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Comparison of the Effectiveness of Parent-Centered Meta-Emotional Training and Family-Centered Play Therapy in Reducing Aggression in Preschool Children

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Extended Abstract

Aim

Aggressive behaviors, particularly relational aggression in preschool children, can lead to social exclusion, forcing some children out of peer groups or causing relationships to end. These behaviors significantly impact the children's adulthood, as childhood aggression is a predictor of delinquency, substance abuse, depression, and academic failure (Hawes et al., 2021). One family-related factor that may exacerbate aggression in children is emotional over-arousal. This construct encompasses emotions that react to other emotions (Bailen et al., 2019). The meta-emotional perspective refers to parents' ability to organize thoughts and feelings regarding their own and their children's emotions (Chen et al., 2012).

Meta-emotional training in the context of parent-child relationships offers a promising approach to reducing children's aggression. Play, serving as a bridge between children's inner thoughts and their external world (Fallah et al., 2021), also plays a pivotal role. Given the significant influence of family dynamics and parent-child relationships on children's emotional and behavioral disorders, family-oriented interventions are expected to effectively address aggression in children. This study aims to compare the effectiveness of parent-centered meta-emotional training and family-oriented play therapy in reducing aggression among preschool children.

Methodology

This semi-experimental research employed a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up design with experimental and control groups. The statistical population consisted of preschool children attending centers in Tehran during 2021–2022. A purposive sampling method was used to select 54 children based on inclusion criteria, accounting for potential attrition. Participants were randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group (18 children each). Ultimately, data from 15 participants per group were analyzed after three children from each group withdrew due to non-participation or incomplete questionnaires.

The inclusion criteria were as follows: children aged 4–6 years, evidence of aggression based on the Preschool Aggression Scale, parental consent to participate, no serious medical conditions, and no major psychiatric disorders in the child or their parents. Exclusion criteria included missing more than two intervention sessions and withdrawal from the study.

Parents in the first experimental group received parent-centered meta-emotional training, while parents in the second group participated in family-oriented play therapy sessions with their children. The meta-emotional training intervention was based on programs developed by Gottman et al. (1996) and Nejatifar et al. (2021). It involved seven two-hour group sessions for parents. The family-oriented play therapy intervention drew on the principles of Kiafar et al. (2013), Davidson et al. (2017), and

Mahmoodi et al. (2022). This program included six two-hour sessions involving both parents and children.

The Preschool Aggression Questionnaire (Vahedi et al., 2008) was used to measure physical, relational, and verbal aggression. Data were analyzed using SPSS 22 software, employing repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Findings

The results revealed a significant difference in aggression scores across three test points within and between groups ($P < 0.001$). The within-group effects test indicated significant effects of time ($P = 0.001$, $F = 14.61$), the interaction between time and group ($P = 0.001$, $F = 7.58$), and between-group differences ($P = 0.001$, $F = 24.08$).

Post hoc Bonferroni tests showed no significant difference between the two experimental groups in reducing aggression levels. However, differences between pre-test and post-test scores (11.35) and pre-test and follow-up scores (11.93) were statistically significant ($P = 0.001$).

Conclusion

This study compared the effects of parent-centered meta-emotional training and family-oriented play therapy on aggression in preschool children. Both interventions effectively reduced aggression, with no significant difference in their efficacy.

Regarding the effectiveness of meta-emotional training, hyper-emotional strategies help parents recognize the importance of emotions in their lives and their children's lives (Belli & Broncano, 2017). These strategies guide parents in teaching children the significance of emotions, establishing boundaries, and modeling appropriate behavior. Parents were trained to accept their child's emotions and guide them in expressing emotions constructively.

Family-oriented play therapy was also effective, as play serves as a crucial tool for emotional development. Through play, children learn emotional regulation, control, and healthy expression. Increased participation in play enhances children's self-awareness and self-worth (Fallah et al., 2021). By focusing on the parent-child relationship, family-oriented play therapy helps address behavioral issues and strengthens family bonds.

Keywords: Aggression, Family-Oriented Play Therapy, Parent-Centered Meta-Emotional Training, Preschool Children.

Ethical Considerations

In adherence to ethical principles, participants received detailed information about the study's purpose, significance, procedures, and session structure. After completing the study, training sessions were provided to the control group. Participants were also informed of their results.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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