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Effectiveness of Gestalt Play Therapy on the Empathy of Single-Parent Children

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of Gestalt play therapy in increasing empathy among children from single-parent families.

Methods: This research employed a quasi-experimental design using a pretest–posttest format with a control group. The statistical population consisted of single-parent children who referred to clinics in District 1 of Tehran in 2024. From this population, 30 participants were selected using a convenience sampling method. These 30 children were randomly assigned into two groups: the first group (15 participants) served as the control group, and the second group (15 participants) served as the experimental group. Empathy pretests were administered to both groups. The experimental group then received 10 sessions of 60-minute Gestalt play therapy, while the control group received no intervention. After the intervention period, posttests were administered to both groups. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 26 and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA).

Results: The results indicated that Gestalt play therapy significantly increased empathy among single-parent children ($F = 97.357$, $p < 0.01$).

Conclusions: Based on these findings, it is recommended that counselors and psychotherapists working with single-parent children use Gestalt play therapy as an effective intervention to improve empathy.

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Introduction

The family, as the primary social institution, plays an undeniable role in a child's emotional and social development. It is within the family context that children first learn patterns of attachment, emotional regulation, communication, and interpersonal understanding. However, in recent years, the marked increase in single-parent families has raised important questions regarding the developmental consequences of this particular family structure for children.

Research indicates that children raised in single-parent households often encounter a unique constellation of challenges that may predispose them to various psychological difficulties, including anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems (Dangle et al., 2023). The impact of single parenthood on children can be attributed to multiple interrelated factors such as economic strain, social stigma, reduced parental availability, and limited daily emotional support (Satriwati et al., 2023). Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that family structure exerts a profound influence on child development. Compared to their peers from two-parent families, children from single-parent households frequently report lower academic achievement and higher rates of mental health concerns. These difficulties are often compounded by prevailing societal misconceptions that equate single parenthood with instability or deficiency, thereby intensifying psychosocial stressors experienced by both parent and child (Chavda & Nisagra, 2023).

Among the various developmental competencies essential for healthy adjustment, empathy occupies a central position. Empathy—defined as the capacity to understand and share the emotional states of others—plays a vital role in children's social and emotional development (Bulgarelli & Jones, 2023). This skill enables children to form positive and meaningful relationships and to demonstrate sensitivity and responsiveness in social interactions. Research suggests that children who acquire empathic skills early in life exhibit better psychological well-being, greater social competence, and fewer behavioral problems (Kimis et al., 2023). Moreover, empathy allows children to respond appropriately to others' emotions in social situations, thereby reducing tendencies toward aggression and relational conflict (Sergeira & Almeida, 2023).

When considered collectively, these findings suggest that the challenges faced by children in single-parent families extend beyond the mere absence of one parent. Rather, they reflect a complex interplay of emotional and social consequences arising from that absence—consequences

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that necessitate targeted and developmentally appropriate interventions. Many single-parent children encounter difficulties in verbally expressing their emotions, particularly when experiencing distress, grief, or internalized conflict. Therefore, therapeutic approaches that facilitate indirect, symbolic, and experiential expression may prove especially effective. Interventions tailored to the child's lived emotional experiences can play a significant role in mitigating psychological harm and fostering resilience (Massey & Shutter, 2023).

In this context, therapeutic intervention for this vulnerable population is not merely beneficial but essential. Because many of these children struggle with direct verbal articulation of feelings, play therapy offers an alternative pathway for emotional expression. Through play, children can externalize internal conflicts, process difficult experiences, and communicate emotions in developmentally appropriate ways. Play therapy is widely recognized as an effective approach that enables children to express emotions, experiences, and challenges within a safe and structured environment. It is particularly beneficial for children facing emotional, behavioral, or trauma-related difficulties (Kaduson, 2024).

Various theoretical models of play therapy have been proposed, among which Gestalt play therapy has received growing attention. Gestalt play therapy is grounded in the principles of Gestalt theory, which emphasizes holistic awareness, experiential learning, and personal responsibility (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2024). Gestalt theory is based on the premise that individuals must understand their experiences as integrated wholes and develop awareness of their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations in the present moment. In this therapeutic framework, clients are encouraged to see, feel, and interpret their own experiences rather than passively relying on the therapist to provide insight. A fundamental assumption of Gestalt therapy is that when individuals become aware of what is occurring within and around them, they possess the inherent capacity for self-regulation and growth (Pahlavani & Ashouri, 2021).

Central to personality development in Gestalt therapy is the principle of organismic self-regulation, which refers to the natural tendency of individuals to maintain psychological balance and meet their needs in adaptive ways (Carroll, 2024). A distressed child often requires therapeutic support to restore healthy organismic self-regulation and create the foundation for psychological well-being. Within Gestalt play therapy, the therapeutic relationship itself constitutes the most essential element. Treatment is grounded in mutual respect, authentic presence, and relational

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equality. The therapist views both self and child as possessing equal value and agency. Through experiential techniques embedded in play, the child becomes increasingly aware of emotions—how they manifest in the body, what meanings they carry, and how they can be constructively utilized (Payne et al., 2024).

Given the increasing prevalence of single-parent families and the heightened emotional-social vulnerability observed among their children, identifying effective interventions to promote psychological adaptation is imperative. Gestalt-oriented play therapy represents a promising approach for helping children process emotions and experiences in an integrative and developmentally appropriate manner (Lacisi et al., 2024). This method enables children to enhance self-awareness while strengthening social and emotional skills through experiential engagement.

A growing body of research—including studies by Abdollahi Bagh-Abadi (2023), Shahdad et al. (2023), Pahlavani and Ashouri (2021), Toker Asjad and Masroor (2023), Davidson et al. (2022), and Dugaprasad and Boling (2014)—supports the beneficial effects of Gestalt-based play therapy interventions across various child populations. Nevertheless, limited research has specifically examined its impact on empathy development among single-parent children. Accordingly, the present study seeks to address the following fundamental research question: Does Gestalt play therapy have a significant effect on increasing empathy in children from single-parent families?

Material and Methods

The present study was applied in purpose and quantitative in nature. A quasi-experimental research design with a pretest–posttest control group was employed to examine the effectiveness of Gestalt play therapy on empathy in children from single-parent families. Although participants were selected through non-random sampling, they were randomly assigned to either the experimental or the control group.

Participants and Sampling

The statistical population consisted of all children from single-parent families who referred to counseling clinics and psychological centers in District 1 of Tehran during the second half of 2024. From this population, 30 children were selected using convenience sampling. After selection, participants were randomly assigned to two groups: Experimental group: 15 children receiving Gestalt play therapy and Control group: 15 children receiving no intervention during the study

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period. Both groups completed the empathy pretest before the intervention. The experimental group then participated in the intervention sessions, while the control group received no treatment. After the completion of the intervention, the empathy scale was administered again to both groups as a posttest.

Instrument

Jolliffe and Farrington Empathy Scale (2006): Empathy was measured using the Jolliffe and Farrington Empathy Questionnaire (2006), which consists of 20 items and two subscales: Affective–emotional empathy (11 items) and Cognitive empathy (9 items). The questionnaire is an attitude-measurement instrument based on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The total score ranges from 20 to 100, with higher scores indicating greater levels of empathy. Scores above 60 suggest relatively high empathy in children.

Previous studies have reported acceptable psychometric properties for this instrument. In the study by Alibér, Matrissardi, Spettri, and Toso (2009), Cronbach's alpha coefficients were 0.87 for the total scale, 0.86 for the affective subscale, and 0.74 for the cognitive subscale, while the content validity index was reported as 0.89. In Iran, Jafari et al. (2017) reported Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients ranging from 0.74 to 0.80, and test–retest reliability coefficients between 0.72 and 0.80. In another study by Roshandel (2019), the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the scale was 0.87. Additionally, Sheikh-Eslami and Seyed Esmaeili Qomi (2024) confirmed the construct validity of the scale using confirmatory factor analysis and reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.87 for the overall scale.

Intervention Procedure: Gestalt Play Therapy

In this study, Gestalt play therapy was implemented in the experimental group across 10 group sessions. Sessions were conducted once per week, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, with 15 children participating in the experimental group. The intervention was designed based on Gestalt therapeutic principles emphasizing awareness, emotional expression, bodily awareness, and self-regulation through experiential play activities.

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Table 1. Summary of Gestalt Play Therapy Sessions

Session	Objective	Technique	Activity
1	Establish therapeutic relationship with therapist and peers	Use of puppets and drawing	Children sit in a circle while the therapist introduces a puppet. Each child states their name and identifies a physical similarity with another child. They then draw circles representing family members and complete each face using emotion cards.
2	Strengthening contact and present-moment awareness	Focus on the five senses	Children observe their surroundings through colored transparent sheets and describe what they see. They explore objects in a sensory bag through touch, identify sounds in silence, taste food without seeing it, and smell objects using one nostril.
3	Increasing bodily awareness	Movement-based activities	Children imitate the movements of their favorite animals. They also perform short role-play activities in pairs while others observe without judgment.
4	Enhancing self-perception	Using "I" statements and exploring polarities	Children complete worksheets with their photos, describing likes and dislikes. They collect, draw, or sculpt objects representing things that make them feel good or uncomfortable and place them into two personal boxes.
5	Expression of aggressive energy with relaxation	Clay work	Children manipulate clay while focusing on sensory awareness. They gradually increase the intensity of hitting or throwing the clay. Relaxation is practiced by imitating a turtle withdrawing into its shell and slowly emerging.
6	Expression of aggressive energy with relaxation	Use of musical instruments	Children choose or create instruments. After hearing a short story about shame, they project the character's feelings and express them musically in group rhythms guided by the therapist. Relaxation follows with calm music and progressive body relaxation.
7	Emotional expression	Identification and projection of emotions	Children roll an emotion dice (anger, happiness, shame, sadness, disgust, fear) and share a short memory related to that feeling. They also discuss the feelings of a puppet character experiencing embarrassment.
8	Emotional expression	Safe-place fantasy drawing	Each child draws their "safe place" and explains its characteristics and why it feels comforting.
9	Emotional expression and projection	Clay modeling of emotions	Children recall a recent moment when they felt fear or embarrassment and represent that feeling with clay. They describe their creation and engage in dialogue between different parts of it.
10	Self-nurturing	Self-care activities	Children create a "care doll" to take home and build a "calm box" containing objects that help them feel safe during moments of fear, shame, or worry.

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical principles were observed throughout the study:

Informed consent was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participating children before the study began.

Participation was voluntary, and parents and children were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

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The confidentiality and anonymity of participants' information were strictly maintained, and collected data were used solely for research purposes.

The intervention sessions were conducted in a safe and supportive therapeutic environment appropriate for children.

To ensure fairness, after the completion of the study, the control group was offered the opportunity to receive the intervention if desired.

All procedures were carried out in accordance with ethical guidelines for psychological research involving children.

Results

As shown in Table 2, the mean empathy score of the experimental group in the pretest was 52.40, which increased to 73.80 in the posttest (after the implementation of Gestalt play therapy). In contrast, the empathy scores of the control group showed no substantial difference between the pretest and posttest stages.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Children's Empathy Scores in the Pretest and Posttest by Group

Group	Test	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Control	Pretest	15	50.66	5.83
	Posttest	15	49.73	6.23
Experimental	Pretest	15	52.40	6.83
	Posttest	15	73.80	9.13

Based on the descriptive findings presented above, the experimental group demonstrated a notable increase in empathy scores following the intervention, whereas the control group's scores remained relatively stable.

Table 3. Results of ANCOVA for Posttest Empathy Scores Adjusted for Pretest Scores

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared (η^2)
Corrected Model	6520.415	2	3260.208	91.985	.001	.872
Intercept	39.687	1	39.687	1.120	.299	.040
Pretest	2176.382	1	2176.382	61.406	.001	.695
Group (Independent Variable)	3450.608	1	3450.608	97.357	.001	.783
Error	956.952	27	35.443			
Total	121931.000	30				
Corrected Total	7477.367	29				

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These results suggest that Gestalt play therapy may have contributed to improving empathy among children from single-parent families. To test the research hypothesis while controlling for pretest differences, a univariate analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was conducted. The results of the univariate ANCOVA, conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of Gestalt play therapy on empathy in single-parent children after controlling for pretest scores, revealed that the effect of group membership was statistically significant: $F_{(1,27)} = 97.357$, $p < .01$). This finding indicates that, after adjusting for pretest empathy scores, there was a significant difference between the experimental and control groups in posttest empathy scores. Furthermore, the effect size for the group variable was substantial: $\eta 2 = 0.783$. This value indicates a large effect size, meaning that approximately 78.3% of the variance in adjusted posttest empathy scores can be attributed to the Gestalt play therapy intervention.

Considering the higher adjusted mean scores of the experimental group compared to the control group in the posttest phase, it can be concluded that Gestalt play therapy significantly increased empathy among children from single-parent families. Therefore, the research hypothesis was supported.

Discussion

The results of the present study showed that the empathy scores of the experimental group increased substantially in the posttest. Furthermore, the findings of the analysis of covariance indicated that Gestalt play therapy had a significant effect on increasing empathy among children from single-parent families. Therefore, the research hypothesis was confirmed. The findings of this study are consistent with previous research, including studies conducted by Abdollahi Bagh-Abadi (2023), Monireh et al. (2023), Pahlavani and Ashouri (2021), Mallahi et al. (2019), Toker Asjad and Masroor (2023), Davidson et al. (2022), Button and Roy (2022), and Dugaprasad and Boling (2014). Collectively, these studies have demonstrated that play therapy can positively influence children's social interactions and enhance empathy in interpersonal relationships.

These findings may be explained by considering that Gestalt play therapy provides a promising pathway for enhancing empathy among children from single-parent families. Rooted in Gestalt theory, this therapeutic approach emphasizes the experience of the "here and now," increased awareness, and the development of healthy contact. These principles create a supportive context

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for children's emotional and social growth. Within the process of Gestalt play therapy, children gradually develop greater awareness of their own feelings, needs, and thoughts. Such awareness serves as a prerequisite for empathizing with others. A child who is capable of recognizing and labeling their own emotions is better prepared to understand and respond to the emotions of others. In addition, dramatic play and role-playing activities used during therapy sessions allow children to place themselves in another person's position and practically experience "seeing the world from another's perspective." Moreover, the therapeutic relationship and the therapist's reflection of the child's feelings within a safe therapeutic environment—combined with an attitude of unconditional acceptance—can provide a model of empathic interaction that children may internalize and reproduce in their interpersonal relationships. In this way, Gestalt play therapy can strengthen empathic capacities in children from single-parent families.

From a theoretical perspective, developmental psychology literature also supports these findings. Theories of cognitive empathy and affective empathy are based on the premise that experiencing emotions directly within a supportive environment enables individuals not only to understand those emotions but also to respond to them in a reflective, empathic manner. This process closely aligns with what occurs in Gestalt play therapy: children actively explore their own emotions as well as those of others and gradually develop the ability to respond empathically (Toker Asjad & Masroor, 2023).

A study conducted in 2024 examined the effects of play therapy interventions on empathy among children with cognitive developmental difficulties and found that such interventions can effectively increase empathy in these populations (Arikan, 2024). However, a distinctive feature of the Gestalt approach is its particular capacity to enhance affective empathy by focusing on children's lived experiences and their internal processes of awareness and adjustment.

Similarly, another study investigating a structured intervention based on art and mindfulness among children and adolescents reported positive effects on mental health and social skills, including empathy. This research emphasized the importance of integrating emotional awareness training within school environments (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2024). Although different from Gestalt play therapy, these findings further highlight the growing importance of developing empathy through active and creative interventions in educational contexts.

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Focusing specifically on children from single-parent families further underscores the importance of the present findings. These children may sometimes experience reduced emotional support networks or heightened levels of social anxiety. Gestalt play therapy can help address these gaps by providing a safe and experiential environment in which children are encouraged to explore emotions, understand others' perspectives, and engage in meaningful emotional interaction.

Despite these contributions, the present study has some limitations. The most important limitation is the use of a non-random sampling method, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Therefore, caution should be exercised when extending the results to broader populations.

In light of the findings demonstrating the effectiveness of Gestalt play therapy in increasing empathy among children from single-parent families, it is recommended that this approach be implemented as a structured program in child counseling centers and schools. Such programs could provide supportive environments that promote the development of emotional awareness and social skills among these children.

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ethics committee of Islamic Azad University.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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