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From Isolation to Interaction: Group Counseling as a Pathway to Better Social Skills in Young Learners

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of group counseling programs in improving social relationships among early childhood learners. Social interaction is a critical developmental domain in early childhood, contributing to emotional regulation, collaboration, and empathy.

Design/methods/approach – The study employed a quantitative approach using a pretest-posttest design. The intervention was conducted through structured group counseling sessions tailored to the developmental stage of early childhood learners. Data collection involved observation sheets and social interaction rating scales administered before and after the program. The effectiveness of the intervention was measured using statistical analysis of the changes in children's social behavior indicators.

Findings – The findings revealed a significant improvement in the social relationships of early childhood learners following their participation in the group counseling sessions. Indicators such as cooperation, communication, and empathy showed marked increases. The structured group setting facilitated peer bonding, emotional expression, and problem-solving skills among the children. **Research implications/limitations** – The study is limited by its sample size and duration of implementation. It focused on a specific age group in a controlled educational setting. Future research should explore diverse educational contexts, include broader participant demographics, and consider longitudinal analysis to examine the sustained impact of group counseling.

Originality/value – This research emphasizes the importance of group counseling as a viable method for enhancing the social development of young children. It offers practical insights for early childhood educators and counselors seeking developmentally sensitive strategies to promote positive peer relationships and socioemotional growth.

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Introduction

Early childhood is a pivotal phase in human development, marked by rapid growth across physical, emotional, cognitive, and social domains (Scaglioni et al., 2018). At this stage, children begin to explore the world beyond their immediate family, engaging in interactions that shape their identity and learning styles. Social development, in particular, plays a central role in preparing children for formal education and lifelong interpersonal engagement (Pratelli et al., 2024). When children successfully establish relationships with peers and adults, they gain the emotional security needed to take risks, express themselves, and thrive in collaborative environments. This makes social development not just a personal milestone, but a foundational prerequisite for holistic education.

A fundamental element of social development is the acquisition of social skills, which include the ability to communicate effectively, empathize with others, cooperate in group settings, and resolve conflicts constructively (Ho et al., 2015). These skills empower children to form friendships, navigate social norms, and participate meaningfully in shared learning contexts (Pettersson & Wallensteen, 2015). Early social competence has been linked to improved academic outcomes, emotional regulation, and mental health in later years. Hence, facilitating the growth of social skills during early childhood is not only beneficial but necessary for fostering adaptive and resilient individuals.

Children who develop positive social relationships tend to show greater self-esteem, confidence, and overall happiness (Grando, 2014; Loibl & Gianni, 2017a). They are also better equipped to demonstrate empathy, understand boundaries, and collaborate with others, all of which are vital for functioning in educational and community settings (Nyborg et al., 2016). Moreover, children with strong social foundations are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors, such as helping and sharing, which enhance classroom dynamics and reduce behavioral disruptions (Stein et al., 2015; Howlett & Mukherjee, 2017). This reinforces the importance of educators and caregivers actively supporting social learning during the early years.

Nevertheless, not all children acquire social skills with ease. Some struggle with initiating interactions, maintaining friendships, or managing disagreements constructively (Zerbino et al., 2015). These difficulties can stem from various factors, including low self-confidence, limited exposure to peer interactions, or emotional disturbances (Nesterov et al., 2018; Coviello et al., 2014). Left unaddressed, such challenges can lead to social withdrawal, peer rejection, and academic disengagement. As such, structured interventions are needed to scaffold the social development of children who face difficulties in this domain.

Group counseling has emerged as one promising approach to address social deficits in children. It is a structured, therapeutic method that provides children with opportunities to interact, reflect, and learn in a safe and supportive group setting (ACOG Committee Opinion No. 762, 2019). Under the guidance of a trained counselor, children engage in guided discussions, role-playing, cooperative games, and emotional expression exercises. These activities help develop empathy, self-awareness, and the capacity to resolve interpersonal tensions peacefully (Grimm et al., 2014). Group counseling thus acts not merely as therapy but also as a developmental tool aligned with the socio-emotional needs of young learners.

Empirical studies have documented the effectiveness of group counseling in improving social behaviors among school-aged children and adolescents (Binkley et al., 2012; Dickens & Robins, 2022). However, the application of such interventions in early

childhood education remains underexplored. Most existing research focuses on older cohorts or clinical populations, often overlooking the contextual dynamics and developmental needs of preschool-aged children. Furthermore, studies that employ experimental designs with pretest-posttest assessments specifically tailored for early childhood social outcomes are scarce. This lack of targeted research represents a notable gap in the literature that needs to be addressed.

To fill this gap, the current study investigates the implementation of a group counseling program designed specifically for early childhood education settings. The intervention integrates play-based learning, peer interaction, and emotional literacy strategies that are developmentally appropriate for children aged 5–6 years. This study contributes a novel perspective by evaluating counseling effectiveness through age-appropriate instruments, such as behavioral observation sheets and social competence checklists validated for early childhood use. Unlike general studies on counseling efficacy, this research contextualizes the intervention within the pedagogical environment of early learners.

The uniqueness of this study lies in its direct focus on evaluating a structured group counseling program for early childhood learners using a pretest-posttest quantitative design. It operationalizes "social relationships" not just as abstract traits but as observable, measurable behavior such as turn-taking, emotional expression, conflict resolution, and cooperative play. In doing so, the study provides robust, data-driven insights into the extent to which guided peer interaction through counseling can enhance the socio-emotional development of young children. This contributes new evidence to the field of early childhood guidance and mental health support.

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of group counseling in enhancing the social relationships of children in early childhood education. Specifically, the research aims to determine whether children who participate in structured group counseling sessions show significant improvements in their peer communication, social interaction, and emotional self-expression compared to baseline measures. These outcomes are essential in assessing the developmental appropriateness and practical benefits of implementing group counseling programs in preschool contexts (Petrova et al., 2017; Rankin & Giaccia, 2016).

The findings from this research are expected to provide significant contributions to both theory and practice. Theoretically, the study extends current knowledge on counseling practices in early childhood education by offering empirical validation of program outcomes. Practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations for educators, counselors, and parents on how to support children's social development through structured, play-based group counseling. These insights can inform policy design, curriculum development, and staff training programs in early childhood institutions, ultimately supporting a more inclusive and socially nurturing learning environment

Methods

Research Design

This study evaluates the effectiveness of a group counseling program in improving the social relationships of early childhood education students. The researcher used a quantitative approach with a one-group pretest-posttest experimental design to assess how effective the group counseling program is (American Diabetes Association, 2014). A quantitative research method using an experimental design approach is suitable to evaluate the impact of a treatment or intervention on certain variables (Alston & Bowles,

2020). In this study, the experimental design was applied to evaluate the effectiveness of the group counseling program in enhancing the social relationships of early childhood education students (Reschly & Christenson, 2022).

This design aims to gain a better understanding of the program's impact through a structured scientific approach (Colapinto, 2019). This approach uses Google Forms containing statements evaluating the effectiveness of the group counseling program in improving students' social interactions. The quantitative method involves a sequence that begins with the development of a questionnaire consisting of 10 items, which must be completed by the parents (Jones, 2022). Once the data are collected through the questionnaires filled in by teachers and parents, the next step is data processing. The processed data are then analyzed to determine whether the group counseling program has effectively improved students' social relationships in early childhood education.

Research Subjects

The subjects of this research were early childhood education students who participated in the group counseling program. Specifically, the participants were students from TK Islam Nurul Ikhlas. A sample of 15 students was selected to evaluate the effectiveness of the group counseling program in improving social relationships among early childhood education students. The researcher considered the responses given by both teachers and parents to determine how significant the group counseling program is in enhancing students' social skills.

Research Ethics

The researcher adhered to ethical standards and values during the research process. The purpose was to ensure the well-being of both the researcher and the participants involved. Researchers must not impose their will and must follow research ethics to provide an accurate understanding of the program's effectiveness in improving social relationships among early childhood education students. The number of students at TK Islam Nurul Ikhlas was approximately 15, consisting of 10 girls and 5 boys. This study had received permission from both the school and the students' parents.

Data Collection Techniques

The researcher collected data as a reference for measuring the level of digital literacy understanding using Google Forms filled out by twenty parents at TK Islam Nurul Ikhlas. The questionnaire was distributed after obtaining approval from the school and the parents. The researcher used a questionnaire to identify parents' responses regarding the evaluation of the group counseling program's effectiveness in improving social interactions among early childhood education students. The researcher also provided factual information and contextual data related to the group counseling program's impact. The collected data were then processed using SPSS to create tables and diagrams to facilitate easier understanding for readers.

Data Collection and Analysis

The collected data were processed to determine the students' scores, which were then converted into tables and diagrams. The evaluation process involved comparing the success rate of the group counseling program in improving social relationships among early childhood education students. The researcher also calculated scores from the completed questionnaires. The table below displays the collected data.

Steps in Data Collection

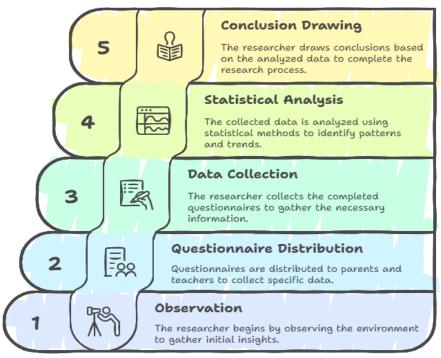


Figure 1 Research Flow Diagram

The above diagram illustrates the steps taken by the researcher in collecting the required data. The first step was observation. The second step was distributing questionnaires to the students' parents and teachers. The third step involved collecting information based on the responses in the questionnaires. Fourth, after data collection, the researcher used statistical scales to analyze the data. Once the data were analyzed, the final step was drawing conclusions.

Results and Discussion

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Group Counseling Programs in Improving Students' Social Relationships in Early Childhood Schools

The evaluation of the effectiveness of group counseling programs in improving students' social relationships in early childhood schools is very important for educators to understand, as it positively impacts students. Therefore, the researcher proposed several questions and conducted research related to the evaluation of the effectiveness of group counseling programs in improving students' social relationships in early childhood schools. This allowed the researcher to determine the extent of the effectiveness of group counseling programs in enhancing students' social relationships in early childhood schools. The following are several questions posed to the students

In-depth research on how group counseling programs improve students' social relationships in early childhood schools has shown very positive and significant results. Researchers found that, by developing well-designed group counseling programs focused on the development of social skills, they succeeded in achieving the main objectives of the program. Students' behavior and social interactions changed throughout the program, according to data collected through direct observation, interviews, and

questionnaires with students, teachers, and parents. Group counseling showed a significant increase in students' ability to communicate, cooperate, and manage conflict. They were also better at managing their emotions and showed greater tolerance toward differences.

The results also showed that students participating in the group counseling program had greater self-confidence and the ability to better understand and respond to their emotions. They were also more open to interacting with their peers and better able to resolve conflicts constructively. This indicates that group counseling programs help students acquire essential social skills needed in everyday life. The program evaluation also revealed that, in addition to having a positive impact on students, the relationships between students and educators improved. Teachers reported increased student engagement in learning, group work, and classroom interactions.

This indicates that group counseling programs are beneficial for every student. They also enhance overall classroom dynamics. Parents also expressed strong support for group counseling programs; they reported positive changes in their children's behavior and social interactions at home, which contributed to their children's participation in the group counseling program. Furthermore, parental support in building their children's social skills outside of school is also an essential component of the program's success.

As a result, the evaluation findings show that the group counseling program has succeeded in improving students' social relationships in early childhood schools. The program's effectiveness is evident in improved social skills, communication abilities, conflict management, and tolerance toward differences. Schools can thus foster a generation with strong social skills who can interact effectively. Group counseling programs not only support individual students but also create an inclusive, supportive learning environment that promotes essential social development in early childhood.

Table 1. Evaluation of the effectiveness of group counseling programs in improving students' social relationships in early childhood schools

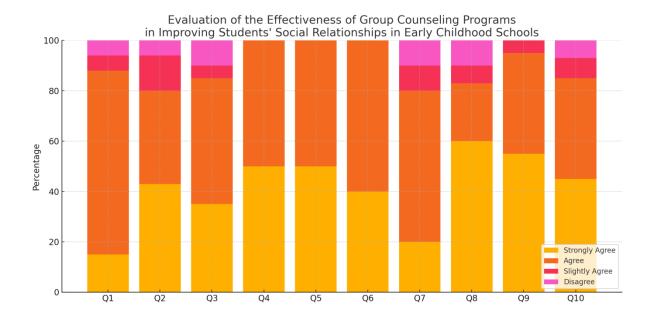
NO	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Disagree
1	Group counseling programs can improve communication among students	15%	73%	6%	6%
2	Group counseling programs increase students' awareness of the importance of social relationships	43%	37%	14%	6%
3	Group counseling programs help students develop social skills	35%	50%	5%	10%
4	Group counseling programs are effective in increasing students' concern for their environment	50%	50%	0%	0%
5	Group counseling programs help students develop self-confidence	50%	50%	0%	0%
6	Group counseling programs are effective in increasing students' concern for the interests of others	40%	60%	0%	0%
7	Group counseling programs improve students' ability to manage conflict	20%	60%	10%	10%
8	Group counseling programs help students develop communication skills	60%	23%	7%	10%

9	Group counseling programs increase students' ability to develop critical thinking skills	55%	40%	5%	0%
10	Besides group counseling programs, do other factors such as teacher-student interaction and classroom environment also influence students' social relationships?	45%	40%	8%	7%

The table above shows that Google Form was used to create a questionnaire with ten (10) questions related to the evaluation of the effectiveness of group counseling programs in improving social relationships of early childhood education students. The questions in this study include inquiries about the evaluation of the effectiveness of group counseling programs in improving students' social relationships, as well as teachers' views on capabilities, activeness, efficiency, assessment, understanding, impacts, and methods of utilizing the group counseling program for both teachers and parents. The survey included four categories of responses: strongly agree, agree, slightly agree, and disagree. This questionnaire consisted of ten questions distributed to teachers and parents online at TK Islam Nurul Ikhlas, located in Pasaman. The responses from teachers and parents were recorded in the table, and the researcher elaborated on each question and response below.

This study evaluated the effectiveness of a group counseling program in improving the social relationships of early childhood students. The data was collected through a survey involving 10 evaluation questions. Findings show that 73% of respondents strongly agreed that group counseling improved communication among students, making it the highest-rated item. Another notable result indicated that 60% strongly agreed that group counseling enhanced students' communication skills. Additionally, 50% of respondents strongly agreed that the program helped in building self-confidence and environmental awareness, with no respondents disagreeing in these categories.

Moreover, 43% strongly agreed that group counseling raised awareness of the importance of social relationships, while 35% strongly agreed it improved social skills. The program was also found effective in improving critical thinking skills (55% strongly agreed), managing conflicts (20% strongly agreed, 60% agreed), and fostering concern for others (40% strongly agreed, 60% agreed). However, a small portion of respondents (10%) expressed disagreement in terms of communication skill development, indicating the need for refinement in certain areas. The overall trend reflects a dominance of "agree" and "strongly agree" responses across the items, suggesting that both teachers and parents perceive the group counseling program as effective in fostering children's social development in early education settings.



Graph 1. Percentage of Responses on the Effectiveness of Group Counseling in Enhancing Early Childhood Students' Social Relationships

Discussion

Group counseling, by design, promotes positive interaction, self-expression, empathy, and peer engagement among students (Corey, 2016). This aligns with findings from Reschly & Christenson (2022), which emphasize that structured social interaction builds students' trust and confidence in navigating peer relationships. Moreover, such programs create a supportive classroom climate where students feel heard and understood, essential for healthy socio-emotional growth (Colapinto, 2019).

In addition, the group counseling model aids in improving students' discipline and classroom behavior. When implemented consistently, it enhances classroom harmony and encourages students to respect boundaries (American School Counselor Association, 2014). Teachers are able to utilize assessment and reflection tools to better understand students' individual needs and to adjust interventions accordingly. This is crucial in early childhood education where emotional and social skills are developing rapidly.

Quantitative analysis using structured questionnaires has proven effective in measuring perceptions and behavioral outcomes. The statistical data gathered provided objective insights into the impact of the group counseling program, reaffirming its alignment with developmental goals of early learners. Thus, this study supports the integration of structured group counseling as an essential strategy to enhance social relationships, communication, and self-confidence in early childhood educational settings.

Conclusion

Based on the results and discussion above, it can be concluded that the evaluation of the effectiveness of group counseling programs in improving social relationships among early childhood students has a significant impact. The majority of respondents agreed that the group counseling program is highly effective as a learning tool to enhance children's learning interest, creativity, and academic performance. This study aimed to evaluate how effective group counseling is in fostering social relationships among students in early childhood education settings. The findings show that the program is effective in improving students' social interactions. A quantitative method with a onegroup pretest-posttest experimental design was used to assess the effectiveness of the group counseling program. In the experimental group that received the intervention, students showed a significant improvement in communication skills, peer interaction, and relationship-building. In contrast, the control group, which did not receive the intervention, demonstrated no significant change in these aspects. This study is expected to support the development of more effective counseling programs in early childhood education institutions, as such programs can help students acquire social skills, build healthy peer relationships, and enhance the quality of social interactions in early learning environments..

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