

Emotion Control Strategies in Early Childhood through Play Therapy

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Abstract: This study explores the strategies for controlling emotions in early childhood through the implementation of play therapy. Emotional regulation is a critical aspect of a child's development, significantly impacting their social interactions and overall well-being. Play therapy, as an evidence-based intervention, provides a safe and structured environment for children to express their emotions, develop coping mechanisms, and improve emotional intelligence. This research examines various play therapy techniques and their effectiveness in helping young children manage emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness. Through qualitative analysis, the study identifies key components of successful play therapy sessions, including the role of the therapist, the types of play activities used, and the outcomes observed in children's emotional behavior. The findings suggest that play therapy is a valuable tool for early childhood educators and therapists in promoting healthy emotional development, reducing behavioral issues, and enhancing children's ability to navigate complex emotional experiences. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the benefits of play therapy and underscores its importance in early childhood education and mental health practices.

Keyword: Strategies, Emotion Control, Early Childhood

Introduction

The individual receiving counseling does not always have to be a student in middle school, high school, or university. It is also possible for the counselee to be an early childhood individual. While young children often seem to be always playing, they can also experience internal conflicts that make it difficult for them to control their emotions. This issue requires special attention from both parents and teachers because if a child encounters problems, it can affect their development during early childhood. This period is known as the golden age, where children are rapidly growing and developing, prompting them to strive for their best and adapt to the challenges they face.

Several studies also explain that early childhood has significant potential to experience problems. One of the issues faced by young children is related to emotional problems. Mental and emotional health in children is becoming an increasingly urgent concern (Amalia et al., 2024). Early childhood is one of the most critical phases in an individual's life because children's behaviors vary widely, and there is no clear distinction between problematic behaviors and serious emotional issues. The importance of experiences during childhood in shaping development in later stages highlights a strong need for preschools to provide

environments where children can develop and acquire essential skills that enhance their academic, social, emotional, and behavioral competencies before entering elementary school.

In addition to the experiences provided at school, there must be a positive parenting style created within the family environment. The family is the first environment known to the child and serves as the foundation for the child's initial experiences before stepping into life outside the home (Munisa, 2020). Issues faced by young children need to be addressed to avoid childhood trauma that can affect their adult life. Especially concerning emotional problems, if a child is allowed to have tantrums from a young age and is never given therapy, they will find it difficult to control their emotions later in life. Such behavior typically occurs during the developmental stage of 18 months to 3 years old and can sometimes be observed in children aged 5 to 6 years (Lestari et al., 2021). A tantrum is a difficulty in children controlling their emotions, often caused by not achieving what they want, leading them to express frustration, anger, disappointment, and sadness for a prolonged period (Y. Ritonga & Ritonga, 2023).

The occurrence of these issues in early childhood represents a serious obstacle to a child's emotional development and can have long-term impacts on their daily life. Several factors contribute to a child's difficulty in controlling their emotions, including: (1) unmet desires; (2) difficulty expressing their feelings; (3) unmet needs; (4) hunger, fatigue, or feeling unwell; and (5) boredom (Y. Ritonga & Ritonga, 2023). To address these issues, counseling that children enjoy is necessary. Since children spend much of their time playing, the counseling process should be accompanied by play. This approach aims to prevent boredom and ensure that children enjoy the counseling process, thereby ensuring that the necessary information is effectively communicated and meets their needs.

Through play, counselors aim to create a two-way communicative interaction based on trust between the counselor and the child. This allows the child to express their feelings unconsciously while playing. Play therapy is a theory that posits childhood as a time for play, where many activities culminate in play (Alhadi, 2016). Based on this explanation, using play therapy in the counseling process for young children is highly suitable for helping them resolve their issues. Many experts recommend the use of play therapy techniques in counseling services for children because play is a natural form of expression for them. It does not directly remind them of traumatic events they have experienced, as counselors use symbolic materials.

With the help provided, children will find it easier to control their emotions because the process of play therapy can be carried out through activities like coloring. Children will color according to their mood, and while they do so, the counselor can gather information from them. Therefore, this study aims to evaluate whether play therapy is an effective strategy to help children manage their emotions. If this proves to be an appropriate strategy, this counseling technique can be implemented as a program in early childhood education (PAUD) schools to help children resolve their issues.

Literature Review

A. Early childhood children

Early childhood refers to individuals aged 0 to 6 years. According to experts in child education, this group also includes children aged 6-8 years. Early childhood is a phase in which children are undergoing a unique process of growth and development. This encompasses

various aspects such as physical growth and motor skills (both fine and gross coordination), cognitive abilities (thinking power, creativity, emotional intelligence, and spiritual intelligence), social-emotional development (attitudes and behaviors, as well as religious values), and language and communication skills. Each of these areas develops in accordance with the specific growth and developmental stages of the child (Hurlock, 2014).

There are several definitions of early childhood. The first definition states that early childhood refers to children aged 0 to 8 years. Similarly, Ardy (2016) argues that early childhood encompasses children aged 0 to 6 years, who are in the early stages of childhood development. At this stage, children exhibit characteristics such as concrete thinking, realism, simplicity, animism, centration, and a broad imagination.

Children are the focal point of education. Therefore, it is imperative for those involved in the field of education to understand and comprehend the developmental characteristics of children in each area and period. This understanding allows educators to provide education that aligns with children's growth and development, talents, and interests, meeting their developmental needs and nurturing their innate abilities.

Early childhood children possess unique characteristics because they are in a phase of rapid growth and development, which is fundamental for their future life. Psychologically, early childhood children exhibit specific traits that differ from those of children older than eight years. The unique characteristics of early childhood children are as follows: (1) They are egocentric; (2) They have a strong sense of curiosity; (3) They are unique; (4) They have vivid imaginations and fantasies; and (5) They have short attention spans.

B. Emotion Regulation in Early Childhood

According to Mubayidh (2006: 5), emotional intelligence is defined as "the ability to behave wisely in relationships with others." Emotional development includes self-control, satisfaction and determination, and the ability to motivate oneself. Martani (2012: No. 1, p. 11) argues that emotion is any state within an individual accompanied by affective coloring, ranging from weak (shallow) to broad (deep) levels. Meanwhile, Nugraha and Yeni (2011: No. 1, p. 3) state that emotion refers to unique feelings or thoughts, a biological and psychological state, and a series of tendencies to act. Linguistically, emotion means an outpouring of feelings that develop into psychological and physiological reactions such as joy, sadness, emotion, and love.

Emotions in early childhood are very strong. This phase is a period of imbalance, where children are easily swept away by emotional outbursts, making it difficult to guide and direct them. According to Hurkock, this emotional development is prominent in children aged 2.5-3.5 years and 5.5-6.5 years. Characteristics of Early Childhood Emotions. Preschool children tend to express their emotions freely and openly. Anger is often displayed by children at this age. Jealousy is also common in children at this age. They often compete for the teacher's attention. High emotions are generally caused by psychological issues rather than physiological ones. Parents only allow children to do a few things, whereas children feel capable of doing much more. Additionally, children become angry when they cannot do something they think should be easy (Susanto, 2011).

There are several factors that influence the emotional development of school-aged or kindergarten children. These factors can originate from within the individual, conflicts in the developmental process, and some come from the environment (Uno, 2008). The first five years are a period where the foundations of human personality, sensory abilities, thinking, language and speaking skills, and social behavior are formed.

C. *Play Therapy*

Play therapy is a psychotherapy method aimed at helping children release their emotional pressure through various imaginative and expressive materials. The assumption in play therapy is that children will express and learn to cope with their emotional conflicts through changes in play activities. The Association for Play Therapy (as cited in Indriyani, 2011) explains that play therapy is an assistance process provided to clients with psychosocial problems related to the environment and the child's development. This condition indicates that the child has not yet behaved in a manner that aligns with the expectations of their environment, making it difficult for them to be accepted. Based on definitions provided by several experts, it can be concluded that play therapy is a medium provided by therapists for children to express themselves in a comfortable setting using various play media tailored to the child's needs (Wahyuni et al., 2022).

Stages in play therapy according to Indriyani (2011) consist of three stages: the initial stage, the middle stage, and the final stage.

1. The initial stage involves building trust and rapport with the child through active listening and reading the child's situation (active listening and reading the situation) and unconditional acceptance, attempting to provide assistance to the child and communicating with full patience. After that, the therapist or counselor will determine a game that matches the child's characteristics and prepare the play tools to be used, and set goals to be achieved in the therapy to change existing behaviors. Finally, they will create a schedule and determine the therapy location together with the child, in a way that suits the child's needs and characteristics.
2. The middle stage, at this stage, therapy begins by providing information to the child or client about the purpose of the play therapy to be conducted. Then, exploration and observation of how the child plays will be carried out. The counselor or therapist will help the child develop their creativity, emotional abilities, and interpersonal relationships.
3. The final stage, this is the concluding stage of the play therapy. At this stage, the counselor gives the child the opportunity to summarize what they have gained from the play sessions. Therapy can be concluded if positive behavioral changes in the child are observed, aligning with the targets or goals set for the play therapy (R. S. Ritonga et al., 2022).

Types of games according to Supatini (2004) are divided into two categories: games and unoccupied behavior.

1. Games: This type of game involves specific tools and uses scoring or calculations. These games can be played by the child alone or with friends. There are many types

of these games, ranging from traditional to modern ones, such as snakes and ladders, congklak, puzzles, and others.

2. Unoccupied behavior: At certain times, children often engage in unoccupied behavior, where they might wander around, smile, laugh, tiptoe, bend, play with chairs, tables, or anything around them. The child might daydream, busy themselves with their clothes, or other objects. Essentially, the child does not play with specific tools, but rather uses the surrounding situations or objects as play tools. The child focuses on anything that captures their attention

Method

This research was conducted using a qualitative method with the aim of revealing the opinions of experts who have previously studied this issue. The qualitative approach is a research and understanding process based on a methodology that investigates a social phenomenon and human problems. In this approach, the researcher emphasizes the socially constructed nature of reality and the close relationship between the researcher and the subjects being studied (Noor, 2014).

Qualitative research can be designed to contribute to practical theory, policy, social issues, and actions. Researchers conduct qualitative research to explore phenomena that cannot be quantified and are descriptive in nature, such as the process of a work step, the formula of a recipe, various understandings of a concept, characteristics of goods and services, images, styles, cultural practices, physical models of artifacts, and so on. In this research, the sampling technique used is purposive sampling, which involves selecting research subjects who are considered to have in-depth knowledge of the information and issues and can be trusted to be reliable data sources. These subjects include Principals, Teachers, and Students. The interview results from these subjects will serve as the primary data sources for this research. The data sources used in this research are twofold: primary and secondary data sources. Data collection techniques include observation, interviews, and documentation. The data analysis method used in this research follows the Miles and Huberman model. The data analysis process can be simplified into three stages as explained by Miles and Huberman.

Result and Discussion

Some strategies that can be used to help children manage their emotions include using counseling techniques such as play therapy. However, the problem in the field is that professional counselors have not yet been placed in early childhood education schools such as PAUD/TK/RA and equivalent institutions. This is due to the limited funds available to pay additional counselors if they need to be hired by the schools. Additionally, there is a lack of interest in working at the early childhood education level, resulting in a scarcity of professionals willing to be placed there.

1. Several methods that can be implemented for early childhood in counseling using play therapy techniques to manage emotions are as follows: Coloring Engaging in coloring activities allows children to express their feelings through the colors they choose. Often, children may select bright colors like red not because they are angry but because they are happy. Therefore, as a teacher or counselor, it is essential to

- talk to the children while they are coloring, asking them why they chose certain colors.
2. **Storytelling** Children feel valued when their stories are heard by those around them. Encouraging children to talk about their feelings when they are emotional helps them feel understood. This practice can begin as soon as a child starts to recognize their parents. For instance, a mother can talk to her child when they are crying as an infant. This habit of sharing feelings can continue into adulthood.
 3. **Role-Playing** Children can express their feelings by pretending to be someone else, such as a teacher or a doctor. This role-playing helps children learn how to manage emotions by experiencing different perspectives.
 4. **Origami Folding** Folding origami helps children develop patience, teaching them to manage their emotions as they focus on the delicate task of creating origami figures.
 5. **Reading Comics** Comics are popular with children because of their vivid illustrations. Reading comics can also help distract children and redirect their focus when they are experiencing tantrums (Rizky Vita Losi et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Every person has different emotional development stages according to their age. However, at an early age, children find it more challenging to control their emotions, often resulting in tantrum behavior. Therefore, parents and teachers need to implement strategies that involve the assistance of professionals, such as counselors. One effective counseling technique is play therapy, which includes various child-friendly methods such as coloring, folding origami, reading comics, storytelling, and role-playing.

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