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The effect of animal food match play therapy on anxiety levels of children aged 5-6 years experiencing hospitalization

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Abstract

Background: Hospitalization in preschool children often causes anxiety due to unfamiliar environments, medical procedures, and separation from parents. Anxiety that is not managed properly may affect children's psychological well-being and recovery process. One non-pharmacological intervention that can be used to reduce anxiety in children is play therapy.

Purpose: This study aimed to determine the effect of Animal Food Match play therapy on anxiety levels of children aged 5–6 years who experience hospitalization.

Method: This study used a quantitative research design with a pre-experimental approach using a one-group pretest-posttest design. The research was conducted in the pediatric inpatient ward of Imanuel Hospital, Bandar Lampung. The sample consisted of 30 children aged 5–6 years who experienced hospitalization and were selected using Purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using an anxiety observation questionnaire. Data analysis was performed using the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test with a significance level of 95% ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Results: The results showed that the mean anxiety score before intervention was 1.23 and decreased to 0.03 after the intervention, with a mean difference of 1.20. The Wilcoxon test showed a Z value of -5.108 and a p-value of 0.001 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores.

Conclusion: Animal Food Match play therapy has a significant effect in reducing anxiety levels in children aged 5–6 years who experience hospitalization.

Suggestion: Nurses are recommended to apply play therapy as a nursing intervention to reduce anxiety in hospitalized children.

Keywords: Animal Food Match; Anxiety; Children; Hospitalization; Play therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Hospitalization is a condition in which a child must undergo treatment in a hospital for a certain period. For preschool children, hospitalization can be a stressful experience because they are faced with a new environment, medical procedures, and separation from their usual daily activities. These conditions often trigger anxiety responses in children (World Health Organization, 2022).

Preschoolers are children who have not yet entered school and can also be called early childhood. Children between the ages of 3 and 6 years old begin to pretend. During this phase, children

experience growth and development (Kelrey & Hatala, 2022). Anxiety and fear due to being hospitalized are still significant problems in nursing services. One of the nursing actions that can minimize stress due to being hospitalized is by playing (Herman & Sari, 2025). Children aged 5–6 years are still in the developmental stage where emotional regulation and adaptation abilities are still developing. When hospitalized, children may experience fear, anxiety, and discomfort due to unfamiliar medical environments and procedures (Erikson, 1963). If this anxiety is not handled properly, it may affect the

The Effect of Animal Food Match Play Therapy on Anxiety Levels of Children Aged 5–6 Years Experiencing Hospitalization

child's psychological condition and recovery process (Hockenberry & Wilson, 2018).

Play therapy is one of the nursing interventions that can help reduce anxiety in children. Through play activities, children can express emotions, divert attention from fear, and adapt more easily to the hospital environment (Salsabila et al., 2022). Several studies have shown that play therapy is effective in reducing anxiety in hospitalized children (Fajariyah, Mahfudah, & Yuniarsih, 2024). Some hospitalized children experience anxiety. Anxiety is an unexplained fear accompanied by feelings of loss of life (Stuart, 2019; Sidauruk & Tambunan, 2023). Children's reactions to anxiety include crying, remaining silent, hugging their mothers, asking to go home, and being uncooperative when doctors or nurses perform procedures (Agustina, Tambunan, Sari, Mustaqimah, Annisa, Gerungan, & Rini, 2023; Marbun & Tambunan, 2023).

Previous research has demonstrated the effectiveness of play therapy in reducing anxiety in children. For example, other research reported that play therapy significantly reduced anxiety levels in hospitalized children (Abdi, Karamoozian, Lotfilou, Gholami, Shaterian, Niasar, & Jandaghian-Bidgoli, 2025). Puzzle play therapy was effective in reducing anxiety among preschool children during hospitalization (Satriana, Mulfiyanti, & Megawati, 2023). Play therapy to build a process between children where caregivers use the power of play therapy to build children to prevent or overcome psychosocial difficulties so that children can express

themselves and solve problems and achieve optimal growth and development (Kumalasari, Devi, Rasmita, Hatala, Widiyastuti, Torano, & Tambunan, 2023; Oktiawati, Khodijah, & Dewi, 2017)

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a quantitative research design with a pre-experimental approach using a one-group pretest-posttest design. The study was conducted in the pediatric inpatient ward of Imanuel Hospital, Bandar Lampung.

The population in this study were children aged 5–6 years who were hospitalized in the pediatric ward. The sample consisted of 30 respondents, selected using the purposive sampling technique.

Inclusion criteria included: Children aged 5–6 years, children undergoing hospitalization in the pediatric ward, children accompanied by parents during treatment and children willing to participate in the study. The research instrument used was an anxiety observation questionnaire to measure children's anxiety levels before and after the intervention. Data collection was carried out in two stages: Pre-test, measuring anxiety levels before play therapy. Post-test, measuring anxiety levels after the Animal Food Match play therapy intervention.

Normality testing was conducted using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which showed that the data were not normally distributed ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was used to analyze the difference between pre-test and post-test scores with a significance level of 95% ($\alpha = 0.05$).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Table Univariate Analysis Results (N=30)

Variable	Results N / Mean $\pm$ SD	P-value
Anxiety Level Before Therapy	1.23 $\pm$ 0.430 (1–2)	
Anxiety Level After Therapy	0.03 $\pm$ 0.183 (0–1)	
Effect of Animal Food Match Play Therapy	Mean difference = 1.20; Z = -5.108	0.001

Based on Table , the mean anxiety level of children before being given Animal Food Match play therapy among children aged 5–6 years who were hospitalized was 1.23 with a standard deviation of 0.430, a minimum value of 1, and a maximum value of 2 from 30 respondents. This result indicates that most children experienced anxiety before the play therapy intervention was provided. Based on Table 3, the mean anxiety level of children after being

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The Effect of Animal Food Match Play Therapy on Anxiety Levels of Children Aged 5–6 Years Experiencing Hospitalization

given Animal Food Match play therapy decreased to 0.03 with a standard deviation of 0.183, a minimum value of 0, and a maximum value of 1 from 30 respondents. This finding shows that after the play therapy intervention, the anxiety level of children during hospitalization decreased. Furthermore, Table 4 shows the results of the Wilcoxon test, which obtained a Z value of -5.108 with a p-value of 0.001 ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that there is a significant effect of Animal Food Match play therapy on the anxiety level of children aged 5–6 years during hospitalization. Therefore, it can be concluded that Animal Food Match play therapy is effective in reducing anxiety levels in hospitalized children.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that Animal Food Match play therapy can significantly reduce anxiety levels in children experiencing hospitalization. Before the intervention, the average anxiety score of children was 1.23, indicating mild to moderate anxiety levels. After the intervention, the average score decreased to 0.03, showing a significant reduction in anxiety levels.

Hospitalization can trigger anxiety in children due to unfamiliar environments, medical procedures, and limited physical activities. Children in the preschool age group are particularly vulnerable to experiencing anxiety because their coping mechanisms and emotional regulation are still developing (Erikson, 1963).

Play therapy is widely recognized as an effective non-pharmacological intervention for reducing anxiety in children. Play therapy allows children to express their emotions, divert attention from stressful situations, and develop a sense of security during hospitalization (Hockenberry & Wilson, 2018).

The results of this study are consistent with previous other research reported that block play therapy significantly reduced anxiety levels in preschool children during hospitalization (Martasih, Sari, & Prawesti, 2025). Coloring play therapy was effective in reducing anxiety among hospitalized children aged 3–6 years (Sari, Pordaningsih, Erwinsyah, & Prasetya, 2023).

Other studies have also shown that various forms of play therapy, including puzzle games and interactive activities, can effectively reduce anxiety levels in hospitalized children (Satriana et al., 2023; Halimah, Maryatun, & Ratrinaningsih, 2024). Play therapy interventions significantly reduced anxiety levels in hospitalized children through engaging and interactive activities (Abdi et al., 2025).

Animal Food Match play therapy works as a distraction technique that shifts children's attention away from fear and medical procedures. Engaging

activities can stimulate cognitive development while also creating a relaxing and enjoyable environment for children (Salsabila, Anggraini, Alifatin, & Aini, 2022).

During the intervention, children actively participated in the game and appeared more relaxed and comfortable. Interaction between children, parents, and nurses also created a supportive environment that helped reduce anxiety. Therefore, it can be assumed that Animal Food Match play therapy is effective because it combines entertainment, cognitive stimulation, and emotional support that are appropriate for preschool-aged children.

CONCLUSION

The results showed that the mean anxiety score before intervention was 1.23, while after the Animal Food Match play therapy intervention it decreased to 0.03. The Wilcoxon test results showed p-value = 0.001 ($p < 0.05$), indicating a significant difference between anxiety levels before and after intervention. Therefore, it can be concluded that Animal Food Match play therapy has a significant effect in reducing anxiety levels in children aged 5–6 years who experience hospitalization.

SUGGESTION

Nurses are expected to apply play therapy interventions such as Animal Food Match as part of pediatric nursing care to help reduce anxiety in hospitalized children. Hospitals are also encouraged to provide play therapy facilities to support children's psychological well-being during treatment.

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The Effect of Animal Food Match Play Therapy on Anxiety Levels of Children Aged 5–6 Years Experiencing Hospitalization

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The Effect of Animal Food Match Play Therapy on Anxiety Levels of Children Aged 5–6 Years Experiencing Hospitalization

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