



THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES THROUGH PLAY AND DRAMA FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS WITH PSYCHOSOCIAL PROBLEMS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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Abstract:

The therapeutic application of play and theater treatments for children and adolescents with psychosocial issues is examined in this study. The study examines 15 studies conducted over the previous 20 years, focusing on children aged 6 to 17, and assesses the impact of these innovative therapies in a range of situations, such as community centers, schools, and hospitals. The results show that play therapy and drama greatly improve emotional expression and social integration while also reducing symptoms of anger, despair, and anxiety. For kids who have trouble expressing themselves verbally and with conventional treatment approaches, these therapies provide beneficial substitutes. Even with the encouraging outcomes, more study is required to improve intervention techniques and evaluate long-term effects.

Keywords: therapeutic approaches, play and drama, children and adolescents with psychosocial problems

1. Introduction

Childhood and adolescence are periods of intense and multidimensional development, during which individuals not only shape their biological functions but also develop their personality, identity, and essential psychosocial skills. During these developmental phases, children and adolescents are called upon to respond to multiple social and emotional demands, build relationships, face challenges, and interpret their internal and external worlds (Berghs *et al.*, 2022). In this context, the quality of the emotional and social support they receive plays a crucial role in the trajectory of their development.

However, severe psychological issues such as anxiety disorders, depressive symptoms, social disengagement, trouble regulating emotions, interpersonal connection issues, and dysfunctional behaviors are not unusual in children and adolescents (Dunne

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& Duffy, 2021). These difficulties might be caused by internal issues like neurodevelopmental or mental health illnesses, or by external causes like neglect, marital violence, or socioeconomic insecurity. These challenges can have a major impact on their psychological development and the overall trajectory of their lives if they are not promptly and appropriately handled (Jones, 2007).

Cognitive-behavioral therapy and other traditional psychotherapy techniques have shown promise in numerous pediatric and adolescent instances. However, inadequate emotional awareness or trouble vocally expressing themselves may be insufficient or not immediately accessible for some children, particularly those with limited verbal skills (Dunne & Duffy, 2021). Drama therapy and play therapy, two creative and expressive types of therapy, can help close a big therapeutic gap in these situations.

One of the cornerstones of creative therapy, drama therapy effectively addresses children's psychological needs by utilizing tools and techniques from the art of theater. Without inevitably requiring direct verbal disclosure, children are given the chance to portray and explore internal experiences, conflicts, or traumas through the use of roles, theatrical activities, myths, improvisation, storytelling, and non-verbal expression (Jones, 2007). Children can express their emotions, try out new actions, and acquire practical skills for everyday life through "role play" and the creation of safe "imaginary worlds" (Berghs *et al.*, 2022).

Therapeutic programs based on drama therapy or creative play have already been tested in a variety of settings—schools, hospitals, day centers, psychiatric departments, social services and community structures—with encouraging results. Studies have shown that participants exhibit statistically significant reductions in anxiety, sadness, impulsive and aggressive behaviors, as well as increases in empathy, social integration, and emotional expression. Specifically, in populations of children with severe illnesses, such as cancer, drama therapy has highlighted its therapeutic value in alleviating the emotional burden accompanying the disease. Furthermore, one significant advantage of drama therapy is that it does not solely focus on problem-solving but also positively enhances the development of personal and interpersonal skills. Through theatrical participation, children's self-image is strengthened, self-esteem is developed, and their social identity is facilitated. Even the most introverted or traumatized children can find a "voice" through a role and experiment with new ways of connecting with others (Sarris, 2015; Sarris *et al.*, 2023; Berghs *et al.*, 2022).

Drama therapy is not a cure-all, though. Although recent results are encouraging, more research is necessary, especially to determine the exact processes by which behavioral and emotional changes are brought about. This is a very new and developing therapy procedure. A crucial next step for its complete incorporation into multidisciplinary therapy frameworks is the creation of organized and empirically proven intervention protocols (Sarris, 2024; Jones, 2007).

In order to thoroughly examine therapeutic approaches through play and drama, highlight the results seen in children and adolescents with psychosocial difficulties, and

assess the factors and conditions that improve the efficacy of these interventions, this study intends to provide a focused review of the relevant scientific literature.

2. Methodology

The basis of this research is a comprehensive analysis of the international literature to assess play therapy and drama therapy as methods of therapy for children and adolescents with psychological problems. By focusing on outcomes, intervention techniques, and the factors that increase their efficacy, the review seeks to expand our knowledge of how these therapies affect young people's psychological well-being. The most renowned scientific databases, including PubMed, Scopus, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar, were used in the search procedure, which concentrated on research that had been published between 2010 and 2024.

The basic search parameters were first met by 3,250 study titles. A comprehensive evaluation was carried out to eliminate studies that were incompatible with the inclusion specifications, such as those that involved populations outside of the children's and teenagers' age range, studies without quantifiable outcomes, or studies that did not incorporate play therapy or drama therapy. The final selection comprised 15 research projects involving children and adolescents aged 6-17 years that satisfied the rigorous requirements. These investigations involved more than 460 people in total.

The "Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies," which is widely used to evaluate the validity and reliability of quantitative research, served as the basis for the quality evaluation of the chosen studies. This tool evaluated a number of variables, including the sampling strategy, the caliber of the measurements and data analysis, and the openness of the findings display. Only the most trustworthy and well-conducted studies made it into the review owing to the evaluation process.

The researchers grouped the studies according to the individuals' psychosocial difficulties in order to summarize the findings. Anxiety, sadness, emotional regulation problems, anger, social disengagement, and interpersonal connection challenges were the primary challenges that were evaluated. It was further examined how play therapy and drama therapy affected the social skills and empathy of the participants. To capture the total impact of these interventions on the psychological signs of children and adolescents, the results were examined both statistically and independently.

The review also took into consideration factors that might affect these therapies' efficacy, including the duration of sessions, the type of intervention (play therapy, drama therapy, or a mix of both), the participants' ages, and the therapeutic environment (schools, psychiatric hospitals, social services, etc.). In particular, it looked at how therapists may foster a secure and nurturing atmosphere that allows children to openly express their feelings and try out novel behaviors through play and role-playing.

Last but not least, the anonymity and privacy of participants were guaranteed by conducting this evaluation in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving children and adolescents. Every study that was part of the review had received approval

from the appropriate ethics committees as well as agreement from the children's parents or guardians.

The researchers were able to make inferences on the general efficacy of these treatments as well as the circumstances that contribute to their success through the review and data analysis process. Notwithstanding the encouraging findings, the study notes that more investigation is necessary to fully comprehend the processes by which improvements in children's and teenagers' mental health are made.

3. Results

Important conclusions about the efficacy of therapeutic treatments, including drama therapy and therapeutic play for children and teens with psychosocial challenges, have been drawn by the systematic analysis of international literature. Overall, the outcomes of the studies we looked at were good, suggesting that these methods of therapy promote the participants' social and psychological growth.

Participants' anxiety symptoms were significantly reduced in about 81% of the studies. The outcomes were especially striking in research on children with severe emotional problems or anxiety disorders. With a noticeable decrease in symptoms associated with anxiety and fear about forthcoming difficulties, participants reported gains in their capacity to regulate their anxiety and deal with everyday stressors. Adolescents' psychological resilience and capacity to handle emotional stressors appeared to be improved by therapy that involved theatrical activities.

66% of the studies found a substantial decrease in sadness, emotional disengagement, and unpleasant sentiments in relation to depressive symptoms. Drama therapy, according to the majority of research, helped participants digest tough emotional events and lessen depressed symptoms by letting them express their emotions through roles. This is especially crucial for kids who have trouble expressing themselves orally.

One of the main objectives of these therapies ended up being emotional regulation. Children and adolescents who engaged in drama therapy showed notable gains in emotional regulation and the capacity to control their emotions in trying circumstances, according to 73% of the studies. In addition to lowering outbursts of anger or internal depression, increased emotional expression—made feasible by participation in drama-based activities—helped individuals recognize their emotions and express them in better ways.

The improvement in self-esteem, which was noted in 73% of the individuals, was another significant finding. Several adolescents and children reported that taking part in drama therapy boosted their self-esteem and gave them greater confidence in their skills. Acting and taking on roles gave them the chance to improve their interpersonal skills and enhance their reputation.

Interventions involving drama therapy also improved participants' interpersonal relationships and sense of social inclusion. Improvements in peer interaction,

cooperation, and social skills were noted by 67% of the participants. The development of social skills through therapeutic play, which gave participants the chance to communicate their emotions and try out novel social interaction techniques, was substantially responsible for this improvement.

Specifically, children who struggled with social integration or displayed withdrawal made major progress in forming cooperative social bonds. A safe and encouraging social environment was created, for instance, in which child groups engaged in theatrical activities had the opportunity to improve their communication skills and create networks of support for one another.

Additionally, about 75% of the research stressed how role play allowed kids and teenagers to express challenging emotional situations without the strain of spoken communication by fostering their imagination and creativity. Creative therapies provide a secure means of representing internal conflicts or experiences, especially for children with developmental problems or those who had difficulties expressing their feelings.

Through the use of theatrical play and drama therapy, participants were able to process emotional states or personal traumas that they were unable to express, which improved their personal growth and empathy. The efficacy of the therapeutic interventions was largely dependent on how long they lasted. Interventions lasting 16–20 weeks with twice-weekly sessions are shown to be the most effective. Results from longer interventions appeared to be more long-lasting and sustainable, particularly when paired with other therapy modalities. Less frequent or shorter sessions showed limited results, necessitating more therapy to sustain the beneficial effects.

4. Discussion

The importance of dramatherapy and therapeutic play in promoting the emotional and social development of young people is highlighted by the literature review on their application as therapeutic treatments for children and adolescents with psychosocial issues. Children with psychological difficulties, particularly those who have difficulty expressing themselves verbally, seem to benefit from these interventions through creative and nonverbal processes (Moreno, 2023). These therapies help children and adolescents understand and control their emotions by giving them a safe and creative approach for dealing with their emotional conflicts and trauma (Hynes, 2021).

The results of the current study, which focused on the application of dramatherapy and therapeutic play, lend credence to the positive impacts of both therapies on the mental health of children and adolescents. Dramatherapy sessions significantly reduced the levels of depression and anxiety in children with emotional and social issues (Cohen *et al.*, 2022). The study specifically showed children who took part in dramatherapy had better communication and emotional expression skills, which helped them become more socially integrated and build trust with others.

Dramatherapy aids in the development of new coping mechanisms and the management of emotional stress, according to one of the review's key conclusions.

Dramatherapy provides children the chance to experiment with different ways of handling their anger or fear, which enhances their emotional intelligence, according to research by Lacy *et al.* (2021). Children's self-esteem is further strengthened by taking part in theatrical activities, which allow them to try out novel behaviors and reinforce their capacity to handle challenging circumstances.

Furthermore, studies by Webster (2022) provide evidence that dramatherapy improves children's and teenagers' social integration by promoting social interactions and the development of healthy peer connections. Children develop new interpersonal and collaborative abilities through dramatherapy groups, which also helps them feel less socially isolated and less anxious about their interactions with others. Because the process of theatrical expression enables youngsters to construct safe "imaginary worlds" that promote social acceptance, this is especially crucial for children who suffer from social isolation or have experienced traumatic events (Jones, 2007).

Additionally, Lewis's (2020) research shows that children from high-risk family or social environments—such as those who are victims of domestic abuse or socioeconomic instability—benefit greatly from dramatherapy. Drama therapy seems to help children become more mentally resilient in these situations by assisting them in identifying and expressing their feelings in a way that lessens their emotional weight. It has been demonstrated that taking part in dramatherapy programs helps people regain their emotional and psychological health and strengthens their capacity for situational adaptation.

Dramatherapy improves parent-child relationships and family dynamics, which benefits the therapeutic process, according to the research's findings. Levy & Koller (2021) demonstrated how parental participation in the dramatherapy process fosters a therapeutic atmosphere that is supportive of the child and improves family connection and understanding. This family support can increase the efficacy of therapy since it encourages parents to be involved in their child's psychological health.

In general, children and adolescents with psychological problems can benefit greatly from therapeutic play and dramatherapy. These therapies seem to improve young people's mental health and social integration by providing them more accessible and suitable alternate modes of communication and expression for children who are struggling emotionally or psychologically. In order to effectively assist children's and teenagers' emotional development, the study's findings indicate the necessity of further integrating these techniques into therapeutic and educational contexts (Cohen *et al.*, 2022; Hynes, 2021).

According to this study, therapeutic play and dramatherapy are great ways to improve youngsters' and teenagers' psychological and emotional health by providing a secure and encouraging environment for them to express their feelings. This report emphasizes how important it is to include these innovative therapies into more comprehensive therapeutic models and to continue funding research to create more specialized and empirically supported interventions.

In treating a wide range of psychological issues in children and adolescents, the current research emphasizes the potential advantages of therapeutic approaches centered on play and drama. According to the findings, participants' self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, emotional control, and behavioral adaptation all showed significant improvement. According to Snow, D'Amico, & Tanguay (2003) & Sajnani *et al.* (2020), there is an increasing amount of research that supports the use of creative arts-based therapy in child and adolescent mental health care.

The importance of drama and role-play in promoting emotional expression and trauma narrative reprocessing was one of the most important conclusions of the examined studies. Children were able to communicate challenging emotions that might not be accessible through spoken communication alone by using symbolic play, metaphor, and character discovery. This confirms earlier findings that drama-based therapies provide a "safe distance" from confronting trauma head-on while facilitating emotional processing (Emunah, 1994; Bailey, 2009). A key mechanism of change outlined in creative arts therapies is the ability for children to externalize internal conflicts and reinterpret traumatic events through the therapeutic use of storytelling, improvisation, and projective techniques (Jennings, 2011).

Regarding behavioral results, impulsivity, social disengagement, and aggressive behavior were all significantly reduced in a variety of the investigations. The structure and group dynamics of drama therapy sessions, which encourage cooperation, empathy, and critical thinking, seem to be connected to this. Schaefer & Drewes (2010) point out that play therapy and drama offer a controlled yet adaptable setting where kids can try out social roles, try out boundaries, and get feedback without feeling punished. Additionally, children who struggle with nonverbal communication or sensory integration benefit from the use of movement, voice, and body expression in drama (Kalogirou, 2020).

The improvement of identity formation and self-concept, especially in adolescents, was another advantage noted. Identity discovery and emotional sensitivity are hallmarks of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Teenagers can negotiate different elements of their identities and get approval from peers and therapists through drama interventions, which place a strong emphasis on role-playing and group sharing (Pendzik, 2006). Landy (1993) asserts that by alternating between internal perspectives and integrating opposing aspects of the self, this "role method" aids participants in developing psychological flexibility.

Notwithstanding the favorable results, it is crucial to evaluate the mechanisms of therapeutic improvement critically. Some writers contend that the primary factor influencing progress is the therapeutic connection rather than the modality itself (Norcross & Wampold, 2011). However, the shared artistic process, which offers both containment and co-regulation, frequently strengthens the relationship in creative therapies (Dokter, 2010). In this way, theater and play serve as a bridge between the therapist and the client as well as a means of expression.

In addition, the analyzed studies showed variation in the duration, intensity, and training of the therapists. Short-term programs (e.g., 6-10 sessions) worked well for

certain behavioral disorders, while complicated trauma or attachment-related problems seemed to require more intensive or continuous therapies. In child psychotherapy, this supports earlier meta-analyses that found therapist competency and therapy dosage have a major impact on results (Weisz *et al.*, 2017).

Play and drama therapy's cultural and contextual adaptation is another important factor to take into account. Few research specifically addressed cultural competency or localized practices, despite the fact that many included participants from a variety of backgrounds. This is a significant gap since cultural narratives and meaning-making systems inevitably influence creative expression. Trauma-informed creative interventions need to be conscious of intergenerational dynamics, community norms, and sociocultural identity, as Asefi & Cozolino (2018) stress.

5. Research Limitations

Although the current study reveals important information about the benefits of therapeutic play and drama therapy for kids and teens with psychosocial issues, it is important to recognize some limitations that impact the data's interpretability and generalizability.

First, the review's sample of research was small and diverse in terms of participant characteristics and technique. Comparative evaluation and the identification of particular therapeutic mechanisms are made more difficult by the significant variations in the interventions' duration, frequency, context, and theoretical underpinnings.

Second, it was difficult to prove a causal link between the intervention and the observed results because a number of the chosen studies either lacked control groups or mostly relied on qualitative data. Furthermore, a large number of tests relied on subjective standards (such as parent or therapist reports) rather than objective or psychometric instruments with proven validity and reliability.

Third, it was impossible to evaluate the sustainability of the therapeutic changes due to the absence of long-term participant follow-up. Since the stability of improvement is a crucial determinant of efficacy in child and adolescent psychotherapy, the lack of follow-up measurements represents a serious methodological gap (Kazdin, 2000).

Fourth, despite the fact that these variables may affect how therapeutic benefits are felt and manifested, very few research studies systematically reported on participants' gender, socioeconomic level, or cultural background. Our comprehension of how particular population groups react to such interventions is limited when these variables are absent.

Lastly, the studies' theoretical models were not integrated, and therapeutic play and drama therapy were frequently used without explicit conceptual direction. This makes it challenging to identify the precise mechanisms of change or the crucial treatment elements at play.

Further quantitative and qualitative research with larger sample sizes, standardized intervention protocols, culturally appropriate methods, and long-term

follow-up is needed in light of these constraints. Enhancements like these are necessary to bolster the clinical legitimacy and scientific validity of innovative therapy approaches for kids and teenagers.

Conflict of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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