experiences.

Neglected children have damaged their spiritual strength due to maltreatment. Studies have shown that victims of maltreatment tend to have more negative views of god, causing them

to be less likely to believe in god, be involved in organized religion, or even practice a religion (Bierman, 2005). These children may have difficulty maintaining their spiritual belief because their spiritual trust has been damage (Walker, Reid, O'Neill, & Brown, 2009). Therefore, counselors need to be creative in their interventions toward neglected children. Play therapy is a type of child counseling intervention (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016; Landreth, 2012; Mountain & Mountain, 2016). Play Therapy is a form of creative counseling method (Gladding, 2016) that can facilitate the spiritual development of children. Play has a therapeutic role that can help counselors to communicate with children in a counseling setting. Children can play based on their experiences and emotions related to life naturally, and a healing process thus can take place throughout a session. In a play therapy session, a counselor communicates with children in a natural environment.

However, the establishment of play therapy in Malaysia is still at an early phase hence the limited studies in this field (Johari, Bruce, & Amat, 2014; Kastawi, 2013; Busu, 2011). There has been a lack of studies on the effect of play therapy in enhancing the spiritual wellness of neglected children. The aim of this study is to explore the views of counselor practitioners about conducting a counseling intervention based on the Adlerian play therapy approach.

### **Literature Review**

The holistic model of wellness was developed based on the Adlerian Counseling Theory (Myers & Sweeney, 2014; Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000). Spirituality is one of the important elements in holistic wellness under essential-self. This theory allows human beings to be understood in a holistic and social manner. In the present study, the researchers used the Indivisible Self model of Myers and Sweeney (2014). Myers and Sweeney (2014) defined holistic wellness as not merely the absence of disease but also the inclusion of physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of wellbeing. The spiritual aspect is the personal belief and behaviour that are practiced as part of the recognition that we are more than the material aspects of mind and body. The dimension of spirituality includes belief in a higher power, hope and optimism, worship, prayer and/or meditation, purpose in life, love (compassion for others), moral values, and transcendence or a sense of oneness with the universe (Myers & Sweeney, 2014).

This holistic model describes the element of spirituality in terms of essential self, social self, creative self, physical self, and coping self. All these elements interact with the same environment in the local, global, institutionalized, and chronometrically context. In order to achieve spirituality, children would have to undergo the natural process of psychological developments, such as self-identity, culture identity, gender identity, self-care, social self, love, friendship, coping self, and creative self. These developments constitute the foundation of faith that can be nurtured by the primary care giver (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012).

In the case of play therapy, the method has been used as a tool to enhance the holistic wellness of neglected children. Nevertheless, most established studies on holistic wellness have focused only on adults and teenagers, and little has been explored in regard to the wellness of children. In one study, Hollingsworth (2009) examined the correlation between children's

wellness and their academic achievements and found that children with good holistic wellness were able to obtain better academic achievement

Children may be too young to apprehend and be involved in the process of traditional psychotherapy (Bryant-Davis et al., 2012). They naturally develop through playing, and they express their emotions using toys (Mountain & Mountain, 2016). Children express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences through playing with toys. In other words, playing is children's language and toys are their words (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016; Landreth, 2012; Homeyer & Sweeney, 2016). Toys are very powerful tools in play therapy sessions. Walker et al. (2010) suggested creative interventions to children, such as storytelling, songs, or passages of sacred. Therefore, toys such as puppets, drawings, miniature, and sand trays can be used as a means to communicate with children. Specifically, counselors can provide toys that are more specific in describing spirituality, such as a mosque, a temple, and a church. In other words.

The Adlerian Play Therapy is a counseling approach which is grounded to the tenets of Adler's Theory of Individual Psychology (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016). This form of therapy was first developed by Kottman in 1987 by integrating the Adler's Theory of Individual Psychology with the play techniques that befitted the natural development of children in order to ensure the success of an intervention. As a conclusion, based on the literature review, it is evident that play therapy is able to give positive effects in regard to handling spirituality issues. Through play therapy, children can be assisted in discovering their spiritual values, which can be beneficial to themselves and others, and which can strengthen their relationship with God. Accordingly, this study was conducted to assist related agencies in implementing interventions that can heighten children's spirituality through the use of play therapy in counseling.

## **Method**

This study has been designed as a qualitative study by means of case studies (Yin, 2014). Yin has also noted worthwhile implication from the actual experience of the study participants, which can be learned from the case study findings. Face-to-face interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire protocol, and all the interview sessions were audio recorded. The interview method was chosen because it allowed the researcher to delve deeply into the experience of practitioners who have utilized play therapy in counseling children. Data from the interviews and observations were transcribed into written text, which was then analyzed (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The data were then analyzed by means of thematic analysis. Content analysis was also used to interpret the data, identify meanings, and produce themes. Questions in the interview protocol were more open-ended and were based on the dimensions of the five personal wellness factors, which are essential-self, social-self, creative-self, coping self, and physical-self.

In summary, the aim of the study is to gain an overall picture of how counselors viewed play therapy and the need for Adlerian therapeutic intervention in assisting the spiritual wellness of neglected children. The interview sessions were recorded in full with the participants' permission. Through the in-depth interviews, the counselors' experiences were elicited in regard



to therapeutic play. Having gained such knowledge, the researchers were able to clearly understand the counselor's experience in using the play therapy approach.

The main question asked was "How does play therapy approach help to improve the spiritual wellness of children?" Further follow-up questions were asked based on a participant's response to the first question, for example, "how play therapy helps children to express emotions"? The information obtained from the interviews were analyzed using a six-step process suggested by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007). The data analysis commenced once the first interview had been completed. In the first instance, the researchers needed to collect and compile the data. The process also involved the production of transcripts in which all the data including interviews, observations, and documents (audio or video) were translated into text form. The transcripts were prepared prior to the analysis.

The researchers then read the whole transcripts to get a general idea of what had been studied before the data were encoded. The data were coded and compiled to form subthemes, themes, and domains. Following which, an overview was developed. The researchers needed to relate the themes to an overview of the subjects that had been studied. Finally, a study report was produced. The researchers reported the results of the study using an inductive method in which the research data were presented first before formulating the results of the study. With regard to the validity and reliability of the qualitative data, the researchers conducted integrity checks to ensure that the data from the transcripts matched the actual participant interviews. Furthermore, researchers conducted an audit trail into the validity and reliability of the qualitative data.

### **Participants**

This study used a purposive sampling involving 10 counselor practitioners who were selected using a sampling technique known as the snowball sampling strategy. The participants criteria were as follows: (i) more than five years of experience as a counselor; (ii) having a play therapy room; and (iii) experience in using a play therapy approach in conducting counseling.

### **Findings**

Ten people (8 women and 2 men) participated in the study. The participants consisted of those from the following categories: IPT lecturers (2 persons), NGOs counselor (1 person), private counselor (1 person), school counselor (1 person), counselor from the religious department (1 person), and psychologists' counseling (4 persons). All the participants have more than five years of counseling experience. The analysis of counseling intervention requirements based on the Adlerian play therapy approach was divided into four major themes, which were then extrapolated from the interviews conducted. These themes are parallel to the holistic personal dimensions of the five-step holistic wellness factor (Myers & Sweeney 2014). This study contributes to the needs of counseling interventions based on the Adlerian play therapy approaches specifically on the spirituality wellness for neglected children. These themes are in line with the holistic dimensions in the Five Factor Wellness-Elementary Version (FFWEL-E) scale.

Demographic of the Counselors Involved in Play Therapy Counselor	Gender	Experience as a Counselor	Experience in Play Therapy
TB1	Female	35 years	15 years
TB2	Female	15 years	8 years
TB3	Female	9 years	9 years
TB4	Male	17 years	6 years
TB5	Male	7 years	5 years
TB6	Female	9 years	9 years
TB7	Female	15 years	8 years
TB8	Female	12 years	5 years
TB9	Female	13 years	6 years
TB10	Female	10 years	5 years

The findings indicate that the Adlerian play therapy approach is able to assist the counselors in exploring spirituality among neglected children. Four emerging themes were identified: (i) the fact that the Adlerian play therapy approaches can be used to help a counselor explore the spiritual wellness of neglected children; (ii) the willingness to accept a neglected child as a client; (iii) the challenges of using a play therapy approach in counseling; and (iv) the recommendations proposed.

**Theme 1: The Adlerian play therapy approaches can be used to explore the spiritual issues of neglected children.**

Play is the nature of a child. Playing is a child's language and toys are words of a child. Counseling is implemented in a natural environment for children. Children feel safe, comfortable and conducive in a natural environment. For children who are neglected, they have attachment problems because they are neglected. This can be perceived in the following statement:

*“Before conducting my counseling session with children, I had talk therapy and ... I do not think it was effective in children ... I went to the therapy courses that involved playing, when I returned from the course I applied to my client and I saw the results.”*

Toys are considered powerful tools in a play therapy. A counselor needs to provide toys that can illustrate spirituality. This measure was perceived by one of the participants:

*“It is important to provide toys like mosques, churches, temples or pictures of people who are praying.”*

### **Theme 2: The willingness to accept a neglected child as a client**

The participants believed that a competent counselor who conducts sessions with a neglected child should have knowledge about the child’s neglected backgrounds. This knowledge can facilitate the counselor in preparing to face any related situation. The willingness to accept neglected children as clients means having knowledge of the psychological characteristics of the neglected children and the willingness to accept the child as a client. Therefore, characteristics of a Counselor towards children can determine the effectiveness of the counseling session, such as the characteristic of unconditional regards, a non-judgmental attitude, and an acceptance of the fact that everyone has different beliefs and practices. The findings have demonstrated that understanding a neglected child means that a counselor is able to understand the feelings of a child who has been neglected and thus these children needs help from other people. This can be gauged from the following response:

*“My understanding on this issue is that these children are among the people who crave for attention. To take an example of my own client on how he begins to get caught up in this world is because lack of attachment and love. It appears that they need and seek love from someone. Some of them broke up with the people they love, some are seeking for love they never get, some have family conflicts but they all agree that love is what they are looking for.”*

As indicated from the statement above, neglected children need someone with whom they can share feelings and by whom they can feel loved.

### **Theme 3: Challenges in Using the Adlerian Play Therapy Approach**

The challenge faced in using this approach is to provide an ideal play therapy room according to specifications (Kottman & Meany-Walen, 2016; Landreth, 2012).

*“I have a little room for me to play.”*

*“I modify my room to become play therapy room ... I do not have any ideal room for play therapy room.”*



The respondents also suggested creating portable play therapy kits for counselors who do not have a play therapy room. Additionally, counselors must undergo training in Adlerian therapy to enhance their competence in the field.

*"Don't have to worry for those who do not have play therapy rooms can bring portable toys to intervention."*

The next challenge is to have a professional training in the field of play therapy. A counselor needs to attend workshops and courses in order to enhance his or her knowledge and skills as a practitioner of play therapy.

*"The counselor needs to equip himself or herself with professional training."*

#### **Theme 4: Recommendations**

A counselor must have high confidence that the Adlerian play therapy approach has a bright future in a counseling setting.

*"Although there is no playroom, the counselor can bring the toys in the form of kits to carry to the session and to run the session ... here's what is important is to keep the client's confidentiality."*

*"I believe play therapy has a bright future."*

To conclude, the above results indicate how a counselor who handles neglected children cases should have theoretical and holistic understanding on the spirituality issues related to neglected children besides the required skills and attitude. The purpose is to enable the counselors to be more prepared and knowledgeable in handling cases of neglected children.

#### **Discussion**

The study participants agreed that there was a coherence of counseling interventions based on the Adlerian's play therapy because the medium of communication of children in a counseling session is not the same as that of adults. Compared to children, adults are comfortable with a verbal counseling session, whereas a play therapy is a counseling approach for children. Children have difficulty in expressing their problems verbally due to certain limitations of cognitive development, particularly the emotional and traumatic experiences they have undergone.

Most of the established studies have recognized the higher efficacy of play therapy over other interventions for neglected children (Allin et al., 2005). The overall conclusion is that play therapy involves resilient peer treatment which has produced positive outcomes for children who have been experiencing neglect (Udwin, 1983). In addition, many studies have concurred that play therapy is an effective therapeutic intervention in children counseling sessions (Blanco, Muro, & Stickley, 2014; Blanco, Ray, & Holliman, 2012; Lin & Bratton, 2015; Ray, Schottelkorb, & Tsai, 2007; Stickley, Muro, & Blanco, 2013).

Studies have recognised the higher efficacy of play therapy over other interventions for neglected children (Allin et al., 2005; Udwin, 1983). In addition, many studies have also concurred that play therapy is an effective therapeutic intervention in children counseling sessions (Blanco, Muro, & Stickley, 2014; Blanco, Ray, & Holliman, 2012; Lin & Bratton, 2015; Schottelkorb et al., 2015; Stickley, Muro, & Blanco, 2013).

Mountain and Mountain (2016) conducted a field study using play therapy to understand the early experiences of children who are victims of natural disasters. According to them, the children's spiritual connection starts with their relationship with humans. Thus, in a play therapy counseling session, counselors must build therapeutic relationships in order to cultivate spiritual values in children. During an early session between the counselors and the children, it is important that trust and confidence are built. Through play therapy, spiritual connections can be established between the counselors and the children.

Richardson (2015) conducted a hermeneutic phenomenology study to explore spirituality among ill children. This research found that the playing experiences provided spiritual meanings on how children coped with daily life. The findings also provided insights on how play can be used in promoting spiritual well-being. Aziz, Johari, and Rashid (2016) conducted a qualitative study on Islamic approaches in play therapy. Islam recognizes play as the fitrah (norm) of childhood. The study looked into the personal qualities and skills in performing play therapy, which should be based on Islamic religious beliefs.

In a play therapy, children are provided with playing materials that allow them to express a wide range of emotions and receive opportunities to practice socially-acceptable behaviours. It is also plausible that children who undergo a play therapy tend to experience a sense of confidence and control when they are given encouragement and support by their counselors. Through play therapy, children can learn to build positive relationships with other people through role modelling as demonstrated in the sessions with the counselors. Positive values that are expressed through play therapy can help children to obtain a sense of awareness particularly in terms of spirituality.

Mountain and Mountain (2016) found that a play therapy can assist in the expression of spiritual connections. A play therapy intervention is very crucial in reviving the spirituality strength of children who are victims of maltreatment. Play has a therapeutic role that can help counselors to communicate with children in a counseling setting. Children play based on their experiences and emotions related to life naturally, and healing process can take place throughout the sessions. A counselor thus can communicate with the children in a natural environment.

Overall, the findings of the present study advocate that counselors utilize play therapy to effectively increase the spiritual wellness of children. Play therapy can indirectly change the experience of children and enhance their coping self attributes, namely self-esteem, stress-management abilities, and reality beliefs, which are able to create pleasant and desirable

experiences. Apart from that, play therapy has also been reported to enable children to attain a sense of empowerment post-therapy and improve their social selves and social skills.

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