The Use of Adlerian Theory Vs. Psychoanalytic Theory While Working With Elementary School Children

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The Adlerian Theory and the Psychoanalytic Theory differ on many levels which makes them each unique. When considering children as the specific population of focus, the theory that would be most beneficial and effective in its application is Adlerian Theory. The Psychoanalytic theory on the other hand would not be quite as effective since it focuses primarily on the past and, with children, they are living in the present with no real past to reflect back on. The following will provide examples and information to showcase how Adlerian theory is more effective than the Psychoanalytic theory when working with children in regards to social lifestyle, family life and the counseling relationship between the client and the counselor.

The Adlerian Counseling, also known as Individual Counseling was founded by Alfred Adler in the early 1900’s. He was an unhealthy child born into a family of six with Alfred being the second oldest. In the early 1900’s he joined Freud’s group, the Wednesday Society, but soon realized his approach differed from that of the group and he separated. His ideas on issues such as holistic views, social factors, choice, social motivation, teleological and goal oriented, and subjective and phenomenological separated him from his peers (Gehart, 2013,). While his peers were assessing the self as being an inner concept, Adler was more focused on the social aspects of one’s lifestyle.

Alfred Adler’s main key concept was the idea of constructivism. Constructivists “see the mind as a much more active agent, that operates on reality rather than passively receiving it” (Kelly, Scott, and Tolbert, 1995, p. 5). In simpler terms it means that outside influences play a major role in shaping one’s life. With this idea of social influences impacting life with children this theory would fit well. Children only learn what they see and how they relate to what they see. They are constantly taking what others have to say and by looking at this idea more closely with children one might be able to help the child understand better. In a counseling session it
would be more effective to ask the child how others effect how he or she behaves and why they act as so around certain people. This further leads into his theory of social interest. Adler believed that humans are innately social creatures (Gehart, 2013). Within this key concept he meant that all humans have a desire to feel needed and wanted by others in a community. This idea was not only based on the needing and wanting of affection from others but also the realization that social interest was about giving back to the community and if one did not give back they would not be happy. Adler said that in order to be well adjusted in life the area of community, work, and love relationships must be reached to a maximum with success. A person wants to be the best that they can be without trying to overachieve and believe that they are better than others. When a person strives to be better than someone else it can cause what Alfred said to be a personal superiority which can in effect cause problems within that person. With children they are usually trying to be better than others whether it be in an educational setting or extracurricular activities. They believe that the winner is always the best and people will like them more if they win. By raising awareness with children and making them aware that success has to come within and not compare themselves to others is a challenge but what makes the Adlerian theory well suited for children. Children tend to think of when they won in the past and that they will keep on winning because they have already won once. The counselors’ job is to focus the client on how that event in their life is affecting their present life.

Adlerian counseling focuses primarily on the present and understanding a client’s lifestyle in the present tense. Although Adler says to understand a person’s whole self the tackling of the past may be necessary. When working with clients the therapist needs to assess the clients based on social interests, early family life and how they believe to fit into society. Adlerian therapy looks at the clients lifestyle and aspects of that lifestyle that go into who the
person is and what might have shaped that person to be who they are today. Here is where one might see how Adlerian therapy focuses on the past. With a child’s past comes the issue of family life and parenting styles.

With children parenting style can play a major role in who the child becomes. Adler focuses his energy on two primary styles: pampering and neglect (Gehart, 2013). The effect that the pampering style might have on children is that they will not be self-sufficient because they tend to get what they want in life without really trying. On the other hand the neglected child would be social adjusted because they did not gain the attention from their parents but from the outside world. With children looking at how they were raised and in what type of environment will give the therapist a better understanding of where that child is coming from in regards to moving from the past into the present. The use of the Adlerian theory would be quite effective with children in this degree since children for the first few years of life only know their parents. Children look up to their parents and the way they raise them has an impact on how they will perceive themselves as they get older. Young children believe their parents can do no wrong and in return they take everything that their parents have to say to heart.

Along with parenting style comes family order and Adler takes birth order and gives characteristic qualities to individual members of a family. Birth order and where in the family the child belongs plays a crucial role into how a child views themself. It is not how many children that are in a family but where the client sees himself/herself fitting into the family. Again, along with fitting into the community the child must first belong to a family since for children that is where it all starts. If a child does not fit in within a family it will be hard for that child to adapt outside of the home not knowing their place. Adlerian counseling focuses on the child and how that child perceives themself and to what extent that child belongs. If a child does not feel like
they belong then the counselor would first begin by using steps and homework to get the child more involved in their family. By gaining a sense of the child’s background in regards to family helps the counselor to make possible connections with the problem which in turn makes this type of counseling quite effective.

The Adlerian theory contains values and approaches that would fit well and be beneficial to children in a counseling session. These approaches include establishing an egalitarian relationship and encouragement, which with children will be effective. The process begins by forming an egalitarian relationship with the client. When working with children a counselor would not want to come off as being powerful and having control over the child. The child already has authorities in their life to look over them and adding another powerful person may be an inconvenience causing the child to regress and feel like they are being told what to do and how to do it. It would not be beneficial to the client or the counselor to walk into a session and begin by stating that the counselor is the boss and the child must do exactly what the counselor says. Adler’s style of encouraging fuses warmth, honesty, and practicality (Gehart, 2013). Children need warmth when entering new situations and need to feel comfortable talking to a new person. As children we are told not to talk to strangers, so as a child coming into session with a so called stranger, the therapist, the therapist must give off a sense of warmth that is inviting to the child. Children respond well to people who talk softly and are seem to care about the child has to say. Boughner and Main (2011) said it well when they said “encouragement is the action required by the therapist to inspire or instill “courage” in the client, particularly courage to engage in the community” (p. 269). Children need to know see that the therapist is encouraging them to take action and become a part of the community. They need to get the sense that the therapist is there to help and when they feel the therapist is only there to help the action
will go right along with that. This approach within the Adlerian theory would be most effective while working with children in a counseling session.

Along with encouragement comes the thought process that needs to take place. The counselor then helps the client gain a better understanding of their lifestyle and how it is affecting their lives. By giving the client choices and not directing them the client will then begin to take ownership of their actions and in return become a contributing member of society. By raising awareness in children that you aren’t there to give them answers but to give them choices and they have the power to choose will be beneficial. Giving children the freedom to make their own decisions in life will help them to grow as adults. Children don’t always follow commands but if they have choices they will pick one. Children might not know the reason they are in counseling so by the therapist bringing to their attention how the child might view themselves and they think about their life paints a picture for the child to make connections within. Once a session is done the counselor can then chose to give homework if they see the need to.

Adler uses the term “homework” to describe how clients can work on themselves outside of the counseling session. While forming goals for each client the counselor can set up “homework” assignments to work on these goals. Children need to be focused on tasks so they do not wander and homework is perfect way to guide children when the counselor cannot be around. Homework is an effective way to get children to take action outside of the session and again gives them the freedom to make their own choices. An example of homework might be to form a new friendship to build a child’s sense of community or enroll in a new sport.

The Adlerian theory would be effective while working with children because it involves social interests and for a child that is very important. Children’s lives are made up of outside influences because they do not have the cognitive ability to decipher what another person is
doing and how that may be affecting them in their life. Also, children tend to think in general terms when talking about their family. For example a child might say my younger brother is the baby of the family so of course my mom gives him more attention. By looking into family life using the Adlerian theory children may be more inclined to not look at the birth order but how they feel they fit into the family.

These are some of the reasons that the Adlerian approach would be best suited for children in a school setting. The Psychoanalytic approach would not be suitable for children in the school setting for many reasons such as it focuses on the past child development stages, the approach one would take in a counseling session and the idea that the counselor is always right. The following will provide examples and information as to why this theory would not be suitable for children.

Psychoanalytic theory was founded by Sigmund Freud who was later nicknamed the “Father of Psychology.” His key concepts on psychoanalysis were based around his stage theory and how a person managed and resolved conflicts at each stage will in turn explain their personality and dispositions. Freud took a more direct route than Adler in regards to directly looking at the unconscious mind and how it works. Everyone has an unconscious part of their mind that holds memories and thoughts but it is how one retrieves and processes the information that Freud looked at. Through the use of dream analysis a look at the clients past will come. This approach would not be very essential with working with children because children are living in the present and they don’t have a past. They may have a few years of school to reflect back on but their dreams are not going to help solve a problem that they may be having in school.

Psychoanalytic theory focuses on the desire for immediate gratification within society and how to work through the conflicts that may arise. These conflicts are said to arise from
situations that have occurred in the past that are placed into the unconscious mind and left there without addressing them such as problems due to reaching certain levels of development as a young child.

The developmental stages put forth by Freud began at birth and went up to age twelve. Freud believed that if one does not satisfy or reach each development with perfection that will in turn play a detrimental role later on. In regards to the notion of developmental stages all children develop at different times in life and therefore one cannot say that because a child did not stop breast feeding till after one year old when to Freud they should have that it will affect how they act as an adult. One cannot diagnose a child’s problem based on whether they met the developmental stages put forth by Freud. If a child in counseling presents a problem of sucking their thumb the counselor would not automatically assume that the child is still stuck at the oral stage but may just in fact be nervous when meeting new people. The stage development that Freud designed would not fit with modern day children and therefore would not be effective.

The psychoanalytic approach would not be efficient for children in the sense that it takes a blank screen approach. Children need the sense that the counselor is there to help where in this approach the client is there to talk and find meaning and the relationship in that sense is more one way. In a counseling session children will only respond when asked a question and with a blank screen approach they are not asked any questions just told to talk. With children there needs to be a two way street in that the child feels comfortable talking and the counselor feels comfortable talking. As stated by Gehart (2013), Freudian drive theorists and ego psychologists use a more dispassionate counseling relationship to encourage and use projection to promote change. The counselor does not try to establish a warm environment and with children establishing that environment with warmth and comfort is crucial in an effective approach. Since
Freud had “little experience of direct work with children and no experience either as teachers or of working in schools” (Midgley, 2008, p. 25), he would now know that children need to feel warmth and comfort.

During the counseling session the Psychoanalytic theory takes the dream analysis approach as well as free association. Free association with children can harmful in the sense that there is no guidance to it. Children need to be guided and helped more than adults do and with free association they are not getting any help. By asking them to just talk they may feel that they are in charge and feel more powerful which is not the goal. Freud said that in this process the patient free associates and so does the analyst (Lothane, 2010). This says that while the client is free associating the counselor is also free associating which when working with children may seem to be less effective. If the counselor is not only focusing on the child but on themselves they may miss certain key words or phrases that the child uses that may be beneficial. If the counselor was to just listen they would be able to catch on to certain words the client is tossing around.

The psychoanalytic theory is based on the idea that everyone represses these emotions and feelings most likely the unwanted feelings into their unconscious mind. It is not until later in life when they are having problems that one is able to look back and through the use of free association, dream analysis and transference that the client is able to relate the problems they are having and making those connections. Children do not have the ability to look at an event from their past and make the connection with the problem at hand. When working with children it is more helpful to look at the presenting problem and how they might feel with the problem at the time.
In a counseling setting using the psychoanalytic approach would not be helpful. By trying to figure out why a child is feeling the way they are will not be solved by looking at the past but by focusing mainly on the present and occasionally looking back at the past but not so young as birth. Children have a hard time remembering what they had for breakfast let alone at what age they stopped sucking their thumb or breastfeeding.

The Adlerian theory takes a more effective approach when dealing with children. It looks more at the present issues in one’s life rather than the past. It also focuses more on social interest and how that might affect the child which in a child’s life the outside influences plays a major role more so than with psychoanalytic theory which looks at inner thoughts and feelings. The Adlerian theory also focuses on how the client and in this case the child views himself/herself in the world and what position they hold in society. It focuses on helping the child become a better active member in society which will help them later on in life as well. In the psychoanalytic theory the child focuses solely on the past which may not help them to grow and make connections with the problems in the present. With the psychoanalytic theory one must have a higher cognitive level to be able to process all of the information that is being placed on them and with children they just do not have that ability at a young age.
References


