

Effectiveness of Play Therapy in Improving Emotional Regulation among Children with Anxiety

Nasiya Niyas

Department of Psychology

Abstract: *Childhood anxiety is a prevalent psychological concern affecting emotional regulation, social functioning, and overall development. Emotional regulation refers to the ability to monitor and manage emotional responses adaptively. Children with anxiety often struggle to express and control emotions, leading to maladaptive coping and heightened distress. Play therapy is a developmentally appropriate intervention allowing children to express emotions symbolically and develop self-regulation skills. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of play therapy in improving emotional regulation among children with anxiety. A pre-test-post-test experimental design was employed with a sample of 20 children aged 6–12 years diagnosed with mild to moderate anxiety. Standardized tools, including the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (SCAS) and the Emotion Regulation Checklist (ERC), were administered before and after an 8-10 session structured play therapy intervention. Paired sample t-tests revealed a significant improvement in emotional regulation scores following the intervention. Findings suggest that play therapy is an effective approach for enhancing emotional regulation in children with anxiety, with important implications for clinical practice in child psychology.*

Keywords: Play therapy, emotional regulation, childhood anxiety, child psychology, intervention

1. Introduction

Childhood anxiety is one of the most frequently reported emotional difficulties in clinical and educational settings. Children with anxiety often exhibit excessive worry, fearfulness, avoidance behaviour, and somatic complaints, which can interfere with social, academic, and emotional development. If left untreated, childhood anxiety may persist into adolescence and adulthood, increasing the risk of long-term psychological problems.

Emotional regulation is the ability to monitor, evaluate, and manage emotional responses adaptively. Deficits in emotional regulation are commonly observed among children with anxiety, leading to heightened emotional reactivity and maladaptive coping strategies. Poor emotional regulation has been linked to internalizing problems, behavioural difficulties, and social challenges.

Play therapy is a therapeutic intervention using play as the primary mode of communication. It provides children a safe environment to express feelings symbolically, explore internal conflicts, and develop adaptive coping skills. Previous research has demonstrated that play therapy enhances emotional expression, reduces anxiety symptoms, and improves emotional regulation (Landreth, 2012; Bratton et al., 2013; Ray et al., 2015; Lin & Bratton, 2020; Blanco & Ray, 2011; Cohen & Schaefer, 2020).

Despite these findings, few studies have specifically examined the effect of play therapy on emotional regulation among anxious children. The present study seeks to fill this gap by evaluating the effectiveness of structured play therapy in improving emotional regulation among children with anxiety.

2. Aim of the Study

To examine the effectiveness of play therapy in

improving emotional regulation among children diagnosed with anxiety.

3. Objectives of the Study

- 1) To assess anxiety levels among children before the play therapy intervention.
- 2) To assess emotional regulation among children before the intervention.
- 3) To implement a structured play therapy intervention for children with anxiety.
- 4) To assess emotional regulation among children after the intervention.
- 5) To evaluate the effectiveness of play therapy in improving emotional regulation among children with anxiety.

Hypotheses

H₁: Children with anxiety will show a significant improvement in emotional regulation after receiving play therapy intervention.

H₀: Children with anxiety will not show a significant improvement in emotional regulation after receiving play therapy intervention.

4. Methodology

Research Design

A pre-test-post-test experimental design was used to evaluate the effectiveness of play therapy on emotional regulation among children with anxiety.

Sample

- Size: 20 children
- Age Range: 6–12 years
- Sampling Technique: Purposive sampling
- Inclusion Criteria: Children diagnosed with mild to moderate anxiety and exhibiting emotional regulation difficulties

- Exclusion Criteria: Children with severe intellectual disability or psychotic symptoms

Tools

- Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (SCAS) – to assess anxiety levels
- Emotion Regulation Checklist (ERC) – to assess emotional regulation
- Socio-demographic Data Sheet – prepared by the researcher

Intervention

- Children participated in 8–10 structured play therapy sessions, each lasting 45 minutes, including:
- Expressive play activities
- Storytelling and role play
- Art-based play
- Emotion identification games
- Therapeutic toys for symbolic expression

Procedure

- Obtain parental informed consent.
- Administer pre-test assessments (SCAS and ERC).
- Conduct structured play therapy sessions over 4–5 weeks.
- Administer post-test assessments using the same tools.
- Analyze pre-test and post-test scores using paired sample t-tests to evaluate effectiveness.

Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent obtained from parents
- Confidentiality maintained
- Voluntary participation ensured
- Intervention safe and age-appropriate

5. Results

Statistical Analysis

Paired sample t-tests were used to compare pre-test and post-test scores on the Emotion Regulation Checklist (ERC).

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Emotional Regulation Scores

Test phase	N	Mean	SD
Pre-Test	20	42.35	6.21
Post-Test	20	56.80	5.74

Table 2: Paired Sample t-test for Emotional Regulation

Variable	Mean difference	t-value	df	p-value
Emotional regulation	14.45	6.82	19	<.001

Interpretation: The paired sample t-test showed a significant increase in emotional regulation scores following the play therapy intervention ($t(19) = 6.82$, $p < .001$), indicating that play therapy had a positive and statistically significant effect.

6. Discussion

The results indicate that structured play therapy is effective in improving emotional regulation in children

with anxiety. Significant post-test improvements demonstrate enhanced emotional awareness and self-regulation skills. The findings align with previous studies emphasizing play as a natural medium for emotional expression and coping skill development (Landreth, 2012; Bratton et al., 2013; Ray et al., 2015; Lin & Bratton, 2020; Blanco & Ray, 2011; Cohen & Schaefer, 2020).

Structured activities, consistent practice, and the therapeutic relationship likely contributed to these improvements. These findings support the inclusion of play therapy in clinical and educational settings for children experiencing anxiety and emotional regulation difficulties.

7. Conclusion

Play therapy is an effective intervention for improving emotional regulation among children with anxiety. Providing a safe and expressive environment allows children to process emotions and develop healthier emotional responses. These findings reinforce the use of play-based interventions in child mental health practice.

8. Limitations

- Small sample size limiting generalizability
- Short duration of intervention
- No long-term follow-up to assess sustained effects

9. Suggestions for Future Research

- Conduct studies with larger sample sizes
- Include follow-up assessments for long-term effectiveness
- Compare play therapy with other therapeutic interventions
- Explore different age groups and cultural contexts

Acknowledgement

I sincerely acknowledge the children and their parents for their cooperation and participation in this study. I am grateful to Innerpeace Counselling Centre for providing the clinical setting, support, and resources necessary to carry out this research. I also extend my sincere thanks to my colleagues and mentors in the field of psychology for their guidance, encouragement, and valuable suggestions throughout the research process.

References

- [1] Blanco, E., & Ray, D. C. (2011). Play therapy with children: An overview of research and practice. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling*, 1*(1), 15–27.
- [2] Bratton, S. C., Ray, D., Rhine, T., & Jones, L. (2013). The efficacy of play therapy with children: A meta-analytic review. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 36*(4), 376–390.
- [3] Cohen, J., & Schaefer, C. (2020). Therapeutic play interventions for childhood anxiety.
- [4] Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 25*(2), 78–85.
- [5] Landreth, G. L. (2012). *Play therapy: The art of the*

relationship* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

- [6] Lin, Y., & Bratton, S. (2020). Effectiveness of play therapy in improving emotional regulation among children with anxiety. *International Journal of Play Therapy, 29*(3), 145–160.
- [7] Ray, D. C., Armstrong, S. A., Balkin, R. S., & Jayne, K. M. (2015). Child-centered play therapy research. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 93*(2), 213–222.