Chapter 5
Filial Play Therapy Process of a Malaysian Parent

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, some parents leave the duties of child rearing to their domestic helpers. This can cause much trauma to a preschool child who has been raised by his domestic helper if the domestic helper leaves the family. The domestic helper was the primary caregiver of the child; hence, when the domestic helper leaves, the child feels that his “mother” has abandoned him. This in turn cause the child to respond via very negative acting out behaviors. This chapter presents a case study using filial play therapy as a therapeutic intervention for a pre-school child and his mother after the domestic helper left the family. This therapeutic process enhanced the bonding between the child and his mother. As a result of better bonding, the child’s negative behaviors subsided.

INTRODUCTION

Great emphasis has been placed on the importance of being a multicultural counseling in the new millennium. A multicultural aware counselor is, in the context of psychotherapies, a type of therapy which takes into account both racial and ethnic diversities of the client, further taking into consideration their sexual orientation, spirituality, ability and any disabilities, social class and economics, and the potential for any cultural bias by the practitioner. The American Psychological Association (2017) defines multicultural counseling as counseling patients while taking into consideration their cultural beliefs and how that may affect their treatment. Multicultural counseling is especially important to Malaysian mental health practitioners because Malaysia is a multicultural country that comprises mostly of three main races: Malays (who account for more than 50% of the population), Chinese (who comprise of roughly 25% of the population), and Indians (around 10% of the population). Other ethnic groups do exist within the country as well such as people from Indigenous tribes and those of Eurasian decent (WorldAtlas, 2017).

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One aspect of human development is universal is the attachment and bonding process between infants and children and their primary caregiver. As John Bowlby stated, “The bond that a child develops to the person who cares for him in his early years is the foundation for his future relationships. (Bowlby, 1979)

However, there are times when secure attachment between an infant and his mother is not created due to a myriad of reasons. One such reason here in Malaysia is when the mother, consciously or unconsciously relinquishes caregiver of the child to their live-in domestic helper. This in turn creates a situation whereby the domestic helper becomes the “mother” figure in the child’s life and the birth mother becomes a secondary caregiver. Such a family dynamic becomes detrimental to the child when the caregiver leaves the family during the child’s pre-school years. The child feels abandoned. This often leads to oppositional behaviors in the child. At this point not only is grief therapy needed for the child, but attachment therapy for the mother and child.

One form of child – parent attachment therapy that has proven to be successful in several countries with diverse populations is filial play therapy.

In 1964, Bernard Guerney formally introduced filial therapy to help children who experience behavioral and emotional issues. In filial therapy, parents are trained to be therapeutic agents by the therapist and have to engage in twice-weekly 20 minutes of non-directive play with the target child. Filial therapy has been tested as an effective method across various cultures, family structures, and presenting issues. Filial therapy is coined as the golden therapy by Cornett and Bratton (2015) simply for the reason that it has yielded an abundance of valuable and long lasting benefits for parents and children. From the psychological perspective, filial therapy is a therapy that emphasizes the connection between parent and child in term of emotion, behavior, and understanding. The tool of the filial therapy is playing. Play and children is a crucial combination. The child needs to play to help the growth and develop in a healthy situation. Children also use play to find solutions to problems. Play can be healing too in some cases that involve emotion and behavior issue. In addition, as an adult parent will understand how a child views the world by watching and joining in their play. Filial therapy also enhances parents parenting skill. Parents have the opportunity to learn special skills for the play sessions which these skills might be transferred to daily life practice. The main skills are structuring skills, emphatics skills, imaginative play skills, and limit setting skills. One might say that filial therapy will give benefit to both child and parent.

The effectiveness of filial therapy with a variety of populations was supported by researches, such as those with Hispanic parents (Sangganjanavanich, Cook, & Rangel-Gomez, 2010), African American parents (Solis, Meyers, & Varjas, 2004), Iranian single parents (Alivandi Vafa & Khaidzir Hj. Ismail, 2009), Jamaican parents (Edwards, Ladner, & White, 2007), foster children (Cornett & Bratton, 2014), married couples (Bavin-Hoffman, Jennings, & Landreth, 1996), and incarcerated fathers (Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998). With so much international success of the use of filial play therapy with families throughout the world, it is hypothesized that child-centered filial play therapy will be beneficial to children and families of Malaysia.

A one-shot single case study was recently conducted in Malaysia as a pilot study to gather information of the child – center filial play therapy experience with a Chinese- Malaysian five- year old boy and his mother and compare the experience to other filial therapy studies throughout the world.

Research Objectives

There were three research objectives explored in this study.
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