

Adlerian Sandtray Therapy in Counseling: Exploring the Dynamics of Abuse among Female Adolescents Under Shelter Protection in Malaysia.

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Abstract

Adolescent abuse is a profound mental health crisis that severely disrupts identity formation and internal working models of relationships. Standard verbal psychotherapy often struggles to access deeply encoded, non-verbal trauma narratives due to defensive avoidance or cognitive numbing. This study explored the lived experiences of abused female adolescents using Adlerian Sandtray Therapy integrated within therapeutic counseling sessions to examine how polyvictimization is symbolically externalized and processed. Utilizing a qualitative multiple-case study design, five female adolescents (aged 13–18) residing under state-regulated shelter protection in Peninsular Malaysia were selected through purposive sampling. Data was generated from unstructured, participant-led interviews embedded directly within a sequential counseling protocol. Thematic analysis was executed using Braun and Clarke's framework, epistemologically sensitized by Adlerian constructs of lifestyle, inferiority feelings, and perceived belonging. Two primary themes emerged from the qualitative analysis: (1) Metaphorical projections: Symbols of perpetrators and power asymmetry, and (2). Dynamics of abuse experienced. AST functions as a powerful counseling "third language" that circumvents verbal resistance, offering a safe, non-threatening medium for the externalization of abuse dynamics, cognitive re-authoring, and psychological well-being..

Keywords: Adlerian Sandtray Therapy (AST), Counseling Sessions, Symbolics Externalization, Dynamics of Abuse, Female Adolescent, Shelter Protection

Introduction

Adolescent interpersonal abuse remains a critical global public health concern, with global estimates indicating that approximately 1 in 2 children aged 12 to 17 endure some form of violence annually. In the Malaysian socio-cultural landscape, the escalating statistics of child abuse present a severe threat to the psychosocial, emotional, and neurocognitive development of vulnerable youth (King et al., 2019; Ramalingam & Alavi, 2021). Interpersonal abuse inflicted by primary caregivers and significant figures does not merely cause transient distress; it structurally compromises brain development, destabilizes affective regulation, and fractures interpersonal trust. As highlighted by global bodies such as UNICEF (2022), abused adolescents exhibit a significantly heightened vulnerability to severe emotional dysregulation, self-harming behaviors, and suicidal ideation, demanding precise and well-structured mental health interventions inside institutional settings.

In Malaysia, child maltreatment encompasses physical violence, sexual exploitation, profound emotional abuse, and systematic neglect, as codified under the Child Act 2001 (Act 611) (Muda & Alwi, 2012). Crucially, these modalities of abuse rarely transpire in isolation; rather, they present as polyvictimization, a complex, concurrent, and layered web of maltreatment that obliterates the development of adolescents. Adolescents placed under state-regulated shelter protection represent an ultra-vulnerable echelon of this population, where the residential home functions as a critical systemic space for rehabilitation and safety. Their psychological landscapes remain heavily compounded by past histories of chronic betrayal, familial disruption, and neglect. According to the National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS, 2023), one in six Malaysian children experiences debilitating mental health issues, with adolescent girls demonstrating the highest rates of suicidal thoughts, anxiety, and depressive disorders.

Despite the acute need for intensive psychological intervention within protective residential settings, conventional counseling modalities are heavily limited by their dependency on verbal disclosure. Severe maltreatment, from a neurobiological perspective, profoundly disrupts narrative coherence; it down-regulates Broca's area (the brain's

speech center) while hyperactivating the limbic system, trapping the survivor in a state of pre-verbal or non-verbal terror. This neurocognitive reality provides a strong methodological justification for introducing non-verbal mediums within the therapeutic process. Consequently, forcing abused adolescents to verbally articulate their painful experiences during standard intake interviews often triggers intense resistance, shame, or intense emotional distress (Rauch et al., 1996; van der Kolk, 2014). Therefore, a tactile and visual sensory intervention is clinically required to bypass these verbal defenses and explore deep-seated internal conflicts (Rauch et al., 1996; van der Kolk, 2014).

In modern educational and institutional frameworks, school-based and residential counseling services have transitioned from mere academic advising into holistic, proactive psychological support aimed at fostering student resilience and developmental adaptation (Paslan et al., 2025). However, when young learners experience dense polyvictimization, the resulting psychological distress often manifests as severe academic disengagement and behavioral disruptions within their educational pathways (Kusumandari, 2025). In Adlerian psychology, these deep-seated feelings of inferiority directly impair a student's social interest and capacity to learn (Ahmad & Amin Nudin 2022). Consequently, there is an urgent need to incorporate expressive, nonverbal modalities such as sandtray therapy into the institutional counseling agenda to bypass these verbal barriers (Paslan et al., 2025). By spatializing their inner worlds through symbols, such counseling interventions do not merely serve a remedial purpose but act as a vital form of psycho-educational re-education, helping vulnerable youth process their adverse histories to enhance their psychological well-being and safely re-engage with their learning environments (Kusumandari, 2025; Paslan et al., 2025).

To bridge this practical gap within the educational and institutional care framework, this case study introduces Adlerian Sandtray Therapy (AST), an expressive, projective, and multisensory psychotherapeutic modality grounded in the principles of play-based healing and integrated directly within sequential counseling sessions. Historically derived from Margaret Lowenfeld's "World Technique" (Lowenfeld, 1935) and later conceptualized through a Jungian framework by Dora Kalff, sandtray therapy allows clients to construct three-dimensional symbolic worlds using sand, water, and miniatures. Lowenfeld discovered that deep emotional connections could be established through these objects and the sandtray without relying on verbal communication. Within the counseling process, the integration of tactile and visual stimulation provides a "bottom-up" sensory experience that directly accesses deep-seated, non-verbal memories, successfully bypassing the verbal defenses of the executive cortex. This flexible, integrative, and projective modality functions as the client's unique symbolic language inside the counseling room (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022).

Previous studies have firmly established the effectiveness of sandtray therapy in supporting emotional well-being and behavioral adjustment. For example, Bratton et al. (2005) reported that sandtray therapy exerts a significant positive effect on adolescents' behavioral and emotional functioning. The inherently non-verbal nature of this therapy allows abused adolescents to express their internal conflicts in a safe environment when conventional talk-therapy approaches fail (Landreth, 2012). Similarly, Tornero & Capella (2017) found that sandtray therapy helps adolescents process difficult interpersonal experiences indirectly within a highly supportive therapeutic atmosphere. Furthermore, sandtray therapy has been shown to improve self-esteem (Lee et al., 2018), assist individuals in addressing long-term effects of maltreatment such as emotional distress and depression (Ramsey & Zaporozhets, 2015) and reframe relational disruptions within a broader social context.

While international literature substantiates the efficacy of sandtray therapy, a distinct empirical gap remains in qualitative counseling literature. Most existing studies focus heavily on quantitative outcomes or younger cohorts, leaving a glaring omission regarding how polyvictimized older adolescents spatially organize and symbolically construct meaning around their abuse histories. Furthermore, there is a scarcity of research exploring expressive therapies within the specific socio-cultural context of Malaysian shelter protection settings.

Therefore, this study addresses the critical need for deeper insight into the lived experiences of abused adolescents residing under shelter protection, a population frequently overlooked in therapeutic research (Figley, 2002; Sprang et al., 2007). The objective of this qualitative multiple-case study is to explore the experiences of polyvictimized female adolescents under shelter protection in Malaysia, utilizing AST within the therapeutic counseling process. Specifically, this study aims to examine how these adolescents spatially organize and symbolically externalize the internal dynamics of abuse, illuminating how they interpret threat, internalize power asymmetry, and negotiate safety on their pathway toward holistic psychological well-being.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study integrates Adlerian Individual Psychology (Adler, 1956) with the Projective Sandtray Therapy Framework conceptualized by Homeyer and Sweeney (2022), operationalized directly within the active structural phases of the therapeutic counseling process. Rather than treating AST as an isolated assessment instrument, this study positions it as the primary non-verbal and projective medium within active counseling sessions to explore how female adolescents residing under shelter protection in Malaysia systematically utilize symbols to externalize and process the intricate internal dynamics of abuse.

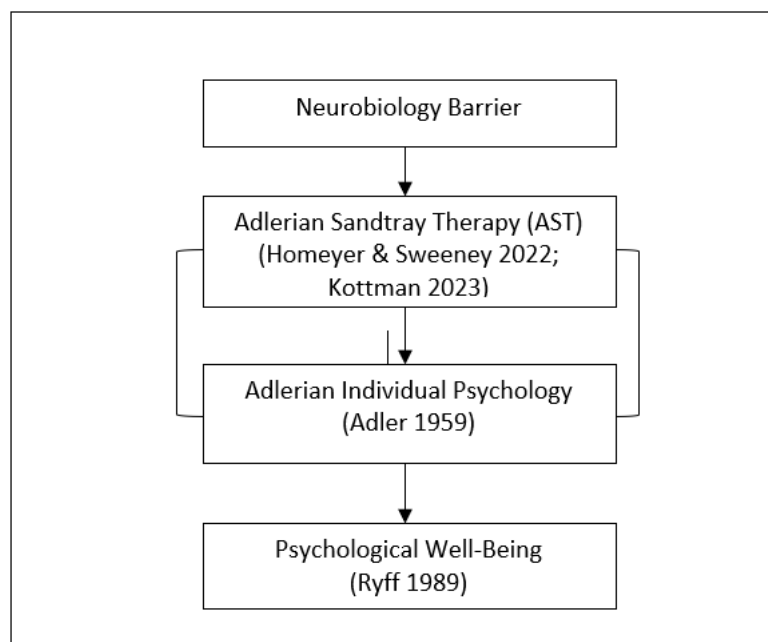


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Adlerian Sandtray Therapy (AST) in Counseling for Abused Female Adolescents Under Shelter Protection

This study integrates Adlerian Individual Psychology with Homeyer and Sweeney's sandtray framework to explore how female adolescents under shelter protection in Malaysia use symbols to process the dynamics of abuse. As illustrated in Figure 1, the theoretical framework follows sequential, vertical progression from clinical justification to therapeutic outcomes. The process begins by addressing the neurobiological barriers caused by severe interpersonal abuse. Chronic maltreatment disrupts verbal narrative coherence by downregulating the brain's speech center, trapping adolescents in defensive avoidance or cognitive numbing (van der Kolk, 2014).

To bypass these verbal blocks, the framework introduces Homeyer and Sweeney's (2022) sandtray protocol within active counseling sessions. Through a structured six-step sequence, tactile and visual engagement with miniatures establishes a secure "third language". This non-verbal medium allows participants to spatialize internal conflicts, power asymmetries, and perceived threats without the pressure of direct verbalization.

The concrete symbolic configurations created in the sandtray are subsequently analyzed through the interpretive lens of Adlerian Individual Psychology (Adler, 1956; Dinkmeyer, 1979). Guided by the four stages of the Adlerian counseling process, core constructs, specifically lifestyle, inferiority feelings, and perceived belonging, are utilized to decode the spatial arrangements into the client's phenomenological reality. Ultimately, this integrated approach provides a non-threatening pathway to achieve the core outcome: restoring the participants' holistic psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) and facilitating the cognitive re-authoring of their experiences.

3. Literature review

3.1 Adlerian Sandtray Therapy (AST) as a Medium for Symbolic Expression

Adlerian Sandtray Therapy (AST) provides adolescents with a non-verbal, symbolic medium to express deep emotions and process their past abuse histories that are difficult to talk about (Herce et al. 2024). By touching the sand and arranging miniature objects, participants can build three-dimensional worlds that show their internal psychological states. In qualitative research, these symbolic setups provide rich data to understand how adolescents organize and share their lived experiences. Instead of treating the sandtray just as a generic tool, this study views it as a core counseling medium for symbolic communication. Within this creative process, miniature objects often serve as "boundary objects" that represent complex relationships, authority figures, protective structures, or threats.

Furthermore, the placement of these objects in the tray reveals how the adolescent views safety and danger. For example, the distance between the miniatures, the use of fences or barriers, and the isolation of certain figures can symbolize the participant's feelings of vulnerability, control, and past oppression. This symbolic approach becomes stronger when combined with Adlerian Theory, which looks at the individual's lifestyle patterns, feelings of belonging, and self-concept (Roesler, 2019). When adolescents face chronic interpersonal abuse, they often form negative beliefs like feeling rejected, unworthy, or highly untrusting of others, which damages their social interest (Adler, 1956; Kottman, 2023). By using Adlerian concepts to analyze the data, the visual and spatial

layouts in the sandtray, such as where power figures are put, can be decoded clearly (Kottman, 2023). This connects the adolescent's symbolic language directly to her personal experiences and self-protective behaviors.

3.2 Dynamics of Abuse in Adolescents

Adolescents who experience continuous abuse from other people often face big problems in their emotions, identity building, and relationships (Kimmel & Weiner, 1985). The painful experiences during this growing-up stage can cause long-term emotional difficulties, such as low self-esteem, deep mistrust, and anger issues (May et al., 2022). Research shows that emotional abuse and neglect badly damage how these teenagers mix with their peers. This usually causes them to withdraw from social activities, avoid people who want to help, and feel lonely (Kamis & Copeland, 2024). Furthermore, being exposed to severe abuse makes adolescents feel isolated, which hurts their self-confidence and traps them in a defensive mindset.

However, these deep emotional and relationship problems are very hard to share through normal talking. Because of high shame, fear, or a limited vocabulary to explain their feelings, abused adolescents often stay quiet or give up during standard counseling sessions (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022; van der Kolk, 2014). Even though most researchers use standard interviews to study these experiences, there remains a significant gap in research on how older adolescents under shelter protection organize their feelings through space (Tornero & Capella, 2017; Hecce et al., 2024). Most current sandtray studies focus either on very young children or on numbers and behavior, leaving the actual meaning behind the symbols unstudied.

In this study, the term “dynamics of abuse” does not just mean the types of abuse acts. Instead, it means the complicated ways adolescents experience unfair power, feel threats, look for safety, and face identity problems. These hidden dynamics can be seen clearly through how they arrange miniature objects and build boundaries in the sandtray. This method gives a safe, non-verbal way to understand their real experiences without forcing them to talk.

4. Methodology

4.1 Study Design

This study used a qualitative multiple-case study design to explore the deeply embedded lived experiences of abused female adolescents living under shelter protection in Peninsular Malaysia. A case study design is well-suited to investigating a real-life phenomenon in its actual context, especially when the boundaries between the two are not clear (Yin, 2018). Although this research was conducted in a single setting, it defines each individual adolescent girl as an autonomous "case" within a shared bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This multiple-case structure is important because it allows for a more robust, compelling, and deeply contextualized exploration of the experiences across different individuals (Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). Every participant brings a highly individualized history of abuse, private logic, and unique subjective responses to the counseling process. A single-site design was intentionally chosen instead of multiple sites to maintain contextual consistency. This allowed a close, detailed exploration of the participants' symbolic expressions and relationships within the same environment. The institutional shelter served as a secure, regulated space where these protected adolescents could safely complete the sandtray tasks, thereby helping the researcher gather rich qualitative data.

The main purpose of this inquiry was to examine how these adolescents structurally internalize and symbolically externalize their abuse histories specifically physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and neglect and how these dynamics affect their psychological and interpersonal functioning.

This research was purely exploratory and interpretive, prioritizing a deep qualitative understanding over statistical generalization (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data were generated through unstructured, participant-led interviews embedded directly within sequential AST counseling sessions. This protocol allowed the cohort to project their experiences through a combination of spontaneous verbal talk and three-dimensional symbolic world constructions.

This practical approach enabled the study to capture nuanced insights into the adolescents' internal conflicts and meaning-making processes within a secure therapeutic relationship. Given the sensitive nature of abuse, combined with the legally protected environment of the residential shelter, a small purposive sample was methodologically appropriate for supporting deep engagement with each participant and facilitating a thorough analysis of the visual and spatial configurations in the sandtray (Patton, 2015).

4.2 Participants and Sampling

The study involved five female adolescents aged 13–18 years who were purposively sampled to ensure the selection of information-rich cases. Purposive sampling is widely recognized in qualitative research as a strategy designed to maximize data richness from a small, targeted cohort (Coyne, 1997; Patton, 2015). The inclusion criteria required participants to have experienced at least one form of abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, or neglect), resided in the shelter for more than four weeks, and were willing to participate in at least four sandtray

therapy sessions of at least 30 minutes each. Participants were also required to be fully committed to the therapy process and provide honest reflections during the counseling sessions.

The exclusion criteria included adolescents undergoing intensive psychiatric treatment, those with severe cognitive impairments, or individuals with clinical conditions that could compromise emotional safety during the research process. This sampling approach prioritized participant safety and ethical considerations while aligning with qualitative research standards that emphasize data depth over numbers (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

During the recruitment process, potential participants were initially identified by shelter administrators, who served as gatekeepers and assessed eligibility against the inclusion criteria (Broadhead & Rist, 1976). Eligible adolescents were then approached and given information about the purpose and steps of the study. Participation was completely voluntary, and the adolescents were informed that their decision would not affect the protection, services, or support they received at the shelter.

Institutional permission and participant assent were obtained before the study began. Because the study involved minors, written consent was also obtained from authorized shelter supervisors serving as legal guardians, ensuring ethical compliance and the protection of participants' rights. No adult participants were involved in this study. Of the seven adolescents approached, five consented and completed all required sessions. No participants withdrew once the data collection started. Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants.

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants

Participant	Age	Time Since Abuse (years)	Duration in Shelter (months)	Legal Status	Living Arrangement
P1	16	9	9	Under shelter protection	Shared
P4	16	6	10	Under shelter protection	Shared
P8	15	9	4	Under shelter protection	Shared
P9	16	7	4	Under shelter protection	Shared
P10	14	9	3	Under shelter protection	Shared

Participants were assigned anonymized codes (P1, P4, P8, P9, P10) to protect strict confidentiality. All participants had experienced multiple forms of maltreatment, including emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, and neglect, reflecting the complex and overlapping nature of abuse in their lived experiences. This context directly informs the interpretation of their spatial arrangements and symbolic expressions during the AST counseling sessions.

5. Data Collection

5.1 Sandtray Session Protocol and Procedures Fidelity

Data were collected through unstructured interviews integrated with sandtray therapy sessions conducted within the shelter environment. A standard sandtray setup equipped with a diverse range of miniature objects was utilized to support symbolic expression (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022). Each participant engaged in at least four sessions, with each session lasting 45 to 60 minutes. This timeframe allowed for a focused yet emotionally safe exploration of sensitive experiences.

The sandtray sessions were conducted by the researcher, who has completed formal training in sandtray therapy Level 1 to Level 3 and possesses extensive experience working with adolescents. To ensure procedural consistency and intervention fidelity across participants, a semi-structured session protocol was followed (Gearing et al., 2011), which included: a) a standardized introduction and orientation to the sandtray materials, b) uninterrupted facilitation of the client-led sandtray construction, and c) a reflective, collaborative processing phase.

All sessions were documented through audio and video recordings, complemented by detailed observational field notes that captured participants' interactions with the materials, miniature selections, spatial configurations, and nonverbal responses. Adherence to the protocol was periodically reviewed through these recordings and field notes. To strengthen observational rigor and interpretive reliability, selected session recordings were independently reviewed by two external experts with professional backgrounds in counseling and qualitative research.

5.2 Methodological Integration, Interviewing Protocol, and Reflexivity

Data generation integrated an unstructured, participant-led session protocol within the active and reflective processing phases of AST (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022). Broad, open-ended questions (e.g., “Can you tell me about your experiences living under shelter protection?” and “Can you represent your feelings using the miniatures?”) were dynamically adapted based on real-time miniature selections, spatial configurations, and affective displays (Patton, 2015). This tactile, symbolic synthesis bypassed conscious cognitive defenses to externalize non-verbal abuse narratives and generate rich qualitative data (Malchiodi, 2023).

Navigating this environment required managing the researcher's dual role as both the practicing counselor and the qualitative analyst (Creswell & Creswell 2018). To dissolve institutional power asymmetries and prevent the dual counselor-participant relationship from shaping the qualitative data, a strict reflexivity protocol was operationalized through specific field procedures: the researcher maintained a strictly non-directive clinical posture (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022), continuously reinforced the voluntariness of participation to counteract institutional compliance, and utilized post-session field journaling to isolate internal emotional resonance (Finlay, 2002; Tufford & Newman, 2012). These bracketed notes were actively cross-referenced during thematic analysis, serving as an internal validity check to ensure the emergent themes strictly mirrored the adolescents' authentic phenomenological realities (Pillow, 2003).

5.3 Strategy and Data Analysis

Data analysis was systematically executed using Thematic Analysis (TA), a six-phase framework conceptualized by (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019). Table 2 shows the analytic approach was deployed as a recursive, iterative process consisting of the following systematic phases:

Table 2 Thematic Analysis Framework

Phase	Phase Name	Analytical Activities and Application
1	Familiarization with the Data	Repeated reading of verbatim transcripts; immersion in behavioral field notes, reflexivity journals, and photographic/ video records of sandtrays.
2	Generating Initial Codes	Application of open and interpretive coding to data segments; capturing explicit verbal statements and latent, symbolic meanings of sandtray interactions.
3	Collating Codes into Potential Themes	Clustering conceptually related codes from transcripts and spatial sandtray patterns into broader candidate thematic categories.
4	Reviewing and Refining Themes	Rigorous evaluation of candidate themes against raw text extracts, photographic maps, and the entire dataset to ensure semantic coherence.
5	Defining and Naming Themes	Formulating conceptual definitions and structural names that capture the holistic configuration of adolescents lived experiences.
6	Producing the Report	Selection of illustrative data exemplars (verbal quotes and visual sandtray descriptions) and synthesizing findings into a grounded narrative.

To optimize the interpretive validity and methodological rigor of the analysis, a detailed, chronological audit trail was documented to map the progression from raw text to formalized codes, and ultimately to overarching themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance inter-coder reliability and challenge potential subjective bias, a comprehensive codebook was developed, and a second coder, an independent qualitative research expert, conducted an external audit of the coding architecture and candidate theme configurations. Any minor interpretive discrepancies were systematically debated and resolved through academic consensus.

Furthermore, while the initial stages of coding progressed inductively to prioritize the participants' raw narratives, Adlerian Theory constructs including lifestyle patterns, inferiority feelings, striving for significance, and damaged social interest were explicitly utilized as sensitizing concepts during the late-stage interpretive synthesis (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006). This conceptual integration ensured that the final themes transcended superficial descriptive summaries, producing a theoretically anchored mapping of how adolescents under shelter protection symbolically construct meaning around the structural dynamics of abuse.

5.4 Coding and Theoretical Integration

During the active coding phase, meaningful data segments encompassing both the participants' verbal narratives and latent symbolic elements such as miniature selections and specific interactions within the sandtray were systematically identified and labeled (Braun & Clarke 2006). This interpretative coding structure captured not only explicit textual content but also the sub-verbal and latent meanings embedded within the spatial configurations, serving as the foundational building blocks for theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

To maintain transparency and methodological accountability, transcript excerpts were systematically referenced using a structured alphanumeric coding matrix indicating the specific participant identifier, session number, and exact transcript line reference (e.g., P1/S2/L145). The identification codes remained consistent with the baseline characteristics outlined in Table 1 (P1, P4, P8, P9, P10) (Yin, 2018).

Crucially, while the initial stages of coding progressed inductively to prioritize the raw, unadulterated phenomenological experiences of the adolescents, Adlerian Theory constructs were explicitly deployed as sensitizing concepts during the late-stage interpretive synthesis (Blumer, 1954; Bowen, 2006). Under this framework, visual and spatial arrangements such as object configurations reflecting power asymmetries, rigid boundaries, profound isolation, or defensive barriers were critically decoded through Adlerian lenses, including lifestyle patterns, inferiority feelings, striving for significance, and damaged social interest or perceived belonging.

Adolescents exposed to interpersonal abuse often internalize pervasive beliefs of rejection, unworthiness, and deep systemic mistrust. Integrating these symbolic items alongside verbatim narrative data facilitated a rich, multi-layered understanding of the participants' internal working models, ensuring that the final emergent themes transcended mere descriptive summaries and achieved theoretical depth (Homeyer & Sweeney 2022; Malchiodi 2023). Throughout this analytical process, a rigorous reflexive posture was maintained to continuously acknowledge and bracket the investigator's clinical and personal presuppositions (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

5.5 Triangulation and Audit Trail

To maximize the construct validity and confirmability of the findings, data triangulation was executed by systematically cross-referencing multiple empirical streams: verbatim unstructured interview transcripts, video-recorded behavioral logs of the active sandtray phases, and descriptive field notes documenting the real-time miniature selections and contextual researcher reflections (Denzin, 2012; Patton, 2015). To challenge subjective interpretive bias, two independent qualitative research experts reviewed selected video recordings and audited the analysis. Their independent observations were rigorously compared against the interview transcripts and field notes to map convergent and divergent analytical patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Furthermore, a stringent, chronological audit trail was systematically maintained to document every conceptual transition throughout the analytical lifecycle, explicitly mapping the raw empirical data extracts, initial codes, candidate categories, and finalized overarching themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Minor interpretive discrepancies between the primary researcher and the independent auditor were thoroughly debated and resolved through academic consensus, thereby securing a transparent, verifiable path from raw participant encounters to the final report.

5.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

To establish methodological rigor and safeguard the structural integrity of this qualitative multiple-case study, four core criteria of trustworthiness were operationalized:

Credibility (Internal Validity): Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with the participants across multi-session protocols and comprehensive data triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, member checking was systematically executed by sharing detailed summaries of the interpreted meanings and emergent themes with the participants during subsequent sessions, allowing them to verify, refine, or validate that the findings accurately mirrored their subjective intentions and symbolic expressions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability (Reliability): Dependability was maintained via the formulation of a comprehensive codebook and the implementation of a rigorous external audit trail (Miles et al., 2014). Two independent qualitative experts scrutinized selected video logs, raw transcripts, and the coding architecture, challenging researcher bias and ensuring that the analytical process remained consistent, logical, and replicable (Creswell, 2013).

Transferability (External Validity): While qualitative case studies do not aim for statistical generalization, transferability was achieved through the generation of thick description (Geertz, 1973; (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The study provides highly contextualized, detailed descriptions of the shelter protection environment, participants' backgrounds, specific behavioral interactions with materials, precise miniature selections, and overarching spatial configurations within the sandtray, allowing external readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to similar institutional settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Confirmability (Objectivity): To ensure that the final interpretations were strictly grounded in the participants' actual data rather than the researcher's clinical or theoretical preconceptions, negative case consideration was actively performed during the thematic synthesis (Miles et al., 2014). Variations, anomalies, and divergent patterns across participants' symbolic configurations were deliberately isolated and analyzed, thereby forcing continuous refinement of the thematic definitions until they comprehensively reflected the entire spectrum of the empirical data (Patton, 2015).

5.7 Ethical Considerations

Prior to data collection, formal ethical approval was secured from the relevant institutional review board. Given the extreme psychological vulnerability of minors residing under shelter protection, the research strictly conformed to local and international ethical mandates (Israel & Hay, 2006; Sieber & Tolich, 2013)

Informed Assent and Guardian Consent: All participants were legally protected minors under the jurisdiction of the state; written institutional permission and legal guardian consent were formally obtained from the authorized shelter supervisors acting as their legal guardians (Flewitt, 2005). Concurrently, written informed assent was secured directly from each adolescent following a comprehensive, developmentally appropriate briefing regarding the study's purpose, scope, and procedures. Participants were explicitly reminded of their absolute right to decline any prompt or withdraw from the study at any juncture without institutional penalties or disruption to their shelter services.

Anonymity and Data Protection: Strict confidentiality was guaranteed by striking all demographic and geographical markers from the datasets (Sieber & Tolich, 2013). Participants were assigned persistent alphanumeric codes (P1–P10). The recording video, verbatim transcripts, and visual materials of the sandtray configurations were securely isolated within heavily encrypted, password-protected files and locked cabinets, accessible exclusively to the primary investigator. All data will be retained and permanently destroyed in strict compliance with institutional research data management guidelines.

Mandatory Reporting and Safety Net Protocols: Due to the probability of sensitive abuse disclosures, mandatory reporting procedures were maintained in strict accordance with national child protection regulations and the Child Act 2001 (Act 611). Any disclosure indicating immediate, unmanaged risk or ongoing external danger to minors was protocolled for immediate collaboration with shelter administrators and statutory child protection services.

Distress Management and Clinical Care: To mitigate the threat of emotional distress or triggers during the externalization of abuse dynamics, a clear distress protocol was active (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). If an adolescent exhibited signs of acute emotional dysregulation, the research agenda was immediately suspended to prioritize clinical stabilization and support, ensuring seamless referral to the shelter's internal psychological care networks for continued long-term support. All translated data extracts were cross-checked to guarantee semantic equivalence, ensuring that the participants' core voices were ethically and authentically preserved (van Nes et al., 2010).

6. Result and Findings

Given the qualitative nature of this study, detailed case-based descriptions are presented to capture the depth and rich context of the adolescents' experiences. At the same time, thematic summaries and tables are provided to blend key patterns across cases, making it clearer and easier to interpret. AST provided a creative and non-verbal medium for these adolescents to express and process deep emotions and past abuse histories that are difficult to talk about. By using miniature objects to build symbolic scenes in the sand, participants successfully externalized complex feelings such as fear, sadness, and anger, as well as hidden conflicts. The tactile and expressive nature of the sandtray helped promote emotional regulation, self-awareness, and reflective insight, which perfectly fits the developmental needs of adolescents living under shelter protection.

6.1 Theme 1: Metaphorical Projections: Symbols of Perpetrators and Power Asymmetry

The first theme shows how abused female adolescents use the physical space of the sandtray to project metaphors of their perpetrators and the unfair power dynamics in their abuse histories. Participants consistently picked specific miniature objects to represent the main perpetrators in their past, such as biological parents, stepparents, family members, and peers. Table 3 shows the coding and symbolic representations of these perpetrators in the AST sessions.

Table 3 Coding and Symbolic Representations of Perpetrators in AST Sessions

Perpetrator (Miniature Image & Code)	Key Representation in Sandtray	Transcript Reference	Sandtray Scene
 Biological Mother (A0112)	Physical intimidation; pinching and hitting; fear response	P1/S1/L79-82	 P1/S1
 Biological father and stepmother (A0201)	Paternal polygamy context; emotional neglect after stepsibling's birth; lack of maternal presence	P4/S1/L28-46	 P4/S1
 Stepfather (H0602)	Described as rude; physical aggression	P8/S1/L149	 P8/S1
 Brother and sister (A0113)	Bullying at home; emotional rejection; miniatures positioned non- upright (symbolic instability)	P9/S1/L479-488	 P9/S1
 Brother-in-law (A0114)	Inappropriate touching; fear and discomfort	P9/S2/L668	 P9/S2
 Boyfriend (A0115)	Rapid emotional attachment; limited familiarity; vulnerable relational boundary	P9/S2/L535-536	 P9/S2
 Biological mother (C0101)	Confinement at home; emotional favoritism toward a sibling	P9/S2/L42-57	 P9/S2
 Brother-in-law (A0105)	Grooming behavior (watching TV); sudden sexualized contact	P10/S2/L247-248	 P10/S2
 Sister (A0117)	Verbal scolding; emotional strain since primary school	P10/S2/L499-501	 P10/S2

	Emotional distancing after divorce; perceived abandonment	P10//S1/L324-325	
Biological father and mother (A0203)			P10/S1

As shown in Table 3, choosing these miniatures clearly reflects the client's private logic and feelings of inferiority. When dealing with past abuse, the participants' mindsets often see the perpetrator as a dominant figure while lowering their own self-esteem. This psychological power imbalance was clearly seen in the physical appearance of the miniatures (such as aggressive or very large figures) and in how they were placed in the tray.

During her first session, P1 chose a pink female figure (Code A0112) to represent her biological mother. Even though the color of the miniature looked gentle, P1's arrangement and story showed deep fear:

"I put her here because she is always watching me... Every time she gets angry, she will come closer, and that is when the pinching and hitting start. I cannot run away because the walls in my house are too high." (P1/S1/L79–82)

In this setup, P1 showed the "spatialization of threat" by burying the lower half of her own miniature in the sand. This directly reflects an Adlerian sense of helplessness and immobility in the face of her mother's anger. A similar dynamic was seen with P8, who used an aggressive Batman figurine (Code H0602) to show her abusive stepfather. Here, P8 used a symbol normally known for protection and justice to show a source of fear and physical anger:

"He looks like a hero to people outside, but inside the house, he uses his power to hurt us. He is heavy, and when he screams, everyone must look down." (P8/S1/L149)

By placing this heavy miniature on a high mound of sand and looking down at her own toy, P8 visually showed the severe power imbalance at home and the destruction of her safety boundaries. The domestic dynamics of abuse were also shown through the distance and layout made by the participants. P9, who experienced multiple types of abuse from different people, built a highly broken scene in the sand. When arranging her biological siblings (Code A0113), she purposely laid the miniatures face-down in the sand:

"They never stood up for me. They pushed me down, and they laughed when my mother locked me in the back room... They are broken to me, so they don't deserve to stand up in my world." (P9/S1/L479–488)

This intentional face-down placement serves as a clear non-verbal sign of damaged social interest. By refusing to let the figures stand up, P9 tried to stop their power to reject her emotionally, attempting to regain a sense of importance and control over a hurtful relationship network.

Similarly, P10 showed deep relationship displacement due to her parents leaving after their divorce (Code A0203). She placed the parental miniatures at opposite corners of the sandtray, separated by a deep, empty ditch she dug in the center of the sand:

"They went their own ways... I am left in the middle of this empty space, and neither of them is looking back at what they left behind." (P10/S1/L324–325)

This spatial arrangement shows how past abuse hurts the adolescent's internal views of relationships. The physical distance between the miniatures, combined with the barrier of the central ditch, serves as a strong metaphor for the emotional emptiness, broken sense of belonging, and chronic neglect these youth face under shelter protection.

6.2 Theme 2: Dynamics of Abuse Experienced

The second theme directly addresses the core objective of this study by identifying the specific forms of maltreatment encountered by the adolescents living under shelter protection. The data reveal that instead of facing a single isolated problem, the participants experienced a dense pattern of polyvictimization including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, as well as neglect, which developed into an internalized state of inferiority and fractured belonging. These overlapping layered experiences were externalized through defensive object configurations within the sandtray, as mapped in Table 4.

Table 4 Cross-Case Matrix of Dynamics of Abuse Experienced by Participants

Participants	Symbol & Polyvictimization	Key Representation in Sandtray Layout	Transcript Reference
P1	 Physical abuse (K0301-household object)	Beating with household objects; knife used as a threat; hair pulling and kicking; visible injuries (bleeding, split lips); Forced to sleep outside	P1/S1/L86-88

	 Sexual abuse (C0104-triangle wood)	Obscene act by uncle; non-consensual touching	P1/S1/L90
	 Emotional abuse (A0104-children)	Repeated verbal humiliation; cursing and rejection statements; feelings of being disliked or unwanted	P1/ S1/L315-316
	 Neglect (F0102- school)	Left at school until midnight; inconsistent caregiving; emotional embarrassment and isolation	P1/S1/L149-155
P4	 Physical abuse (A0201-biological father & mother)	Paternal physical aggression; instigation by stepmother; perceived favoritism and influence	P4/S1/L51-54
	 Sexual abuse (A0104-female children)	Sexual violation by father; victimization of both participant and sibling	P4/S1/L95-96
	 Emotional abuse (A0111-biological father)	Verbal degradation; denial of paternity; persistent humiliation and rejection	P4/S1/L167-170
	 Neglect (A0112-biological mother)	Absence of biological mother since childhood; lack of maternal attachment	P4/S1/L31-32
P8	 Physical abuse (K0302-household object)	Stepfather described as aggressive; recurrent physical hitting; atmosphere of fear within the household	P8/ S1/L149
	 Sexual abuse (H0602-movie character)	Sexual violation by stepfather; victimization of participant and sibling; occurred during nighttime while mother was work	P8/S1/L163-165
	 Emotional abuse (A0203-divorced & remarried)	Perceived maternal favoritism toward younger siblings; feelings of rejection after mother's remarriage; emotional distress during disclosure	P8/S1/L90-99
	 Neglect (A0115-siblings)	Differential caregiving within blended family; participant and biological siblings overlooked; stepfamily members prioritized	P8/S1/L101-102
P9	 Physical abuse (A0203-divorced & remarried)	Kicking and physical assault by brother-in-law; targeted physical aggression (neck area)	P9/S2/L821-822

		Invasive gaze during private moments; implied sexualized boundary violation; heightened vigilance and fear within the home	P9/S2/L680-688
		Derogatory name-calling related to physical appearance; mockery and humiliation by family member	P9/S1/L377-378
		Perceived lack of emotional support; feelings of abandonment; chronic emotional isolation	P9/S1/L84-85
P10		Recurrent physical hitting by brothers; scapegoating within family dynamics	P10/S1/L247-248
		Inappropriate touching by brother-in-law; occurred during routine family interaction	P10/S1/L247-248
		Sister symbolized as a lion; loud, aggressive, unpredictable anger; perceived intimidation and dominance	P10/S4/L215-223
		Father's withdrawal after divorce; emotional detachment from children	P10/S1/L324-325
			

Based on the choice of miniatures and their spatial arrangements seen in Table 3, the specific characteristics of the abuse experienced by the participants can be summarized across four main dimensions. The first dimension, physical abuse, represents a primary source of immediate distress. In the sandtray scene, P1 symbolized her history of physical beatings and weapon threats using a pink female figure, while P4 and P8 mapped severe paternal aggression onto central biological father and stepfather miniatures, respectively. Furthermore, extended family violence was shown by P9, who highlighted targeted abuse to the neck area, and P10, who detailed persistent domestic scapegoating by her biological brothers. Within the configurations, these physical threat miniatures were consistently placed in towering or dominant positions, visually demonstrating an Adlerian state of felt inferiority and helplessness.

The second dimension involves sexual abuse, where boundary violations frequently overlapped with physical harm, further complicating the participants' experiences. For instance, P1 projected her uncle's sexual abuse through an abstract geometric structure (C0104, triangle wood), utilizing this non-human choice as an Adlerian defense mechanism to block the painful reality of the event. In contrast, P4 and P8 utilized central paternal figures, including the movie character H0602 in the case of P8, to signify direct sexual violation, effectively showing how primary protective figures had transformed into symbols of absolute terror. Meanwhile, P9 and P10 experienced intrusive sexual boundary violations by the same brother-in-law (A0116), which manifested through invasive gazes for P9 and inappropriate touching during routine domestic activities for P10.

The third dimension identified in the data is emotional abuse. Beyond direct bodily harm, emotional degradation emerged as a prominent type of abuse that deeply damaged the participants' self-worth. This was clearly shown by P10, who represented her sister as a roaring lion (B0209) to communicate an unpredictable and intimidating domestic atmosphere. For P4 and P9, the emotional scars were deeply rooted in verbal degradation, specifically

the pain of paternal rejection via the denial of paternity for P4, and severe peer and familial mockery regarding physical appearance for P9. In Adlerian terms, these persistent verbal attacks act as profound structural discouragements, convincing the developing youth that they inherently lack social value.

Finally, the fourth dimension is neglect, where chronic neglect and abandonment emerged as stark gaps within the participants' life histories. This form of maltreatment was illustrated by P1, who showed severe maternal abandonment by placing her home and school environments (F0102) in complete isolation. Similarly, P4 and P10 left large, empty spaces in their trays to symbolize the severe disruption of primary family bonds caused by parental divorce and maternal absence. This systemic harm was further detailed by P8, who used a sibling cluster (A0115) to map favoritism within her blended family by physically placing stepfamily members in close arrangements while pushing herself and her biological siblings to the far corners to illustrate her total displacement as an outsider.

Ultimately, profiling the types of abuse experienced by these adolescents proves that polyvictimization acts as a severe assault on their psychological development. These spatial configurations reveal a damaged Style of Life heavily marked by pervasive mistrust and severe feelings of inferiority. Nevertheless, the sandtray medium safely contains these painful realities, providing the adolescents with a vital non-verbal outlet to externalize their hidden conflicts and initiate the process of emotional healing. To provide a comprehensive overview of the interpersonal dynamics involved in the participants' histories, Table 5 summarizes the specific perpetrators associated with each type of abuse experienced across the five cases.

Table 5: A Summary of Abuse Types and Associated Perpetrators

Participants	Types of abuse	Perpetrators						
		Biological father/mother	Biological parents	Stepmother/stepfather	Uncle	Siblings	Brother-in-law	Peers
P1	Physical	/						
	Sexual				/			
	Emotional	/						
	Neglect		/					
P4	Physical	/		/				
	Sexual	/						
	Emotional		/	/				
	Neglect		/					
P8	Physical			/				
	Sexual			/				
	Emotional		/	/				
	Neglect		/					
P9	Physical						/	
	Sexual					/	/	/
	Emotional					/	/	
	Neglect	/						
P10	Physical	/				/		
	Sexual						/	
	Emotional		/				/	
	Neglect		/					

Notes: "/" indicates the presence of abuse type perpetrated by the corresponding individual

As demonstrated in Table 5, this summary aims to enhance analytical transparency by systematically mapping the overlapping relational dynamics and perpetrator configurations across all five cases. This cross-case presentation reveals a dense network of interpersonal conflicts, highlighting that perpetrators are predominantly located within immediate and extended family units. By condensing these intricate relational patterns, this study underscores how symbolic play in AST serves as a vital expressive medium, safely externalizing complex dynamics of abuse that remain difficult to articulate through conventional verbal counseling.

7. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that AST is an effective non-verbal tool for adolescents to express and process complex abuse histories. From an Adlerian perspective, these sandtray setups do more than just list the types of abuse; they visually map the clients' internal Style of Life. Participants consistently chose threatening figures, predators, and aggressive miniatures to represent their abusers, which directly showed the dynamics of power, fear, and family dominance. Within Adlerian theory, these physical arrangements clearly show the participants' internal struggles with deep feelings of inferiority, vulnerability, and a broken sense of social interest caused by long-term abusive environments.

World scenes and miniature choices reveal specific symbolic ways to access hidden conflicts, especially emotional abuse and chronic neglect. Because these hidden forms of mistreatment leave no physical marks, they often remain unseen within family networks. This supports the view that emotional and neglectful harms are naturally difficult to detect. Through AST, emotional abuse was shown through small, isolated, or trapped figurines that represented helplessness and a lack of belonging. In contrast, physical and sexual abuse were displayed through dominant, tall predators or sharp objects that symbolized active aggression and immediate threats, while neglect was shown through gaps and large empty spaces. Instead of relying on spoken words, which these adolescents often avoid as a defense mechanism, the non-verbal sandtray allows counselors to understand the psychological impact of polyvictimization by reading the relational hierarchies and coping strategies shown in the sand (Jamaludin et al., 2018).

Beyond its therapeutic use, this study highlights the double value of the sandtray as both a counseling session medium and a qualitative research method. By combining Adlerian concepts with creative play, this approach provides a flexible and safe medium that helps with emotional regulation, self-awareness, and rebuilding the client's personal story (Paslan et al., 2025). This contribution is highly relevant in shelter protection settings, where vulnerable youth often struggle with conventional talk counseling due to age or verbal difficulties, ultimately hindering their developmental and educational pathways (Kusumandari, 2025). Therefore, counselors working with severely abused adolescents should systematically include structured sandtray sessions in their practice. This maximizes the power of non-verbal methods to reach individuals who are otherwise hard to help through conventional sessions, thereby fostering their long-term resilience and reintegration into learning environments (Kusumandari, 2025; Paslan et al., 2025).

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study show that adolescent girls under shelter protection face a complex mix of all four main types of abuse: physical, sexual, emotional, and neglect. These acts are mostly committed by immediate and extended family members. The presence of more than one abuser at home highlights the heavy complexity of polyvictimization and shows how fragile the family institution can be. This emphasizes the urgent need for protective measures and safe therapeutic environments. These combined negative experiences cause deep psychological, physical, and emotional distress that seriously harms the psychological well-being of developing youth.

In this context, AST acts as a highly effective and safe method to express and process these deep abuse histories through symbols, especially for adolescents who find it hard to speak about their pain. By putting their inner conflicts into physical shapes, this creative medium helps process deeply stored emotions and actively supports clients in rebuilding their self-narratives, leading to a healthier, holistic recovery.

Significantly, this study highlights how useful sandtray arrangements are for detecting emotional abuse and chronic neglect. These are subtle forms of mistreatment that easily escape notice because they lack visible or physical evidence. Because adolescents often struggle to put emotional hurt into words or may not even realize they are being made family scapegoats, the sandtray offers a safe, non-verbal space. This structured setup allows counselors to discover hidden relationship issues that are usually impossible to find through standard, talk-based intake interviews. Ultimately, this study confirms that sandtray therapy provides a transformative pathway that helps vulnerable youth organize, understand, and safely express complex abuse histories to begin true emotional healing.

9. Limitations and Future Directions

Despite its valuable insights, this study has several limitations. First, the project involved a relatively small sample size confined to a single shelter protection home in Malaysia, which limits the ability to generalize the findings statistically. However, in qualitative research, the focus is on depth of analysis and rich context rather than large numbers. The frequent appearance of similar symbolic and relationship patterns across the five cases supports the robustness and usefulness of the data for similar protective settings.

Second, there are methodological challenges in interpreting the sandtray. The researcher served as both the practicing counselor and the main investigator, which could introduce personal assumptions into the interpretations. Although the researcher remained highly self-aware throughout the process, decoding symbols in

AST naturally depends on the counselor's clinical skills, thereby adding an element of subjectivity. Interpretation is even more challenging when looking at emotional abuse because its hidden nature means the symbols used are often subtle, broken up, or indirect. Furthermore, an adolescent's ability to express complex conflicts through symbols depends heavily on their age, creative confidence, and how comfortable they feel with non-verbal therapy.

To build upon these findings, future research should integrate sandtray therapy within mixed methods designs or longitudinal frameworks. Combining AST with complementary qualitative or quantitative instruments would enhance data triangulation, especially when tracking how hidden forms of abuse change over time and across different ages. Finally, expanding future studies to include multiple shelter centers would strengthen the research methods, cross-cultural applicability, and practical value of sandtray therapy for vulnerable youth.

10. Availability of Data and Materials

The primary data and interview transcripts supporting the findings of this study are kept strictly confidential to protect the identities and privacy of the minors under shelter protection. Anonymized data summaries, codebooks, and matrix layouts are included within the supplementary tables of this article. Any additional questions regarding the research procedures can be directed to the corresponding author.

11. List Of Abbreviations

For ease of reference, the abbreviations used in the text are listed below in alphabetical order with their full meanings:

Abbreviations	Meaning
A0104	Miniature female children
A0105	Miniature male figurine sitting (Brother-in-law)
A0112	Miniature family member-women (Biological Mother)
A0113	Miniature brother and sister
A0115	Miniature siblings/ cluster
A0116	Miniature brother-in-law standing
A0201	Miniature biological father and stepmother
A0202	Miniature representing divorce
A0203	Miniature biological parents (divorce/ separated)
B0209	Miniature lion
C0104	Miniature triangle wood
F0102	Miniature fences/ school environment
H0602	Miniature movie character (Batman)
K0301	Miniature household object (Knife)
K0203	Miniature household object (Pan)
P1-P10	Participant 1 to Participant 10
S1, S2, S4	Session 1, Session 2, Session 4
L	Transcript Line Number

12. Author Contribution

The primary author was fully responsible for the main concept, research design, fieldwork execution, data analysis, and drafting the manuscript Noriana binti Abdullah. The co-authors contributed to the manuscript review, editing, research supervision, and final approval of the text by Ku Suhaila Ku Johari & Mohd Izwan Mahmud. All authors actively reviewed the results and approved this version of the manuscript for publication.

13. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the objective work reported in this paper.

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15. Ethics Declarations

This study received ethical approval from the Faculty of Education Committee Ethics (Approval number: UKM.FND.600-8/1/P101476). Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent from guardians and assent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, allowing voluntary participation with the right to withdraw, and minimizing psychological harm during sessions. Participants received emotional support throughout the sandtray therapy process, and a debriefing was provided after each session.

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