



## Dance/movement therapy for children suffering from earthquake trauma in Taiwan: A preliminary exploration

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### ABSTRACT

This study used short-term dance/movement therapy to examine children who were at high risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following the 9/21/99 earthquake in Taiwan. Fifteen elementary-school age children (grades one through five) who were at high risk for PTSD participated in a two-day "Happy Growth" dance/movement therapy program. This program was designed by a team consisting of one dance/movement therapist and three clinical psychologists. At the beginning of the program, the children's behavior was obstreperous and disorderly. During the program, they made coffins and tombs, and then they built castles. The way in which the group process developed was extremely different from the direction that the therapists had originally planned. In terms of the phenomenon displayed through dance/movement therapy, three therapeutic issues were emphasized: (1) What impact does psychophysical liberation have on the possibility for healing? (2) Is making Death Rituality the mourning process for survivors? (3) What is the significance of "holding" by the therapist in dance/movement therapy? The implications from the study are discussed.

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### Literature overview

#### Background

At 1:47 AM on September 21, 1999, a violent earthquake registering 7.3 on the Richter Scale rocked Taiwan. The epicenter was in the mountains in central Taiwan in Jiji Village, Nantou County. This earthquake is called the 921 (September 21) Earthquake, or the Jiji Earthquake. The entire island experienced severe tremors that continued for 102 s. The earthquake killed 2415 people, left 29 missing, and injured 11,305; in addition, 51,711 buildings collapsed and 53,768 were damaged. The most severe impact was in central Taiwan, and this was the most damaging disaster in Taiwan since World War II (Ministry of Interior, 2002).

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#### Dance/movement therapy and trauma healing

The cognitive behavioral model is a psychological intervention that is used for children who have experienced disaster or trauma. The cognitive behavioral model (Cohen, Berliner, & March, 2000) gives children the opportunity to understand their post-traumatic psychological and physiological reactions, learn that these reactions are mostly normal, and seek to reduce their anxiety and improve social adaptation. Dance/movement therapy uses the body as a vehicle to initiate the possibility of healing. The dance/movement therapy approach does not directly teach children the relationship between knowledge and experience but instead allows their bodies to direct them toward re-experiencing the past and creating something in that context. This is more of a Gestalt view than a type of analytical thinking (Sharf, 2008) and preserves the individual children's reactions to anxiety instead of harshly telling them, "Don't be afraid." In other words, dance/movement therapy, through an expressive approach, is an interesting model for psychological intervention, especially for psychologically traumatized children who lack the appropriate verbal skills (Monahon, 1993).

## The research issue

This paper focuses on children who were psychologically traumatized by an earthquake and then participated in a dance/movement therapy group after the disaster. The paper discusses three therapeutic issues in dance/movement therapy. First, using the body as the main agent, how is healing achieved through body liberation? Second, what is the meaning of psychological contents in the dance/movement therapy group? (i.e., what is the meaning behind the children making coffins and tombs?) Third, what is the meaning of “holding” in dance/movement therapy?

## Methods

### Participants

The dance/movement therapy program called “Happy Growth” was held over two days for a total of 12 h at an elementary school in a town in midwestern Taiwan. The town was one of the most severely damaged areas after the earthquake, as more than 350 people died, and 1000 buildings were destroyed (Ministry of Interior, 2002). Before entering the Disaster Recovery Area, all the rapists agreed that tension should be relaxed, both physically and psychologically, so that the children could begin to express their entangled thoughts and feelings. Because these children had just started to learn how to express their inner mental state verbally, the team decided that the dance/movement therapy program was a suitable choice to allow these children to express themselves through nonverbal means (mainly through their bodies), in order to transform the ordeal and the anguish. With the cooperation of elementary school teachers and counselors, 15 children with a variety of traumatic experiences were enrolled using purposive sampling (Willig, 2001) to explore the healing effect of therapy. Of this sample, nine were boys, six were girls, the ages ranged from 7 to 11, and the grades ranged from one to five. These children were selected as being at high risk for PTSD. In addition to the first author of this paper, who was a dance/movement therapist and the group leader, two clinical psychologists helped lead the group, along with three elementary school teachers, for a total of 21 participants in the group.

### Description of the “Happy Growth” dance/movement therapy program

The “Happy Growth” dance/movement therapy program was held in April 2002 and was embedded in a Posttraumatic Children’s Psychological Recovery project sponsored by the National Science Council in Taiwan. Two years after the earthquake, as many as 14.6% of school-age children in the disaster area were at high risk for PTSD (Chao et al., 2009), according to the UCLA Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Reaction Index (Steinberg, Brymer, Decker, & Pynoos, 2004). After the earthquake, these children had difficulty sleeping, were afraid to sleep, had nightmares, were irritable, lacked concentration, were hypersensitive, or were over-reactive to stimuli.

According to Caruth (1996), trauma does not result from the original event in the individual’s past, but rather it results from the way that the trauma returns to haunt the survivor. Therefore, even after two and a half years, the survivors were still bothered by the traumatic event. The importance of working backwards through the symbolic residues that are left by the originating event cannot be neglected (Alexander, 2012), and body techniques can be a medium through which to explore these symbolic residues.

## Results

### The group process and phenomenon

The group followed the basic concepts of the Chacian method. The group gathered into a circle and shared the leadership format and movement interaction (Chaiklin, 1976). We invited the children to explore themselves through games/playing and creative body/movement activities, and the children were encouraged to freely express their authentic feelings. The following quote confirmed our observations: “The creative dance/movement emphasized the physical equivalent of the psyche in the body through action” (Evan, 1951). Therefore, through embodiment, there was an engagement with bodily movement toward the goal of transformation (Payne, 1992).

The following is a description of the events and the situation during the two-day workshop (Table 1).

*Warm-up.* The group formed a circle, and then each participant called out his or her name and simultaneously made a movement, while the others mirrored the movement. This exercise helped the participants get to know each other quickly. After becoming familiar with each other and the space, we stretched our limbs and freed our bodies. We explored all of the different areas of the room and tried to release our bodies in the space. A warm-up is not just movement, but it is also affinity in movement, which allowed us to accept the children’s emotions at the movement level.

After the warm-up, the group was divided into four subgroups, and each subgroup was led by one therapist to develop stories. However, shortly thereafter, we encountered “turbulence,” and

**Table 1**  
“Happy Growth” dance/movement program.

Time	Day one	Day two
9:00–12:00	<p><b>Part one: opening</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Introduce each other and the group</li> <li>2. Warm-up</li> <li>3. Movement discovery: learning the elements of movement</li> </ol> <p>Team discussion: the group is divided into 4 teams. Each team is led to discuss themes relating to the 921 disaster. (Use the individual anecdotes of group members to integrate into a whole story.)</p>	<p><b>Part three: learning, helping, and sharing</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Warm-up</li> </ol> <p>Watch the clips of each team’s performance</p> <p>Learn cognitive behavior skills: team discussion, participants review their experiences, and write on posters.</p> <p>Sharing experiences: each team selects a representative to share their experience</p> <p>Performance of each team</p>
12:00	Lunch	Lunch
13:00–16:00	<p><b>Part two: sharing</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Expression: using their bodies with other media (such as fabric, puppets) to express stories</li> <li>2. Experience sharing: the 4 teams return to the class and act out their stories</li> <li>3. Group discussion and feedback</li> </ol> <p>Return to Brightness ceremony: the story from each team is strung together; all group members go through a twisting path with lanterns; at a certain point, the candles in the lanterns are lit to signify the process of going from darkness to light</p>	<p><b>Part four: termination</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Each group performs a skit, inviting the teachers of the school to watch</li> <li>2. Distribute certificates</li> <li>3. Interaction</li> </ol> <p>Follow-up contact</p>
16:10	Staff meeting: review and discussion	Staff meeting: review and discussion

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