Original Article

IEEPJ Vol. 5, No. 2, 2023, 332-342

http://ieepj.hormozgan.ac.ir/

Iranian Evolutionary and Educational Psychology Journal

IEEPJ

The Effectiveness of Child Centered Play Therapy (CCPT) on Trauma Symptoms and Behavior Problems in Children with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) : A Case study

Azimeh Salimi[1], Abdulaziz Aflakseir[2]*, Habib Hadianfard[2], Mohammad Ali Goodarzi[2]

1- PhD Student in Clinical Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran

2- Department of Clinical Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran

* Corresponding author's Email: aaflakseir@shirazu.ac.ir

Abstract: The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of child-centered play therapy on trauma symptoms as well as internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems in children with severe adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). This study employed a single-case experimental design with multiple asynchronous baselines. Two children with at least three identified traumatic experiences, who were referred to psychology clinics in Shiraz, were selected using purposive sampling. Behavioral problems were assessed using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), while trauma symptoms were measured with the Child and Adolescent Trauma Screen (CATS-C). Both children received a structured program of child-centered play therapy over multiple sessions. Post-intervention assessments were conducted, and data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics in SPSS. The findings revealed a marked reduction in trauma symptoms and behavioral problems following the intervention. Both participants showed decreased scores in the internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, hyperactivity) subscales of the CBCL and SDQ. Additionally, trauma-related symptoms measured by the CATS-C checklist demonstrated significant improvement, suggesting the therapy's effectiveness in emotional regulation and trauma recovery. Child-centered play therapy was effective in reducing trauma symptoms and improving behavioral and emotional functioning in children with severe adverse childhood experiences. These findings highlight the importance of using play-based, child-focused therapeutic approaches to foster psychological healing and prevent the long-term consequences of early trauma. Future studies with larger samples are recommended to confirm these results and explore the long-term outcomes of such interventions.

Keywords: Child-centered play therapy, Signs of trauma, Behavioral problems, Children with traumatic childhood experiences

Introduction

Traumatic childhood experiences (TCEs) are adverse and stressful events that exert a profound and enduring influence on the mental health and overall well-being of both children and adults (Felitti et al., 1998; Wade et al., 2016; Clarkson Freeman, 2014). The presence of one or more traumatic experiences during childhood is a major concern for healthy psychological and social development. Children exposed to severe or multiple traumatic events often experience complex trauma, which can disrupt emotional regulation, interpersonal functioning, and cognitive development.

Research has consistently demonstrated that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are associated with a broad range of negative health and behavioral outcomes across the lifespan. Individuals exposed to multiple traumatic events in childhood are at greater risk of developing chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disorders, diabetes, and cancer, as well as psychosocial problems including substance

Article information: Received: 2022/07/21 | Accepted: 2022/12/20 | Published: 2023/06/1. https://doi.org/10.52547/ieepj.5.2.332

[DOI: 10.61186/ieepj.5.2.332]

abuse, depression, and suicidal behavior in adulthood (Mersky et al., 2013). Felitti et al. (1998) reported that 18.3% of individuals who experienced four or more ACEs had attempted suicide later in life, while Pérez et al. (2016) found that adolescents with traumatic childhood experiences exhibited a higher risk of suicidal ideation and behavior. Furthermore, adults who endured early trauma tend to report increased physical exhaustion, diminished vitality, and a reduced quality of life (Felitti et al., 1998).

The effects of traumatic childhood experiences also extend to behavioral and social domains. Studies have identified strong associations between ACEs and high-risk delinquent behavior during adolescence (Baglivio & Epps, 2016). These adverse experiences frequently contribute to substance abuse, addiction, and suicidality in adulthood. Given the substantial impact of early trauma on future functioning and mental health, there is a pressing need to design early detection, prevention, and intervention programs for affected children and their families.

Moreover, traumatic experiences are closely related to both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems. Internalizing problems, such as anxiety, withdrawal, and depression, can lead to feelings of social rejection, suicidal thoughts, and psychosomatic symptoms (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981; Werry & Quay, 1971, as cited in Jingkong Liu, 2004). These emotional difficulties often persist into adulthood, contributing to occupational inefficiency and the onset of various physical illnesses (Narsite, Ruponen, Alexandersson, & Sedberg, 2017). Conversely, externalizing behaviors—including aggression, defiance, and hyperactivity—are major risk factors for adolescent delinquency, criminal behavior, and violence in adulthood (Campbell, Harris, & Lee, 1995; Han, 2002). The growing prevalence of these behaviors has made violence prevention a crucial public health priority in many societies (Gurney, 2001; Parker, McFarlane, Soken, Silva, & Reil, 1999, cited in Jingkong Liu, 2004).

Considering the significant and multifaceted consequences of traumatic childhood experiences, early psychological intervention is critical. Play-based therapeutic approaches, particularly child-centered play therapy (CCPT), have gained increasing attention for their effectiveness in helping children process trauma and improve emotional and behavioral regulation. Accordingly, the present study aims to investigate the effectiveness of child-centered play therapy in reducing trauma symptoms and alleviating internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems among children with multiple traumatic experiences.

Material and Methods

The statistical population of this study included all children aged 6 to 9 years in Shiraz during 1400 (2021–2022) who had experienced three or more traumatic events. The participants were selected

[DOI: 10.61186/ieepj.5.2.332]

purposively from medical and psychological centers, including the Counseling and Psychological Center, Ibn Sina Clinic, and the Shiraz Welfare Organization.

Based on the inclusion criteria—namely, having at least three traumatic childhood experiences and the absence of intellectual disabilities or severe developmental disorders—two children were selected for participation. Screening was conducted using the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs; Felitti et al., 1998) checklist completed by parents and a structured clinical interview with the researcher. Children who scored three or higher on the ACEs checklist were eligible to participate. Both participants and their parents provided informed consent prior to the study.

The present study employed a single-case experimental design with multiple asynchronous baselines, allowing for individual monitoring of therapeutic changes over time. This design was selected to assess the impact of child-centered play therapy (CCPT) on trauma symptoms and internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems in children with severe adverse childhood experiences.

Instruments

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Checklist: The ACEs Checklist (Felitti et al., 1998) is a 10-item self-report questionnaire assessing exposure to childhood trauma before age 18. It measures experiences of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional), neglect (physical, emotional), and household dysfunction (domestic violence, parental mental illness, substance abuse, separation/divorce, and incarceration). Revised versions (Wade et al., 2016; Haas et al., 2017) include items related to bullying, discrimination, and unsafe neighborhood environments. In this study, the parent-report version adapted by Haas et al. (2017) for use with children was utilized.

Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL): The CBCL—Parent Form (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) assesses emotional and behavioral problems in children aged 6–18 across eight subscales: anxiety/depression, withdrawal/depression, somatic complaints, social problems, thought problems, attention problems, rule-breaking behavior, and aggressive behavior. The latter two subscales constitute the higher-order factor of externalizing problems. Responses are rated on a 3-point Likert scale (0 = not true, 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, 2 = very true or often true). High internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.97$) and test–retest reliability ($r = 0.94$) have been reported (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2007). The Persian version was standardized by Tehranidoost et al. (2002), with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.63 to 0.95 (Minaei, 2006).

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)—Parent Form: Developed by Goodman (1997), the SDQ assesses behavioral and emotional functioning in children aged 4–16 based on ICD-10 diagnostic criteria. It includes five subscales: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems, and prosocial behavior. Additional items evaluate the impact, duration, and

[DOI: 10.61186/ieepj.5.2.332]

severity of the problems. The instrument has demonstrated good reliability (test–retest r = 0.79; Flitlich-Bilk, 2004) and discriminant validity between clinical and non-clinical samples (Ahmadi, 2005).

Child and Adolescent Trauma Screening Checklist (CATS-C): The CATS-C (Sachser et al., 2017) is a DSM-5-based tool designed to assess exposure to traumatic events and post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) in children and adolescents. It includes 15 potentially traumatic events, 20 PTSD symptom items, and 5 diagnostic criteria. The checklist is available in caregiver-report versions for children aged 3–6 and 7–17 years and demonstrates strong psychometric properties across age groups.

Procedure

After screening and selection, both children participated in a structured program of child-centered play therapy based on the thematic stages proposed by Guerney (2001), as cited by VanFleet, Sywulke, and Sniscak (2016). The sessions were conducted individually by a trained therapist and organized into three main phases:

Warm-up Phase (Sessions 1–4): Establishing rapport, familiarization with the playroom environment, and facilitating free expression through play.

Therapeutic Phase (Sessions 5–10): Focused intervention sessions promoting emotional expression, mastery, and coping through play-based techniques.

Termination Phase (Sessions 11–12): Reviewing therapeutic progress, consolidating emotional regulation skills, and preparing the child for the conclusion of therapy.

Before the intervention, parents completed the CBCL**,** SDQ**,** and CATS-C to establish baseline measures. These assessments were repeated after the therapy sessions (post-test) and during follow-up to determine treatment outcomes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software through descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Given the single-case design, three complementary analytical strategies were employed:

Graphical Analysis: As the primary analytical method, data were plotted to visualize the level, trend, and variability of scores across baseline, intervention, and follow-up phases. Changes in the dependent variables were visually inspected following the procedures outlined by Lane and Gast (2014) and Nofresti and Hassanabadi (2018).

Percentage of Improvement: To determine the clinical significance of therapeutic change, the percentage of improvement formula was applied. Clinical significance was established when post-intervention scores fell below the clinical cutoff, indicating that the child's functioning reached the level of typically developing peers.

[DOI: 10.61186/ieepj.5.2.332]

Clinical Efficacy Index: The clinical efficacy rate was calculated to assess the internal validity and overall effectiveness of the intervention.

These methods provided a comprehensive evaluation of the impact of child-centered play therapy on trauma symptoms and behavioral problems in children with multiple adverse childhood experiences.

Thematic Stages of Child-Centered Play Therapy

According to Guerney (2001), as cited in VanFleet, Sywulke, and Sniscak (2016), the process of child-centered play therapy (CCPT) typically progresses through several thematic stages that reflect the child's evolving emotional state, relational patterns, and therapeutic growth. Each stage demonstrates changes in the child's play behavior, affect, and communication with the therapist. The sessions in the present study followed these sequential phases, as outlined below.

Stage	Sessions	Characteristics and Therapeutic Indicators
Warm-Up Stage	Sessions 1–4	During this phase, children display curiosity and engage in exploratory play without adhering to fixed rules or principles. Play tends to be spontaneous, creative, and unstructured. The child experiences mixed emotions of joy and anxiety, and expresses themselves through simple descriptive language. Anxiety is typically at its peak, and the child frequently evaluates or comments verbally on the therapist's reactions to their play. This stage establishes the foundation for trust and emotional safety.
Aggressive Stage	Sessions 5–8	The child becomes more verbal and may direct anger or frustration toward the therapist. Exploratory and unstructured play continues, accompanied by an increase in general aggressive themes. Emotional expression remains intense, with both joy and anxiety evident. Children often exhibit immediate, spontaneous reactions and produce heightened background sounds (e.g., shouting, sound effects), reflecting the release of internal tension. This stage represents catharsis and emotional discharge.
Regression Stage	Sessions 9–12	In this stage, the child may revisit earlier developmental levels or behaviors, symbolically "returning to the past." Exploratory and aggressive play begin to decline, while communicative and cooperative play increase. Creative and joyful play becomes more frequent, and the child engages in more meaningful interaction with the therapist. Nonverbal cues of control and reassurance-seeking behaviors appear. The child starts sharing more personal and family-related information, indicating growing trust and emotional insight.
Mastery Stage	Sessions 13–16	Play becomes increasingly structured, goal-directed, and age-appropriate. Creative and communicative play predominate, often accompanied by the emergence of problem-solving themes. Although some aggressive play persists, it becomes more purposeful and integrated into broader narratives. The child expresses a range of emotions—joy, confusion, distrust, and even hatred—reflecting a deeper understanding of complex feelings. This stage signifies progress toward emotional mastery and autonomy.
Complementary Stage	Sessions 17–24	The final stage is marked by dramatic and role-playing activities that reflect mastery, self-expression, and consolidation of therapeutic gains. The child's connection with the therapist strengthens, and play themes emphasize positive resolution and personal empowerment. The dominant emotion is happiness, and the child continues to share meaningful stories and insights about themselves and their family. This phase concludes the therapeutic process with increased emotional regulation and interpersonal confidence.

Results

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of child-centered play therapy (CCPT) in reducing trauma symptoms and internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems among children with multiple adverse childhood experiences. Data analysis was conducted using visual (graphical)

[DOI: 10.61186/ieepj.5.2.332]

analysis, percentage of improvement, and clinical efficacy indices, in line with single-case experimental design methodology.

1. Visual Analysis

The visual inspection of data across baseline, intervention, and follow-up phases demonstrated a clear downward trend in trauma symptoms and behavioral problems following the implementation of CCPT. During the baseline phase, both participants displayed high and stable scores on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and Child and Adolescent Trauma Screening Checklist (CATS-C), indicating persistent emotional distress and behavioral dysregulation.

As the intervention progressed, a marked reduction was observed in problem behaviors. Specifically, scores on the internalizing and externalizing subscales of the CBCL began to decline after the fourth therapy session, coinciding with the transition from the warm-up stage to the aggressive stage of therapy. This reduction continued consistently through the regression and mastery stages, indicating progressive emotional regulation and behavioral adjustment.

Follow-up assessments, conducted four weeks after the completion of the intervention, revealed that the improvements were maintained, suggesting that the therapeutic effects of CCPT were stable over time.

2. Changes in Trauma Symptoms

According to the CATS-C scores, both children exhibited a substantial decrease in post-traumatic stress symptoms, including avoidance, intrusive thoughts, hyperarousal, and negative mood. The mean reduction from baseline to post-intervention exceeded 50%, and follow-up assessments showed that trauma-related symptoms remained below the clinical cutoff point. Parents also reported improvements in sleep patterns, reduced fearfulness, and enhanced emotional stability in both children.

3. Internalizing and Externalizing Behavioral Problems

Scores on the CBCL and SDQ indicated significant improvement across multiple behavioral domains. In the internalizing dimension, both participants demonstrated reductions in anxiety, withdrawal, and depressive symptoms. In the externalizing dimension, notable decreases were observed in aggression, defiance, and rule-breaking behaviors. On average, total problem scores decreased by 45–60%, with the largest improvements noted in aggression and emotional distress.

4. Clinical Significance and Percentage of Improvement

The **percentage of improvement** analysis indicated that both children achieved clinically meaningful change. Post-treatment scores on the CBCL and SDQ fell below the clinical cutoff range, suggesting a return to normative behavioral functioning. Specifically, Child A demonstrated a 58% overall improvement in trauma and behavioral symptoms, while Child B showed a 63% improvement. These findings indicate that the therapy achieved not only statistical but also clinical significance.

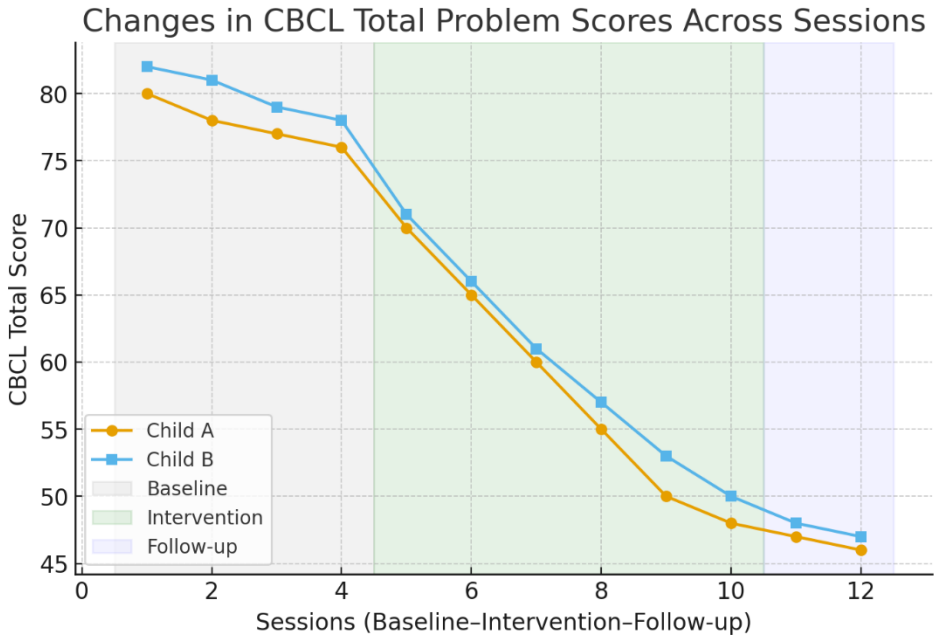
[DOI: 10.61186/ieepj.5.2.332]

5. Clinical Efficacy

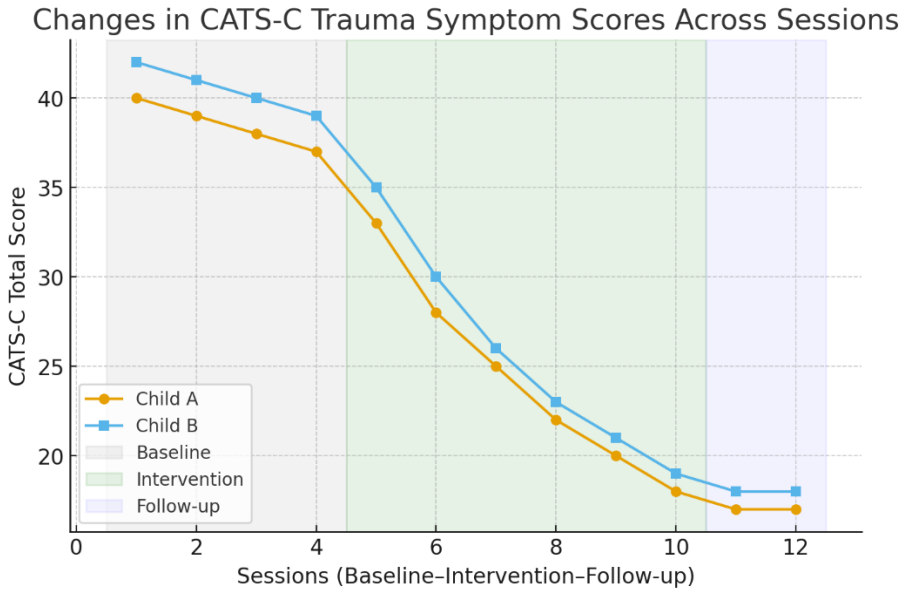
The clinical efficacy rate confirmed the internal validity and robustness of the observed outcomes. Consistent reductions across all dependent variables during the treatment phase, coupled with stability during follow-up, support the conclusion that the observed changes were a result of the therapeutic intervention rather than random variation or external influences.

6. Qualitative Observations

Qualitative observations during therapy further supported the quantitative results. Initially, both children exhibited high levels of anxiety, limited verbal expression, and unstructured play. As therapy progressed, play behavior became increasingly organized and symbolic. By the mastery and complementary stages, both children engaged in cooperative play, role-playing, and problem-solving activities. These behavioral shifts were accompanied by verbal expressions of emotional awareness, trust, and self-confidence, reflecting therapeutic progress and psychological healing.



[DOI: 10.61186/ieepj.5.2.332]



Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that child-centered play therapy effectively reduces both internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems in children with traumatic life experiences. This outcome highlights the therapeutic value of play-based interventions in helping traumatized children regulate emotions, reduce behavioral difficulties, and build resilience. These results suggest that such interventions can be successfully implemented in care, treatment, and counseling centers serving children exposed to trauma.

The effectiveness observed in this study aligns with a wide body of research demonstrating the long-term psychological and physiological consequences of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Previous studies have shown that early traumatic experiences are closely linked to a range of negative outcomes, including post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, hopelessness, stress, and even suicidal behaviors. For example, Monat and Chandler (2015), using data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (2009–2012), found that adults who had experienced multiple childhood traumas were at greater risk for serious physical health conditions such as heart attacks, diabetes, and functional limitations. Their findings underscored the importance of early detection and psychological intervention, as childhood trauma can serve as a predictor of adult physical and mental health outcomes.

Similarly, Felitti et al. (1998) reported that individuals with four or more traumatic childhood experiences were substantially more likely to experience depressed mood and suicidal behavior compared to those with no such experiences. They also noted associations between childhood trauma and later substance abuse**,** alcohol dependence, and delinquent behavior, illustrating the pervasive and

[DOI: 10.61186/ieepj.5.2.332]

long-lasting impact of early adversity. Subsequent research by Haatainen et al. (2003) further confirmed that the number of adverse childhood experiences is positively correlated with hopelessness in adulthood, suggesting that trauma may impair one's sense of purpose and optimism over time.

In adolescents, Perez, Jennings, Piquero, and Bagillo (2016) found that childhood trauma was significantly correlated with suicide attempts, impulsivity, aggression, school problems, and substance abuse. Their results indicated a dose–response relationship: as the number of traumatic experiences increased, so did the likelihood of suicide attempts. Adolescents who reported nine or more traumatic experiences were 24 times more likely to attempt suicide than those who had none. These findings reinforce the idea that childhood trauma has a cumulative effect on risk behaviors and mental health outcomes.

Beyond mental health, adverse childhood experiences have also been linked to broader social and behavioral dysfunctions, including criminal activity **and** difficulty forming healthy relationships. Individuals with multiple ACEs may struggle with trust, attachment, and emotional regulation, which can hinder their ability to maintain stable interpersonal relationships in adulthood.

From a physical health perspective, several longitudinal studies have established connections between childhood trauma and later-life medical conditions. Mersky, Topitz, and Reynolds (2013) demonstrated that individuals exposed to severe childhood trauma were at higher risk for developing chronic diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. Likewise, Monat and Chandler (2015) reported a significant association between childhood physical abuse and increased risk of metabolic and cardiovascular disorders in adulthood.

Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of early psychological intervention for children who have experienced trauma. The results of the present study show that child-centered play therapy—by allowing children to express their emotions symbolically and rebuild a sense of safety and control—can be a highly effective approach for mitigating the psychological impact of trauma. Through consistent therapeutic engagement, children are able to process distressing experiences, improve emotional regulation, and reduce maladaptive behaviors.

In conclusion, the outcomes of this study support the growing body of evidence that play-based interventions provide a developmentally appropriate, effective, and meaningful path toward emotional healing for children exposed to trauma. Future research with larger samples and longitudinal follow-ups is recommended to examine the long-term effectiveness of child-centered play therapy across diverse trauma types and age groups.

[DOI: 10.61186/ieepj.5.2.332]

Conflict of interest: There is no conflict of interest associated with this research.

Financial sponsor: This research was conducted without any financial support and with the researcher's personal funds.

Acknowledgments: The researcher would like to express their gratitude to all the participants, as well as the professors and friends who provided support throughout this research endeavor.

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[DOI: 10.61186/ieepj.5.2.332]