

## The Effectiveness of Play Therapy on Reduction of Symptoms of Insecure Attachment and Separation Anxiety of among Preschoolers

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(Received:20 Oct 2018; Revised: 6 Nov 2018; Accepted:15 Dec 2018)

### Abstract

**Introduction:** the purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of play therapy on reduction of symptoms of insecure attachment and separation anxiety of preschoolers.

**Method:** the present study was experimental with a control group design and included pre-test, post-test. Sampling was purposeful in which 20 preschoolers from Garmsar preschools and kindergartens who were received high score in pre-test were selected and randomly divided into 2 groups (experimental and control). The instruments that used as pre-test and post-test were RADQ and CSI-4 questionnaires. The Experimental group received 8 sessions of group play therapy weekly and the control group received nothing. After sessions both groups participated in post-test and the data were collected. Analysis of the data was done by descriptive and inferential analysis such as covariance analysis.

**Results:** the result showed that play therapy was effective on reduction of symptoms of insecure attachment and separation anxiety ( $\alpha < 0.05$ )

**Conclusion:** The application of play therapy is effective on reducing level of separation anxiety and problems of insecure attachment in preschool children. It could be concluded that considering the capabilities of group play therapy, its application in decreasing children's anxiety and emotional, behavioral and interaction deficits, is effective and by this intervention they can promote personal and social adjustment.

**Declaration of Interest:** None

**Key words:** insecure attachment, separation anxiety, play therapy, preschoolers.

### Introduction

Attachment is a strong and unique relation between child and parent that affect future relationships in his/her life. This unique relationship with parents can play important role in child psychological traits (1). Attachment is created by interaction between psychological capacity of child and responses of care givers in environment's

context and makes the basis of child's emotions and behaviors in whole life (2). Attachment starts from 6 month old and forms feeling of security and independence, so from responses of child to anxiety and security issues, we can find child's types of attachment (3).

There are two basic patterns for attachment; secure and insecure attachment. In secure attachment, child knows the parents as an comfort and secure source and feels security near them and he/she can plays and explores in external environment but in insecure attachment form, child can not recognize his/her parents as a secure and comfort base(1). Insecure attachment children may destroy the toys, threaten their playmates or hurt pets. They do not understand other intentions and find them threatening and hurtful, thus they cannot trust others. They cannot find friend, even they cannot communicate with others (4). Insecure attachment children are emotion dysregulated in confronting problems. These children can't request help from others so they disappointed immediately, they will face to many problems in various fields such as interpersonal relations, self-concept, social skills, marital adjustment and anxiety situations (5). Insecure attachment can be the main factors of serious social and physiological issues (6). Thus inappropriate pattern of attachment should be repair with a proper interference.

In the other hand, although most children can adequately learn to regulate their distress reaction to separation, but some children continue anxiety for a long period of time when symptoms of separation anxiety continue, these behaviors can become highly problematic and debilitating(7). Separation anxiety is a kind of anxiety disorder. It is very prevalent in preschool ages. It can make a serious problems in preschoolers in case of separating from caregivers for the first time and it can be continued till adulthoods. These children in the case of separation, show high level of anxiety and uncomfoting that is inappropriate with their level of growth (8). This situation makes them avoid from any separation and social interaction. Separation

anxiety will not vanish by itself and the impacts of it may lead to serious disease such as adolescent anxiety, depression, eating disorder, phobia, panic attacks, generalized anxiety and other emotional or behavioral disorders (9). So first separation of preschoolers should be manage appropriately to avoid future issues and timely treatment is necessary.

Regarding to etiology of separation anxiety, it is related to attachment and the root of separation anxiety is inside insecure attachment. Many studies show significant relation between these two problems (10). Due to both harmful effects in personal and social life, it is essential to find proper interference to reduce symptoms of these problems and improve personal and social function of these children.

Play can be considered as a tool for therapeutic interventions. The play allows children to reveal their own experiences threatening them. It is a therapeutic approach for children to overcome obstacles in expressing their feelings and emotions (11). In fact play therapy is a method by which the child can be released from all environmental pressures and can balance his/her behaviors (12). Play therapy is an applied and constructive method for children because of their limitation of cognitive and linguistic skills and their interest of playing with toys. Paly therapy is a proper technic for children because they still cannot reveal their emotions and thoughts directly so by playing they can express and share those hurtful or threatening experiences. Children can relate between inner thought and external world by playing and control things and environments (13). Play therapy increases the participation of children in treatment process and changes the inflexible environment and relation thus in safe and comfortable space, children can play and

making dream and enhance their inner source (14). Play therapy help children to understand negative emotions and confront them without resistance and express themselves by safe and dynamic interpersonal relation with therapist (9). This method is an attractive way for children to cooperate with therapist to solve any emotional or behavioral problem. Play therapy is a specialized process in which children can enhance their functions and consequently they can grow via potentials of play (15).

Previous studies showed positive impacts of play therapy on different disorders. Yang and Wang (7) in their study find that play therapy has positive effect in dealing with children with separation anxiety and related interpersonal relationship difficulties. Research of Ghasemzadeh et al (15) investigates the significant effectiveness of play therapy in parenting style and reduction of mothers stress and clinical symptoms in children with separation anxiety. According to Mehara et al (16), cognitive-behavioral play therapy can be useful for decreasing trait anxiety in children with cancer. A case study by Mohammed et al (17), claim that play therapy was an effective method for reducing anxiety among children undergoing surgery as a feasible in preoperative preparation. In a research on hospitalized children, researchers can reduce the level of anxiety by using play and art therapy (18). Other study showed that child center play therapy can play significant role in decreasing level of worriness and anxiety in primary school children (19). Cranny review 14 studies with the aim of effectiveness of play therapy on reactive attachment disorder between the years 2000-2015 and on the age of 0-18, in all studies play therapy decreased symptoms of chronic symptoms of disorder (20). Also in a study, children of orphanage after receiving group play therapy, showed better social skills and

lower insecure attachment issues (21). White, in his research claimed that direct and indirect technics of play therapy are useful and applied interferences for treating reactive attachment disorder in preschoolers (4). Although the previous studies have examined the effectiveness of a play therapy on anxiety disorders or attachment issues, but there is lack of researches to evaluate this method in children with separation anxiety and insecure attachment together. Thus, regarding to positive effects of play therapy this paper aim to increase the symptoms of anxiety and insecure attachment of preschoolers in Garmsar city.

### Methods

Method of this study was experimental with control group design and pre-test, post-test. Statistical population were all preschoolers of Garmsar city who received high scores in pre-tests. Procedure of sampling was purposeful in which 20 children from 15 kindergartens and preschools of Garmsar city, who were received high scores in both RADQ and CSI-4 questionnaires as pre-tests were selected and randomly divided into experimental and control groups (10 subjects each). Experimental group received 8 sessions of play therapy weekly after sessions both experimental and control groups take post-tests. The data were collected and statistical analysis was done. The first research tools was RANDOLF ATTACHMENT DISORDER QUESTIONNAIRE for recognizing attachment issues of children that fill by parents and includes many problems that they have observed in last 2 years, the symptoms that checked in this tool is matched to attachment disorder symptom checklist(ADSC) that assessed by clinical specialists. It contains 25 questions with multiple choices. Regarding to results of validity and reliability of this test, it is reliable and valid test for Iranian children that was evaluated by Movahed Abtahi et al

(Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.83$ ). Scoring of this test is by Likert scale from point 1 to 5 and in its grading 65-75 scores show low attachment disorder, 76-89 scores show medium attachment disorder and up to 90 scores show severe attachment disorder (22). In this study, those children who received up to 65 scores were selected for experimental group.

Second tool was CHILD SYMPTOMS QUESTIONNAIRE (CSI4) parents form part (J) Specifically for separation anxiety assessment. Part (J) include 10 questions with 4 choices answers from points 0-3, which assessed

symptoms of separation anxiety in children exclusively. The method of scoring in this paper was based on the severity of separation anxiety symptoms. Those children who received 2 standard deviation upper than mean, were selected for experimental group. Reliability and validity of (CSI4) through re-administrating of questionnaire showed that mentioned tool had relatively good reliability as screening tool for behavioral-emotional disorder in Iranian children (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.74$ )(23).

Table 1: Play therapy sessions

sessions	Games name	Content
<b>First</b>	Playing with names	Introducing, truth making, explaining the rules, playing with each other' s name
<b>second</b>	Emotional labeling	Acquainting and discovering emotions, excitations and issues, playing with emotional words, signs and colors.
<b>Third</b>	Emotional shooting the balls	Recognizing anxiety and worry, playing with anxiety balloon.
<b>Forth</b>	Bubbling	Controlling anxiety by bubbling play, learning relaxation.
<b>Fifth</b>	Group playing	Emotional catharsis, group activities, encouraging corporation and interaction with each other, chairs playing and mini basketball playing.
<b>Sixth</b>	Making clay animals	Enhancing touch feeling, decreasing defense power, increasing flexibility by shaping the clay, making story for clay animals, role modeling by identifying with animals, finding variant solutions, coping with issues.
<b>seventh</b>	School backpacks	Pretend playing with dummy in the backpacks, recognizing child roles in daily anxiety and insecurity, coping with unfamiliar adults and situations.
<b>eighth</b>	Finishing preparation	Reviewing learned behaviors, practicing and generalizing effective solutions.

Plays derived from Kaduson & Schaefer (24, 25).

**Results**

After conducting intervention program on experimental group and entering the data, using SPSS22, descriptive and inferential

statistics were performed. The results are as follow: Table 2 shows descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) in pre-test and post-test of examinees.

Table 1: calculating central tendency and variable distribution

Variable	Index	Test level	Play therapy group	Control group
<b>Separation anxiety</b>	Means	Pre-test	15.60	16
	Standard deviation		2.83	2.62
	Mean	Post-test	11.90	15.9
	Standard deviation		2.55	2.8
<b>Insecure attachment</b>	Means	Pre-test	84.1	79.2
	Standard deviation		9.88	8.58
	Mean	Post-test	78.9	79.6
	Standard deviation		10.42	8.4

For pre-assumptions of one way covariance, the results of Shapiro Wilks in separation anxiety and insecure attachment variables were assessed. The results show that, in both variables the significant level is more than 0.05, therefore normality of dependent variables was considered. The results of Flevin for assessing equality of separation anxiety and insecure attachment variables' variance. Significant levels of Flevin were more than 0.05, therefore zero hypothesis approved in this variable. Also as the results of homogeneity of regression gradient line show, significant level of interaction between independent group and pre-test for separation anxiety and insecure attachment were more than 0.05, therefore the pre-assumption of regression gradient line was considered.

For the pre-assumption of randomized sampling, Samples of this paper were 20 children from Garmsar city preschools in the year 2017 that randomly divided into experimental and control groups (10 subjects each), thus the pre-assumption of covariance analysis was considered. 1. Play therapy is effective on reduction of symptoms of preschoolers' separation anxiety.

Table3 shows the results of the effects between experimental and control groups about separation anxiety scores. Due to significant level of F for separation anxiety (sig=0.001, F=137.46), it is significant in the error level of 0.05, thus pre-assumption of linear covariate regression and dependent variable is considered.

Based on summarize of the effects between examinees of separation anxiety scores and by considering error amount (personal differences) and after omitting probable effect of pre-test, the significant level of F is less than 0.05 ( $p=0.001$ ,  $df=1; 17$ ,  $F=77090$ ), therefore the amount of separation anxiety between experimental and control groups show differences and independent variable is effective (The level of effectiveness is 0.82 and statistic power is 0.99).

**Table3:** summarize of assessing effects between experimental and control groups' examinees about separation anxiety scores

Dependent variables	Source change	of	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom (df)	Average squares	F test statistics	Level of significance (sig)	Eta	Statistical power
	Pre- test		115.51	1	115.51	137.46	0.001		
	Independent variable effect (group)		65.64	1	65.46	77.9	0.001	0.82	0.99
	error		14.28	17	0.84				
	Total corrected		4074	20					

2. Play therapy is effective on reduction of problems of preschoolers' insecure attachment. Table4 shows the results of summarized assessing between experimental and control groups' examinees about insecure attachment scores. Based on significance level of F (sig=0.001, F=456.74), is significant in the error level of 0.05, Thus pre-assumption of linear covariate regression and dependent variable is considered.

Regarding to the summarized assessing between examinees insecure attachment scores and by considering error amount and omitting probable effect of pre-test, the significance level of F is less than 0.05 (p=0.001, df=1; 17, F=43.02), therefore the amount of insecure attachment between two groups is different and independent variable is effective (level of effectiveness is 0.71, statistic power is 0.99).

**Table4:** the summarized assessing between experimental and control groups examinees about insecure attachment scores

Dependent variables	Source change	of	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom (df)	Average squares	F test statistics	Level of significance (sig)	Eta	Statistical power
	Pre- test		1557.33	1	1557.33	456.74	0.001		
	Independent variable effect (group)		146.70	1	146.7	43.02	0.001	0.71	0.99
	error		57.96	17	3.41				
	Total corrected		127229	20					

### Conclusion

Present study was done to investigate the effectiveness of play therapy on reduction of separation anxiety and insecure attachment

problems among Garmsar city preschoolers. The results showed that play therapy was effective on reducing the symptoms of separation anxiety and decreasing the

problems of insecure attachment of program's children. The results of this paper in field of anxiety is consistent with previous studies as Ramdaniati etal, Stulmaker and ray, shoa kazemi etal and bratton (18,19,26,27), also it is compatible with cranny, Mousavi and Safarzadeh, white and bazazian etal in the field of insecure attachment (20,21,4,28). Ray and bratton etal, investigated 94 researches that applied play therapy and concluded that this technic caused reduction of behavioral issues, decreasing depression and anxiety symptoms in children (29). Also Baggerly, investigated the effectiveness of group play therapy on self-confidence and anxiety of homeless children, they believed that play therapy had manifest effect on reducing the level of anxiety and increasing self-confidence and making good relationships with others (30). In play therapy children via play process reveal their threatening and hard experiences thus they can conquer those hurtful situations and they have better understanding from harmful thoughts and emotions which in other spaces cannot talk about freely without resistance(31). Play is an instrument for children to express their needs and interact with external world, catharsis their emotions and cure their inner fears and anxiety as well as attaining pleasure. In play therapy sessions by understanding irrational believes and emotions, children can replace rational forms of thoughts and feelings by learning from frequent plays in a dynamic relation and safe interactions with peers and therapist(10). Finally, play can create an environment for children to express their feelings freely and in this environment they can use the symbols to find solutions of their problems in the real world, and by controlling and modifying external events, find a way to manipulate their surrounding and achieve self confidence that decrease their anxieties(11). Children of our program experienced 8 sessions of play

therapy without the attendance of their mothers so they recognized that the absence of their mother didn't mean hurting or be in danger. The consequence of this program was decreasing separation anxiety of these children.

Due to attachment theory, quality of children's first relation predict future relation and wrong relations lead to future problematic interpersonal relations therefore reforming wrong relations can be done by play therapy. By right patterning interaction with therapist similar to parent-child relation, the incompatible interactions can be rebuilt (32). Play therapy can help children with insecure attachment to reduce their psychological tensions and affective failures by emotional relation with therapist and peers. They can release their negative self-concept by trusting others and receive positive feedback (33). Play therapy technics can make proper field for social communication between children in play group and each child can feel sympathy by participating in group play programs. This appropriate platform can prepare a trusting and safe space for caring all members and it can enhances child's self-confidence to participate in social situations rather than avoiding it (21). These goals achieve by group paly therapy that applied in this study program.

Group play therapy is combination of play therapy and group therapy that cause effective relation between two therapies. Group play therapy is social and psychological process that teach children how to play with each other in a play room and also help the therapist to teach them problem solving skills. The main goal of this technic is helping clients in various fields such as learning, self-avoiding, achieving responsibility sense, controlling emotions, self and other accepting, improving social skills, feeling safety, increasing self-confidence and decreasing depression and

anxiety (34). Therefore in a safe and unthreatening environment children interact by other members who have the same problem, shape sympathy and trust to others and by receiving proper feedback and attention from therapist and other members, the possibility of learning positive and instructive behaviors is increased. And also children can share their experiences and express their fears, anxieties and other inconsistent behaviors in a way without hurting others by making stories about toys, role modeling and play technics (that insecure attachment children are not able to do). Moreover in play situation children use both mental and physical power to play and give pleasure without feeling direct interference of therapist, it is similar to real society thus they can generalized their learned behavior to their real life.

### Limitations

The difficulty of this study was finding samples because of limitation of purposeful sampling. The results of this study could not generalized to other areas and groups. There wasn't possibility to have clinical interview or direct observation and data were collected by parent reporting.

### Suggestions

It is suggested to apply combined therapeutic technics with play therapy to reduce anxiety and attachment issues. Regarding the value of play for children, it is suggested that related organs learn how to use play technics to reduce children psychological and behavioral problems. Also it is suggested to use play therapy for different ages.

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