

4-14-2022

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Recommended Citation

Endow, L. T. (2022, April 14). Promoting Socio-Emotional Skills Through a Strength-Based Dance Program for Children Who Have Experienced Trauma. Poster presented at the Virtual OTD Capstone Symposium, University of St Augustine for Health Sciences. Retrieved from <https://soar.usa.edu/otdcapstones-spring2022/13>

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A Strength-Based Dance Program to Promote Socio-Emotional Skills for Children Exposed to Trauma

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BACKGROUND

- Trauma is experienced by more than 2/3 of children under the age of 16 in the U.S. (SAMHSA, 2021).
- Children exposed to trauma have a higher risk of negative outcomes due to underdeveloped socio-emotional skills necessary to respond to stressful events (Price et al., 2013).
- Treatments that integrate sensation and disrupted emotions were found to be most effective for trauma care (van der Kolk, 2003).
- Dance is a multisensory activity that improves physical, social, and psychological factors (Rehfeld et al., 2018; Bungay & Vella-Burrow, 2013; Burkhardt & Brennan, 2012).
- Dance was also found to strengthen socio-emotional skills necessary to cope with traumatic experiences (Cook et al., 2005).

PROBLEM

There is a need for more research that focuses on dance as an evidence-based intervention (Prieto, 2020). Secondly, here are limited reports on occupation-based treatments specifically directed by an occupational therapist within the mental health setting (Cahill et al, 2020).

PURPOSE

To develop and implement a strength-based dance program to promote socio-emotional skills for children exposed to trauma with an emphasis on the sensory system.

METHODS

Informal Site Observation

- An informal site observation was conducted during individual/group rehab sessions at Wellnest community MH
- Observations focused on the 5 principles of Trauma-Informed Care

Staff Questionnaire

- **Potential benefits:** body/emotion regulation, body awareness, attention, expel energy, coping skills, expression
- **Potential limitations:** time/duration, dysregulation, trigger for behavior
- **Current movement:** outdoor play, OT group, yoga, stretching, obstacle course
- **Suggestions:** clear structure/routine, flexibility, modeling, duration/location
- **Covid:** routines disrupted, increased behavior, programs modified, less kids

Outcome Measure & Sensory Questionnaire

- **Caregivers** reported limitations in self-management
- **Staff** reported limitations in self-management and responsible decision-making skills
- **Sensory questionnaire** reported highest challenges in movement processing

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

General Program Goals:

1. To improve socio-emotional skills through dance/movement-based activities
2. Establish a safe and trusting environment that supports collaboration, choice and empowerment
3. Include sensory strengths of the participants to enhance engagement

Dance Program Visual Schedule:

- | | |
|-----------------------|---------------|
| • Engine Check-In | • Breathing |
| • Butterfly or Dragon | • Bunny/horse |
| • "Everybody do this" | • Mouse |
| • Freeze dance | • Bear |
| • Tree | • Relaxation |



Acknowledgment: Special thanks to Bonnie Schlachte & the Wellnest Staff members

Theoretical Frameworks:

1. Sensory Integration Theory
2. Trauma-Informed Care Approach



References

Program guide



RESULTS

- Analysis of pre- and post- socio-emotional outcome measures were conducted
 - **Caregivers** reported improvement in self-management skills
 - **Staff** reported improvement in self-management, social-awareness, and responsible decision-making skills
- Staff provided with a final questionnaire regarding outcomes, strategies, confidence, and feedback
 - **Outcome common themes:** Self-management, responsible decision making, body awareness
 - **Strategies:** visual board, imitation, boundaries, engine colors, freeze dance, light projector, breathing, mouse activity
 - **Confidence level** → average 7.7/10
 - **Feedback:** "client always looked forward to it", "activities were organized and well thought-out"

Pre and Post Socio-Emotional Outcome Measure Results



FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Program Recommendations

1. Conduct full Sensory Profile™
2. Include caregivers
3. Implement program for a longer duration
4. Advocate for dance as occupation-based activity

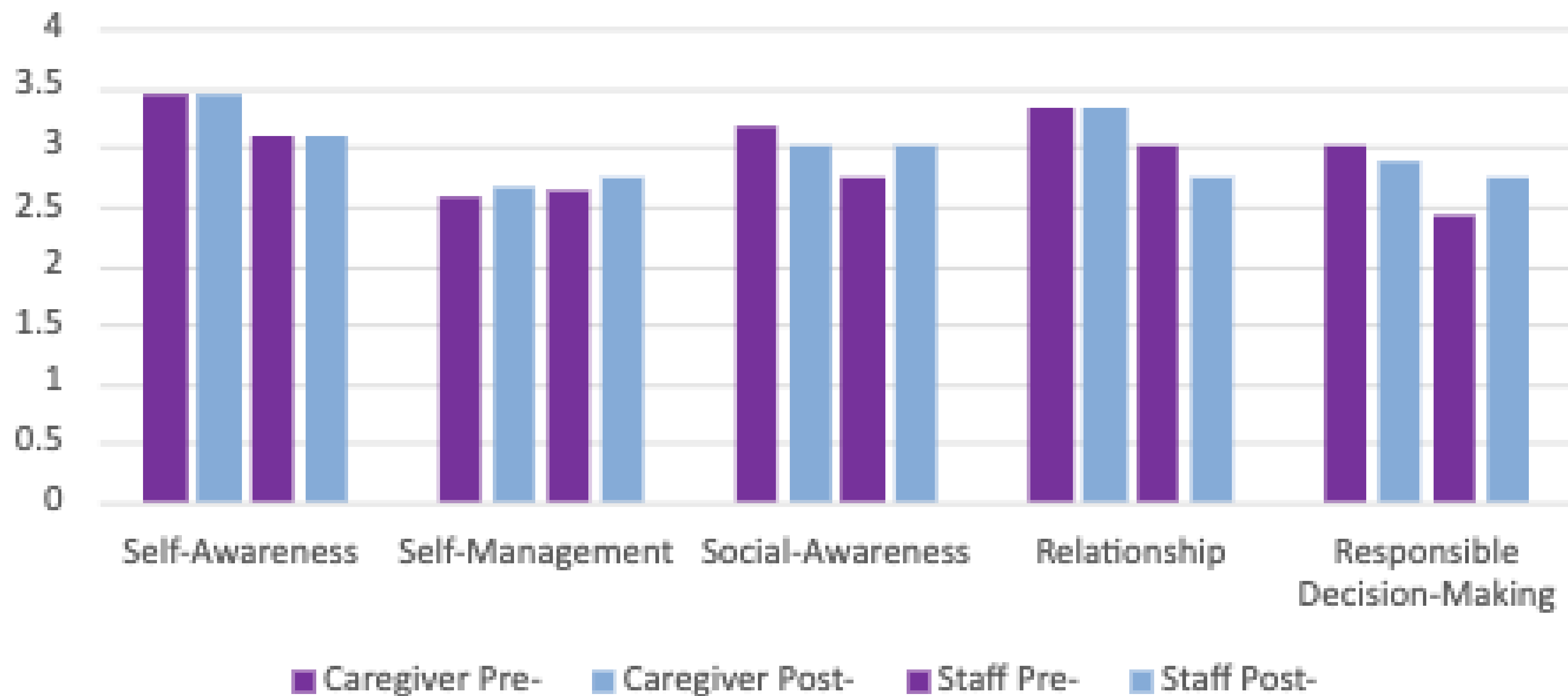
OT Practice Recommendations

1. Develop more occupation-based programs in MH settings
2. Promote sensory strategies
3. Advocate for OT in MH across lifespan

Dance Visual Schedule



Pre and Post Socio-Emotional Outcome Measure Results



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