

Psychological and Physiological Effects of Forced Parental Separation in Latino U.S. Citizen Children: Sandtray Play Therapy as a Treatment Modality for Trauma Resolution

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Abstract

The forced separation of U.S. citizen children from their undocumented parents is a pertinent legal, social, ethical, and moral issue that is dividing the country and defining the current culture in the United States. In this paper, the psychological and physical fallout experienced by Latino child victims of forced parent-child separation is examined. Sandtray Play Therapy is presented as a useful treatment tool to lessen the negative impact of emotional trauma on children, allow them to avoid social and developmental pitfalls, and to develop a positive path forward in their lives.

Keywords: Child Developmental Disorders; Child Mental Health; Child Parental Separation; Deportation; Latino Population; Neuroplasticity; Sandtray Play Therapy

Abbreviations

ADHA: Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder; BASC-2: Behavior Assessment System for Children, Second Edition; CAFAS: Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale; PTE: Potentially Traumatic Event; PTSD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Introduction

Forced child and parent separation, as well as the loss of parents, are some of the factors that contribute to distressing events among the children, which affect their mental health. By some estimates, there are 9 million children in the United States whose parents are undocumented immigrants; most are from Latin American countries, such as Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Brazil, El Salvador, and Mexico. Of that number, 4.5 million are US-born by undocumented immigrants; thus, the children (even though born of undocumented parents) have U.S. birthright citizenship [1]. Such U.S. citizen children live in fear that their undocumented parents might be deported, which places these children under extreme psychological stress.

From 2010 to 2012, almost 250,000 parents of citizen children were deported, as reported by Passel, Cohn, Krogstad, and Gonzalez-Barrera (2014) and the U.S. Office of Immigration (2013) [2,3]. Roberts *et al.* (2014) reported that children of arrested or deported parents experience shame, lack of social support, uncertainty about their future, loneliness, separation, social stigma, and medical illness. The parent-child separation radically alters and disrupts the parent-child relationship, negatively impacting and impairing the mental health of the child [4].

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The purpose of this research was to review Sandtray Play Therapy as an effective treatment for mental trauma experienced by Latino U.S. citizen children following arrest, detention, or deportation of their undocumented parents. A comprehensive literature review of the topic was employed. This paper offers recommendations on measures to overcome the mental trauma suffered by the children, focusing on Sandtray Play Therapy.

Due to recent and dramatic changes in the U.S. government immigration policy, there has been a sudden rise in distressed Latino children needing mental health support to reduce trauma symptoms. Sandplay Tray Therapy has proven to be an effective modality to promote feelings identification and validation, cognitive processing and reframing, and skills and positive insight development.

Note that Sandplay Therapy and Sandtray Play Therapy have similarities (primarily in the general tools used); however, they have distinct differences in theoretical orientation, the use of directives, interpretation, and the certification of the respective practitioners [5]. Although this paper is citing Sandtray Play Therapy, both interventions may be equally effective, or one more so than the other—a research topic left for future investigation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to determine or promote one approach over the other.

Discussion

Overview

The majority of Latino children whose parents have been deported or detained are susceptible to extreme poverty and live in disadvantaged neighborhoods at risk of exposure to violence, victimization and further marginalization [6]. Parental-deportation actions also place the affected children at risk of a gamut of socio-emotional disadvantages, beyond the adverse effects of poverty and poverty-related risk factors, including misdiagnosis of developmental disorders. According to Allen, Cisneros, and Tellez (2015), children with more potentially traumatic events (PTEs) tended to have more externalizing problems, as determined by the Behavior Assessment System for Children, Second Edition (BASC-2); and were rated by clinicians to have higher than average total dysfunction by the Child and Adolescent Functional Assessment Scale (CAFAS) [7]. These analytics demonstrated that children suffering traumatic-related symptoms are at risk of misdiagnoses, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHA) or behavioral disorders. Alegría, Green, McLaughlin, and Loder (2015) added that PTEs in children were the most preventable causes of debilitating mental illness, like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression [8]. Rojas-Flores, Clements, Koo, and London (2017) reported that in 2006, about 8 million of children in the United States were given emergency medical care because of unintentional injuries caused by acute PTEs. The injuries resulted from falls, dog bites, motor vehicle crashes, fires, and drownings. They added that more than 0.4 million of the injuries were attributable to poverty [9].

Parents-children separation effects

In the U.S., separation of children from parents through deportation or detention results in the children experiencing the absence of affection and attention of their parents; hence, the children can suffer mental and physical health issues. Zayas and Heffron (2015) noted that the children lived in fear for their lives as well as the lives of their parents. They also noted that 81% of the parents who have been deported are Latinos [10]. The arrest and deportation of individuals affect their friends, neighbors, and children when they witness the traumatic event of arrest, detention, and deportation. Due to separation from their parents, the lives of children are adversely affected, as they are no longer in touch with their parents, resulting in a lack of parental care and guidance.

The American Psychological Association (2012) established that the children (who have experienced emotional trauma and distress in witnessing a parent being arrested and deported) typically suffer discrimination and live in poverty; afterward, their physical health may be negatively affected due to feelings of isolation and rejection [11]. Children of deported parents more often suffer from food deprivation, compared to children of U.S. citizen parents. Children whose parents were deported or detained experience lower rates of positive development, compared to children of U.S. citizen parents [12]. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2015) reported

that children separated from their parents were often subjected to sexual violence, gang violence, poverty, domestic violence, and other forms of oppression, as they lack parental care and protection. Also, they are subjected to aggression, self-stigma, and inferior academic performance; they tend to develop problems more often than children living with their parents [13].

Sandplay therapy in child mental trauma

According to *Psychology Today*:

Sandplay therapy is a nonverbal, therapeutic intervention that makes use of a sandbox, toy figures, and sometimes water, to create scenes of miniature worlds that reflect a person's inner thoughts, struggles, and concerns. This form of play therapy is practiced along with talk therapy, using the sandbox and figures as communication tools. Sandplay therapy is often used with those who have suffered some form of trauma, neglect, or abuse. Although sandplay [therapy] is especially well suited for working with young children, who often cannot express their inner feelings in words, it is also a technique that is helpful for some teens and adults who are having trouble expressing themselves and who may have suffered some form of severe trauma. [14]

Sandtray Play Therapy is a sensory experience that can promote brain integration through actuating more neurons. This therapeutic approach can improve brain functionality due to more neuron involvement; hence, higher-level skills, such as empathy and insight are developed [15]. Research on neuroplasticity shows that when a person 'exercises' the brain, situations that seem difficult to begin with become more manageable; the seeming impossible becomes possible [14]. In this context, Sandtray Play Therapy promotes adaptive neuroplasticity which is the ability of the nervous system to create new pathways to cope with reality in a healthier, more adaptive way. Sandtray Play Therapy is a rich sensory experience that often goes through the 'back door' of the mind, avoiding the emotional blocks that many affected people erect with their words [16]. Sandtray Play Therapy helps relieve traumatic stress as it encourages children to process traumatic events in metaphorical, indirect ways—and, therefore, reduces the exposure to retraumatization. Also, Sandtray Play Therapy encourages children to overcome challenges they may face in the absence of parents, since the therapy can make seemingly impossible situations possible: using modeling and reframing to parental separation [17].

Conclusion

By some estimates, there are 9 million Latin American children in the United States whose parents are undocumented immigrants living in the United States. These children, having been born in the United States, have legitimate U.S. citizenship however, many of their parents do not, and are subject to arrest, detention, and deportation. It has been documented herein, and through numerous other studies, that children—experiencing strident legal actions against their undocumented parents—can suffer severe emotional trauma that can lead to adverse social and psychological development. Thus, these children become susceptible to a myriad of sequelae, including physical and sexual abuse, malnutrition, behavioral disorders, misdiagnoses, emotional deprivation, low self-image, social stigma, and poor physical health.

Sandtray Play Therapy has proven to be an effective intervention in enable children suffering from parental separation to express their circumstances and feelings through 'playing out', allowing the practitioner to more readily assess the child's trauma, and facilitates skill building and trauma resolution. Sandtray Play Therapy enables these affected children to come to terms with traumatic events, assists them in gaining mastery of their lives, and guides them in overcoming psychological challenges.

Although this research focused on the application of Sandtray Play Therapy in emotionally-traumatized Latino children, who have suffered parental separation, it is proposed that more intervention and treatment modalities are researched to promote trauma resolution and improvement of the gap disparities that Latino children may suffer.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare that this paper was written in the absence of any commercial or financial relationship that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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