Beyond Words: Integrating Hand-crafted and 3D-Printed Prototypes Into Bereavement Psychotherapy for School-Age Children

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Although death of a loved one is not an uncommon event among school-age children, bereavement-related discussions are still perceived as a taboo. This societal stigma can inhibit the grieving process for many individuals. In some cases, therapeutic support is required, however, therapists and therapeutic playrooms are not provided with a sufficient amount of appropriate tools to address this topic. Thus, the research was designed as a responsive evaluation to map therapists' needs, implemented via the variability description method. Furthermore, projective play therapy offers to process emotions, grief and experiences in such a way that reduces the risks of retraumatization, and provides a safe space under the guidance of a qualified professional. Therefore, this study developed 3D-printed and hand-crafted prototypes for therapeutic method Sandplaying, enabling children to process grief through symbolic objects and thereby fulfilling their needs. Moreover, the research includes a thematic qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with psychotherapists. These interviews validate the prototypes as a complementary solution to the current lack of specialized support materials. Additionally, an analysis of an anonymized composite case illustrates the practical application of these tools, which enable children to fully express their previously unprocessed emotions and grief. These insights suggest potential use of these symbolic objects within other methods of therapy, e.g. methods of narrative therapy, therapeutic board game, among others. Furthermore, the study contributes to the development of specialized therapeutic tools for psychotherapy for bereaved children, and expert reflection of therapeutic practice within bereavement care.

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