

## Research Article

## **Play Counseling Approach in Overcoming Academic Anxiety among Lower Grade Elementary School Students**

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### **Abstract**

Academic anxiety is a common challenge for lower-grade elementary school students, often triggered by academic tasks, examinations, or teacher evaluations. Such anxiety can diminish concentration, reduce motivation, and hinder academic performance if left unaddressed. To address this issue, schools require interventions that are developmentally appropriate and effective. One promising approach is play counseling, which utilizes play as a natural medium for children to express feelings, confront fears, and develop coping strategies in a safe environment. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of structured play counseling in reducing academic anxiety while enhancing students' motivation and self-confidence. A qualitative literature review method was employed, drawing upon academic articles, reports, and publications from 2015–2025 obtained through reputable databases including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and SpringerLink. Articles focusing on play therapy, counseling, and academic anxiety among elementary school children were systematically analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that play counseling, particularly through non-directive play, cognitive-behavioral play therapy (CBPT), and child-centered play therapy (CCPT), significantly reduces academic anxiety by providing children with a safe medium for symbolic expression. Moreover, play counseling fosters motivation and builds academic self-confidence by reframing learning as enjoyable exploration rather than stressful evaluation. Case studies demonstrate improvements in classroom participation, test-taking resilience, and peer interaction. These results highlight play counseling as an effective psychosocial



intervention that supports both emotional well-being and academic outcomes for young learners. The study contributes to developing adaptive play-based counseling strategies suitable for Indonesian elementary school settings.

**Keywords:** Play Counseling, Academic Anxiety, Elementary School Students.

## INTRODUCTION

Academic anxiety is one of the most common psychological pressures experienced by lower-grade elementary school students, particularly when they face assignments, examinations, or new learning transitions (Mammarella et al., 2021). Such anxiety can decrease concentration and learning motivation while also triggering avoidance behaviors toward school-related activities (Mammarella et al., 2021). In line with this, psychosocial interventions in elementary school settings are essential as preventive measures against academic and emotional difficulties (Verywell Health, 2022). One approach that has increasingly gained attention is play therapy, where children can express and understand their feelings through the medium of play (Wikipedia, 2025).

Academic anxiety is a psychological condition that arises when individuals, particularly students, experience feelings of tension, worry, and lack of confidence in dealing with academic demands such as exams, assignments, or presentations. This form of anxiety is often triggered by high academic pressure, expectations from parents and the surrounding environment, as well as the fear of failure. If not properly managed, academic anxiety can reduce learning motivation, disrupt concentration, and negatively impact academic performance. Recent studies have shown that academic anxiety has a significant correlation with academic stress and low self-confidence when facing academic evaluations (Pramukti et al., 2020).

In addition to affecting cognitive aspects, academic anxiety also influences emotional and physical conditions, such as the emergence of insomnia, headaches, and mood changes. Psychological interventions such as counseling, relaxation techniques, and the enhancement of coping strategies can help reduce the level of academic anxiety. Recent research also highlights the importance of social support from peers, lecturers, and family in overcoming academic anxiety, as emotional support can strengthen students' self-confidence and resilience (Putri & Wideasavitri, 2021). Therefore, understanding the triggers as well as the strategies for managing academic anxiety is

crucial to help students achieve their academic potential optimally.

Play therapy has consistently demonstrated its effectiveness in reducing anxiety and enhancing children's emotional well-being (Verywell Health, 2022). For instance, non-directive play therapy has been found effective in lowering anxiety in cases of family-related stress (Hateli, 2022). Moreover, interventions based on cognitive-behavioral play therapy (CBPT) have been shown to effectively reduce school-related anxiety and behavioral problems in elementary school students (Shayganfard, 2024). This suggests that play-based interventions can be cognitively and behaviorally structured to specifically address children's psychological difficulties (Shayganfard, 2024).

Furthermore, research applying cognitive-behavioral play therapy has reported a decrease in social anxiety and improvements in academic self-efficacy, especially among students with learning difficulties (Shabani, Sadoughi, & Samkhaniani, 2024). This emphasizes that the use of play media, when combined with cognitive-behavioral approaches, not only alleviates anxiety but also strengthens self-confidence in academic contexts (Shabani et al., 2024). Therefore, structured play activities can serve as a bridge between emotional expression and the development of academic skills (Shabani et al., 2024).

In addition, child-centered play therapy (CCPT) has also been shown to improve academic achievement and reduce performance-related anxiety in both at-risk and typically performing students (Blanco et al., 2015). For instance, a long-term CCPT intervention conducted over 18 weeks demonstrated significant improvements in the academic performance of second-grade students (Blanco et al., 2015). This highlights that providing supportive, structured play environments can enhance academic outcomes while minimizing anxiety related to academic evaluations (Blanco et al., 2015).

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of play-based approaches—particularly CBPT and CCPT—few studies have specifically explored the use of play counseling to address academic anxiety among lower-grade elementary school students in Indonesia. Considering that academic anxiety can negatively affect both emotional well-being and academic achievement, the development of play-based counseling interventions is urgently needed.

While several prior studies have confirmed the effectiveness of play therapy in reducing general and social anxiety (Bashash, Moghtader, & Pourshaban, 2022;

Shayganfard, 2024; Shabani et al., 2024), research focusing specifically on anxiety related to tasks, grading, or academic performance among lower-grade elementary students remains limited, particularly in mainstream Indonesian schools. Moreover, the integration of emotional and academic aspects within the framework of play counseling still requires further investigation.

Based on the background and urgency discussed above, this study aims to: (1) evaluate the effectiveness of structured play counseling in reducing academic anxiety among lower-grade elementary school students, and (2) explore the impact of play counseling on students' motivation and academic self-confidence. It is expected that the findings of this study will contribute to the development of relevant and adaptive play-based psychosocial intervention programs in elementary school settings.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative research approach with a literature review design. The literature review method was chosen because the objective of the study is to examine, analyze, and synthesize previous research related to the effectiveness of play counseling in reducing academic anxiety among lower-grade elementary school students. This approach allows the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of the concepts, theories, and empirical findings, which can then be used to construct a conceptual framework (Snyder, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Data Sources**

The data sources for this study consisted of scientific articles, research reports, and academic publications relevant to the research topic. Data were obtained from reputable national and international journals, as well as electronic databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, PubMed, and SpringerLink. The inclusion criteria were: (1) articles published between 2015–2025, (2) written in either Indonesian or English, and (3) directly addressing play counseling, academic anxiety, or psychological interventions in elementary school children. Articles that did not meet academic standards or lacked relevance to the research focus were excluded (Fink, 2019).

### **Data Collection Techniques**

Data collection was conducted through a systematic search process using specific

keywords such as “play therapy”, “counseling”, “academic anxiety”, “elementary school students”, and their equivalents in Indonesian. Following the search, a screening process was carried out to identify articles that matched the inclusion criteria. Furthermore, a critical evaluation was conducted to assess the methodological quality and relevance of each article (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016).

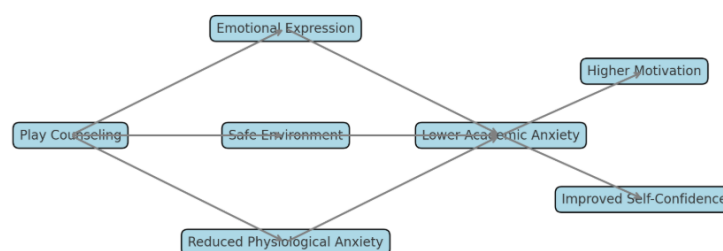
## Data Analysis Method

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Information extracted from the literature was coded based on recurring themes, such as the type of play counseling applied (non-directive, CBPT, CCPT), aspects of academic anxiety addressed, and intervention effectiveness. The thematic analysis followed these steps: (1) reading and familiarizing with the literature, (2) coding key concepts, (3) grouping themes based on recurring patterns, and (4) synthesizing and presenting the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was chosen to provide a structured and comprehensive synthesis of the contributions of play counseling in reducing academic anxiety among lower-grade elementary school students.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Effectiveness of Play Counseling in Reducing Academic Anxiety

Impact of Play Counseling on Academic Anxiety, Motivation, and Self-Confidence



**Figure 1. Impact of Play Counseling on Academic Anxiety, Motivation and Self-Confidence**

The effectiveness of play counseling in reducing academic anxiety becomes clearer when one considers the lived experiences of children in the early years of school. At this developmental stage, many children are unable to fully verbalize their internal

struggles. Anxiety about reading aloud, solving math problems, or being evaluated by a teacher often manifests not through words but through silence, avoidance, or even physical symptoms like stomach aches and headaches. Play counseling addresses this gap by creating a symbolic medium through which children can communicate their fears. In the playroom, toys, drawings, and role-play scenarios become a child's language. As Landreth (2016) argues, play is not merely entertainment but the child's most natural form of expression. Within a structured counseling framework, this form of expression allows suppressed anxiety to surface in a safe way.

The therapeutic space also provides a sense of security that the classroom may lack. A child who trembles when called to the blackboard often feels trapped in the expectation of performance. But in play counseling, the same child might re-enact the classroom situation with dolls, puppets, or board games where mistakes carry no consequences. The counselor's acceptance and non-judgmental stance reassure the child that failure is not dangerous. Over time, this atmosphere lowers the intensity of anxiety, as shown in the findings of Keles and Yurtal (2020), who observed significant improvements in children's willingness to engage with academic challenges after several sessions of play therapy.

A vivid case that illustrates this comes from the study by Havighurst et al. (2020). In their intervention, a group of primary school students who consistently avoided test situations participated in eight weeks of structured play counseling. Initially, these children displayed acute anxiety symptoms—nausea before class, refusal to write tests, and crying when called on. During therapy, they were encouraged to act out test scenarios through playful activities: answering “pretend” questions in a game, drawing their fears of tests, and then reimagining those fears with humorous twists. Over time, their physiological symptoms decreased, and teachers reported that these students began attending school on exam days without protest. One boy in particular, who previously ran out of the classroom during quizzes, was able by the end of the program to complete a short written test while expressing confidence that “it was just like the game we played.”

Huang et al. (2022) further confirmed this effect in their study, where children who received play-based counseling not only reported lower anxiety scores but also demonstrated greater attentiveness during class. Teachers noted that formerly withdrawn students began participating more frequently, and their avoidance behaviors

were replaced by tentative, yet steadily growing, engagement. The narrative emerging from these findings is that play counseling allows children to symbolically confront the threatening aspects of school life, rehearse adaptive coping strategies in a safe environment, and then gradually transfer those strategies to real academic situations.

Through these cases, it becomes evident that play counseling does not simply distract children from their anxiety but fundamentally alters their emotional responses to academic stressors. By providing a safe space where fears are externalized and reinterpreted, play counseling gradually reduces both the emotional and physiological dimensions of academic anxiety, enabling children to face school tasks with resilience and greater calm.

### **The Impact of Play Counseling on Academic Motivation and Self-Confidence**

The impact of play counseling on children's motivation and self-confidence in academic settings becomes evident when one observes how the intervention shifts their emotional orientation toward learning. For many children in the lower grades of elementary school, academic challenges are often framed as threatening encounters rather than opportunities for growth. Reading aloud, solving arithmetic problems, or presenting in front of the class can provoke avoidance behaviors that undermine motivation. Play counseling interrupts this cycle by reframing these activities in the language of play, which children instinctively associate with curiosity, safety, and enjoyment. In this way, learning begins to feel less like a judgmental test of competence and more like a creative exploration, gradually fostering intrinsic motivation to engage with academic tasks. Lin and Bratton (2015) observed that children who underwent structured play therapy were more likely to approach schoolwork with enthusiasm, treating it as an opportunity rather than an obligation.

The increase in self-confidence is closely tied to this shift. In play counseling sessions, children often rehearse real academic challenges in a symbolic and supportive setting. For instance, a counselor might use role-play games to simulate a classroom scenario where the child plays both the student and the teacher. Through this playful rehearsal, children not only gain familiarity with difficult situations but also experience mastery in a low-stakes context. Huang et al. (2022) demonstrated that such role-play exercises led to measurable gains in children's academic self-efficacy, with students reporting greater belief in their capacity to solve problems and persevere in the face of

difficulty. This growing sense of competence is then transferred back into the classroom, where children feel more confident raising their hands, tackling new assignments, and presenting their ideas in front of peers.

A concrete case reported by Perry and Landreth (2019) illustrates this dynamic. In their study, a young girl in second grade, who initially refused to read aloud due to fear of embarrassment, engaged in a series of play counseling sessions involving puppet theater. In the sessions, she would use puppets to “read” stories, gradually shifting from hiding behind the characters to taking pride in her own storytelling voice. After several weeks, her teacher noted that she began volunteering to read in class, smiling afterward and saying, “It’s not scary anymore.” This transformation highlights how play not only reduces fear but instills a new sense of agency and pride in learning.

Social interaction within play counseling also contributes to enhanced confidence. Yeo et al. (2021) found that children engaged in collaborative play counseling sessions developed stronger peer support networks. By engaging in cooperative games, they learned to celebrate small successes together, which reinforced a sense of belonging and competence. This relational dimension of play created a ripple effect: children who previously hesitated to participate academically felt more supported by classmates and thus more willing to take academic risks.

One striking example of this comes from a case study in a South Korean elementary school, where students with low academic confidence were placed in group play counseling sessions involving collaborative problem-solving games. At first, the children avoided participation, claiming they “couldn’t do it.” However, as the group dynamic encouraged shared effort and collective celebration of achievements, the children’s self-talk shifted from avoidance (“I can’t”) to determination (“Let’s try again”). Teachers reported that these same students began applying this attitude in their math classes, where they persisted longer on challenging problems and celebrated progress rather than fearing mistakes.

Taken together, these examples reveal that play counseling strengthens children’s motivation and academic self-confidence not by artificially rewarding achievement, but by cultivating a mindset that views learning as safe, enjoyable, and possible. Through play, children discover their own ability to succeed, and this discovery provides them with the courage to face academic challenges with resilience and optimism.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that play counseling is an effective approach to alleviating academic anxiety in lower-grade elementary students. By utilizing play as a therapeutic medium, children are able to externalize their fears, reduce emotional and physiological stress, and gradually build resilience toward academic challenges. Furthermore, structured play counseling strengthens students' intrinsic motivation and academic self-confidence, ultimately contributing to better engagement and learning outcomes.

## Practical Suggestions

Teachers and school counselors are encouraged to integrate play counseling sessions into the learning environment as a preventive and remedial intervention for academic anxiety. Classrooms can adopt structured play-based activities that simulate academic challenges in a supportive, non-threatening manner. In addition, collaboration between educators, counselors, and parents is crucial to sustain children's confidence and motivation beyond the playroom.

## Research Recommendations

Future research should focus on implementing experimental or longitudinal studies to measure the long-term effectiveness of play counseling in diverse school contexts, especially within Indonesian educational settings. Comparative studies between individual and group play counseling, as well as cross-cultural investigations, would provide deeper insights into the adaptability of this method. Further exploration into integrating digital or technology-assisted play tools may also expand the relevance of play counseling in modern educational environments.

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