

# Chapter 42

## Healing Alex's Wound: Application of MSJCC in Adlerian Play Therapy

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) has emphasized the need to consider multicultural and social justice factors into all aspects of the counseling profession. Consistent with the MSJCC guideline, it is essential that counselors provide developmentally and culturally responsive interventions when working with children from diverse backgrounds. Adlerian play therapy is a unique approach in which counselors incorporate basic tenets of individual psychology and premise of play therapy to help children work through different types of emotional or behavioral issues. This chapter provides an overview of the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on children's mental health, particularly the multitude of effects on Hispanic children. The author then illustrates the application of Adlerian play therapy from MSJCC's perspective to work with a Hispanic boy exposed to a high level of ACEs.*

### INTRODUCTION TO THE CASE

In this case study, to protect the child and his families' confidentiality and anonymity, pseudonyms are used. Alex was a 6-year-old Hispanic boy living with his grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Garcia, two uncles, and a younger sister, Abby. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia were first generation immigrants in the United States and their children and grandchildren were born and raised in the United States. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia brought Alex to play therapy services because of Alex's increasingly aggressive behavior. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia reported that Alex's biological mother left the family when Alex was three years old due to the abusive relationship with Alex's father. Before living with Mr. and Mrs. Garcia, Alex and Abby had moved a lot with the father and his girlfriend, and Alex was asked to call the father's girlfriend "Mom".

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Mr. and Mrs. Garcia reported that they called Child Protective Service (CPS) after finding out their grandchildren were victims of domestic violence by the father. They shared it was a hard decision for them to contact CPS because he was their son and they felt shame to reveal this incident to everyone. However, they wanted to protect their grandchildren and they think it was better for their grandchildren to leave their father. They noted that Alex's father was physically and emotionally abusive toward Alex and Abby when the father was angry or drunk. After CPS had been involved, they had removed Alex and Abby from the father's house. Alex and Abby had lived with their grandparents for about a half year since the removal. Although the father would visit the children once a week, Mr. and Mrs. Garcia reported that Alex would feel confused about why his father would come and go every week. They further reported that the father recently gave up the guardianship, so they had become legal guardian of their grandchildren. However, recently, the children's biological mother re-entered their lives and wanted guardianship of her children. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia were worried about losing their grandchildren. They shared the mother was not likely to get the guardianship back because she had not contacted the family since she left. Yet, it would be an ongoing issue in the family.

Mr. and Mrs. Garcia described that Alex would behave like his father when he got angry. For example, Alex would show anger outbursts, such as kicking, hitting, yelling, and threatening towards his grandparents and sister. However, his behavioral issues seemed to only occur at home. Alex's kindergarten teacher reported that Alex did not show any behavioral problems in the classroom and described Alex as a cooperative and polite child in the school setting. He seemed to get along with his peers well. However, the teacher commented that when Alex felt sad, he tended to hold his tears back from teachers and peers.

The grandparents reported feeling stressed and helpless about Alex's behavioral issues because they have tried different ways to discipline him, such as telling him not to hit people when angry, using timeout, or taking his toys or TV time away. However, their parenting methods did not seem to work. They were worried about Alex's aggressive behavior and their families' safety. They shared their hopes to decrease Alex's aggression and improve his relationships with his families.

## **ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES IN HISPANIC CHILDREN**

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are chronic and traumatic experiences and events, ranging from abuse and neglect to parental separation or divorce, and may have negative, lasting effects on well-being in childhood or later in life (Sacks, Murphey, & Moore, 2014). A growing body of research has shown that ACEs are becoming a critical mental health issue (Sacks & Murphey, 2018). Adverse childhood experiences study was first conducted by Kaiser Permanente, a health insurance company in collaboration with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from 1995 to 1997. Over 17,000 middle-class adult participants completed the survey exploring their current physical health status, social functioning, and behavior along with questions related to their childhood maltreatment and family dysfunction. The questionnaire used in this study categorized ACEs into three groups: abuse, neglect, and family/household challenges. There are 10 ACE factors, including emotional, sexual, and physical abuse, emotional and physical neglect, substance abuse and mental illness within household, mother treated violently, parental separation or divorce, and incarcerated household member. Each factor weighs one point and the total score of the different categories of ACEs reported by participants was added up to assess cumulative childhood stress ranging from 0 to 10 points in which higher ACE scores indicate higher exposure to adversity events. The results indicated that almost two-thirds of study participants reported at least one

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