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STRESS MANAGEMENT DURING PH.D. STUDIES: A SHARE OF REAL EXPERIENCES

Fadli Fizari Abu Hassan Asari¹, Azlina Mat Saad^{2*}, Ar-Rayyan Fikri Fadli Fizari³, Irhamna Fikri Fadli Fizari⁴, Azlina Zid⁵, Salwani Affandi⁶

- ¹ Faculty of Business and Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Perlis Branch, Malaysia Email: fizari754@uitm.edu.my
- ² Independent Scholar, Environmental Engineering, Perlis, Malaysia. Email: linasaad139@yahoo.com
- ³ Sekolah Menengah Sains Tuanku Syed Putra, Perlis, Malaysia Email: Darulamanku@yahoo.com
- ⁴ Sekolah Tengku Budriah, Perlis, Malaysia Email: linasaad1488@gmail.com
- ⁵ Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation, UiTM Shah Alam, Malaysia Email: azlinazid@uitm.edu.my
- ⁶ Faculty of Business Management, UiTM Terengganu Branch
- Email: salwaniaffandi@uitm.edu.my
- * Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Effective and proficient stress management during the duration of a Ph.D. programme is critical for all Ph.D. students. This is done to ensure the emotional well-being of Ph.D students. Despite confronting a variety of hurdles and tests throughout the course of study, academic achievement remained consistently excellent. Travelling, cooking, reading, watching films, and gardening are just a few of the stress-relieving activities that are commonly mentioned on social media platforms like Facebook and blogs. However, we have chosen a unique technique, called play therapy, as our stress management therapy modality. Toys such as robots (Transformers), miniature car models (Hotwheels), blocks (LEGO/Kre-O), weapons and arrows (NERF), small train models (Thomas & Friends), and board games (Monopoly/Scrabble) were among our therapeutic goods during our Ph.D studies. The act of going to the store to buy new toys, the joy of finding a good deal on something we've been eyeing for a long, and the "hunt" for our all-time favourite toy are all components of this activity's therapeutic significance for us. As a result, the benefits of the toy treatment are felt not only by us but also by our children. Consequently, we are not the only ones who are experience it. We have taken toy collection treatment to an altogether new level. Whereas, as a family, we



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were able to successfully capture many medals, including gold medals, in international innovation competitions by leveraging our interest in collecting these toys. In addition, we presented papers on various elements of toy design at a number of international conferences. It is our honest hope that being able to speak and share our actual experiences of coping with stress while working on our Ph.D. can, to some extent, energise the sharing of many therapies that are already available for stress management.

Keywords:

Stress, Ph.D., Toys, Therapy, Family

Stress and Ph.D.

The term stress refers to the reaction or response of an individual as a picture of helplessness in facing something that will cause the mental, physical, and behavioural state of the individual who experiences it to feel restless, tense, angry, disappointed, and various other unpleasant conditions to occur (Smyth et al., 2023; Hadiansyah et al., 2019). In addition, stress can be characterised as a condition of incongruity that is counteracted by a complex array of physiological and behavioural reactions that endeavour to preserve or reestablish the jeopardised state of equilibrium, commonly referred to as the adaptive stress response (Buheji et al., 2020). The experience of stress is triggered when an individual's perception of the demands posed by external stimuli exceeds their capacity to effectively manage, reduce, or modify those demands (Daniel, 2019).

Candidates for academic positions, as well as students who are still enrolled in school, frequently experience stress in their daily lives. The causes of the stress that Ph.D. students experience come from a variety of outside sources and include issues such as limited financial resources, a lack of available time to finish studies, the pressure to produce influential publications, and the opinions of those in their immediate environment. We (refer to the first and second authors), a married couple, acknowledge that as regular people, we are not exempt from suffering it while we are in the midst of pursuing our Ph.D. studies. This is something that we are not ashamed to admit. Stress that is not excessive can still be experienced by humans, and according to Don et al. (2021), humans require stress in order to function as a push factor in their pursuit of success. Frazier and Brown (2022) stated that, excessive stress poses a significant threat to both the mental and physical wellbeing of humans.

People who suffer from stress are more likely to develop a variety of health issues (Adam & Tomayahu, 2019; Gryphon, 2014), some of which include difficulty in sleeping, intense anxiety, depression, diabetes, headaches, obesity, and other related conditions. In our case, when we begin to exhibit symptoms of stress in our behaviour and mental health, such as getting irritable, angry, impatient or coiled up, exhausted or having difficulties sleeping and overburdened, becoming more easily angered or upset, and experiencing headaches and stomachaches, we start to realise that we are in the midst of a stressful situation. We have made the conscious decision to manage our stress in order to avoid experiencing stress of an extreme nature.

The first step in overcoming the stress that we are facing is to openly acknowledge to one another that we are experiencing stress as a result of the activities and obligations that we are responsible for while pursuing our Ph.D. To tell you the truth, the process of earning a Ph.D. *Copyright* © *GLOBAL ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE (M) SDN BHD - All rights reserved*



is pretty difficult for my partner and I since we have to divide our time between our jobs, our studies, and our family in order to maintain a healthy equilibrium and ensure the wellbeing of all parties involved, including ourselves, our young children, our parents, and society as a whole. After determining the source of the tension, we came to the conclusion that addressing the issue as a family would be the most effective course of action. On a different level, we make an effort not to place blame on others and, instead, we allow ourselves the opportunity to be joyful without experiencing an excessive amount of stress.

Following that, we attempted several different types of therapy, one of which being play therapy. We are thankful that the toy therapy we choose has been effective in lowering our levels of stress and making us feel happy overall. The tension that was endured has, with some effort and success, been redirected towards more constructive activities, which has resulted in a considerable improvement for our family as a whole. Both Miskan and Fisol (2021) and Asnawi and Madlan (2020) emphasize the necessity of stress management abilities for every individual in order to ensure contentment and pleasure in life as well as the ability to prevent all of the harmful effects of high stress. There is not one particular strategy that we implement in order to ensure the success of this play therapy session due to the fact that the focus of this piece is more on sharing. Intuition and the interests of our family play a larger role in this decision. The writer's experience in dealing with stress is diagrammed in Figure 1, which can be found below.



Figure 1: Flow Chart of Stress Management Based on the Author's Experience Play Therapy? Why?



As per the Fourth Edition of the Kamus Dewan (2022), therapy refers to a non-pharmacological rehabilitative intervention or a sequence of surgical procedures aimed at addressing a distressing condition that encompasses physical, mental, emotional, and social aspects experienced by an individual. Psychologists have suggested a range of therapeutic techniques, encompassing spiritual practises such as chanting, performing tahajud prayers, and reading the Quran (Sutioningsih et al., 2019), as well as physical methods such as progressive muscle relaxation (Mutawalli et al., 2020), dance art (Masruroh & Nugroho, 2021), and music (Mutakamilah et al., 2021), alongside other forms and approaches to stress therapy. This article discusses the distinctive approach of utilising the toy method for stress therapy, which has been adopted as the preferred medium by a family comprising of two adults (First author and Second author) and two children (Third author and Fourth author).

The implementation of toy therapy has effectively mitigated the stressors that we have encountered. Play therapy is a well-established therapeutic approach that is frequently employed with a specific demographic, particularly children. Scholarly literature has documented the utilisation and efficacy of aforementioned techniques and methods, particularly in the context of children who have experienced post-tsunami trauma in the Sunda Strait region. Following engagement in play therapy interventions, the child exhibited indications of increased well-being and emotional ease. Play therapy enables individuals to effectively mitigate the fear and trauma they encounter. The cognitive absorption experienced during play leads individuals to temporarily disregard the current issue (Afiati, et al., 2020). Handajani & Yunita (2019), play therapy has been found to be efficacious in mitigating the stress experienced by children undergoing medical treatment in hospital settings.

The implementation of play therapy resulted in a significant reduction in anxiety levels among approximately 70% of the children who were included in the study. In a separate investigation, Pratiwi (2019) undertook a study involving paediatric patients receiving medical care in a hospital setting. The findings demonstrated a favourable outcome in which the therapeutic intervention (toys therapy) effectively alleviated the anxiety experienced by individuals throughout their hospitalisation period. In another study conducted by Taylor and Ray (2021) revealed a noteworthy enhancement in the emotional well-being of African American children through the utilisation of play therapy. Children who receive play therapy demonstrate a significant level of empathy towards both individuals and the surrounding environment. Consistent with previous research, play therapy has demonstrated efficacy in children between the ages of 2 and 4 years.

The issue of separation anxiety among individuals was effectively resolved. Furthermore, the therapy implemented also facilitates the cultivation of virtuous principles within children. Individuals exhibit heightened levels of attentiveness and sensitivity towards their peers, educators, and guardians (Zarra-Nezhad et al., 2023). Play therapy, particularly when conducted in a group setting, has the potential to effectively sustain optimal mental well-being for individuals, with a particular emphasis on children (Ilxomovna, 2023). During the act of play, children can express and manage their emotions, as well as develop their social skills by fostering positive relationships with their peers. Indeed, engagement in play fosters active cognitive processes in children, thereby enhancing their creativity.

Engaging in physical activity during play not only promotes physical well-being among children, but also contributes to their mental health. Engaging in play can trigger the release of



endogenous chemicals known as "happy hormones." This will likely result in a beneficial outcome for them. Play Therapy intervention is effective and significant in decreasing social anxiety disorders in children with speech impairments. According to the findings of Egbe et al. (2023), play therapy was found to be effective in mitigating social anxiety symptoms in children who have speech disabilities. Play therapy involves engaging individuals in games and activities to foster their immersion and promote a sense of tranquilly. A diverse range of toys, such as Transformers manufactured by HASBRO, Hotwheels produced by MATTEL, and blocks from LEGO and DUPLO, are often utilised as a means of stress therapy.

It is noteworthy that a significant portion of our toy assortment is procured during stock-out sales, often at a substantially reduced cost. In fact, certain items have been acquired at a discount of up to 90% off their initial retail value. The act of procuring these reputable and established branded toys at a reduced cost is deemed highly advantageous and provides a sense of gratification to individuals who collect toys. Furthermore, the diverse designs, shapes, and colours of toys possess physical characteristics that captivate the interest of not only children but also a subset of adults. The intricacy and excellence of toy design can elicit a sense of immersion and captivation, both during observation and engagement. The presented visual aid, Figure 2, displays a portion of our collection of playthings.



Figure 2: Among Our Family's Toy Collection



Toys such as Transformers necessitate the transformation from a robot to a vehicle, requiring a significant level of concentration. The successful completion of this task can result in a sense of gratification. The diverse range of accessories accompanying these robots renders them more captivating and impressive. Hotwheels toys, which are available in a variety of brands, colours, and designs in the form of small car models, elicit a sense of wonder among consumers. The act of organising and arranging these diminutive automobiles on the shelves has proven to be an effective stress-reducing technique. Hotwheels are marketed with a variety of themed tracks, such as car washes, car workshops and petrol stations, among others. In addition to their association with rubber projectile weaponry, NERF toys are frequently acquired and incorporated into extant toy assortments. The NERF toy provides an enjoyable experience as it assesses precision and detects designated targets for shooting.

This game additionally imparts the skill of expeditiousness, particularly in the context of reloading ammunition. With the utilisation of safety gear like goggles, NERF proves to be a fitting recreational activity for individuals of all ages within a family setting. Engaging in NERF play and experiencing laughter has been found to have stress-relieving effects. Furthermore, the Thomas & Friends toy is included in our collection. The aforementioned item is a diminutive, aesthetically pleasing, and vivid replica locomotive. This game additionally assesses memory retention through the recollection of the names of multiple miniature locomotives. The product is available in a diverse range of captivating and inventive options. Engaging in a family activity such as installing a track can serve as a therapeutic measure to alleviate stress. The observation of miniature locomotives traversing their designated rails elicits a feeling of elation.

Furthermore, we have also opted for LEGO and Kre-O building blocks. These blocks facilitate the conceptualization of diverse architectural, zoological, and environmental designs. Engaging in construction activities with LEGO and DUPLO blocks has been found to have a stress-reducing effect. Moreover, it facilitates the maintenance of concentration and perseverance while engaging in a task. Engaging in LEGO play enhances conscientiousness and fosters proficiency in managing numerous small building blocks. Board games such as Monopoly and card games like UNO are highly suitable for family entertainment. These games have the potential to enhance familial bonds by facilitating the allocation of meaningful time for shared activities. During gameplay, family members engage in indirect communication and experience shared laughter.

The experience of positive affect has the potential to alleviate the weight of stressors encountered. Parents and children are no longer solely reliant on smartphone and computer screens for their entertainment and communication needs. The utilisation of toys as a therapeutic intervention is a dual approach that serves to mitigate the stressors associated with pursuing a Ph.D. degree, while concurrently fostering a more congenial and amicable familial dynamic, without any individual feeling marginalised. Typically, our family allocates approximately one to two hours per week, primarily during evenings or weekends, to engage in recreational activities with our assortment of games. Playing helps us as much as possible to relieve stress. Playing while laughing effectively lessens the weight of our stress. According to studies, laughing joyfully can significantly lower stress levels. As a result, mental health improves (Gonot-Schoupinsky & Garip, 2019).



Advancing the Toys and Game Trough Innovation

Possessing an extensive and varied assortment of toys and games not only mitigates stress but also fosters creativity and ingenuity in our everyday existence. Several concepts were generated, leading to increased activity in the pursuit of successful game-based family innovation ideas. In our case, we adapted an English idiom "kill two birds with one stone" suggests the idea of performing two contradictory actions simultaneously. The implementation of innovative practices within a familial context has been shown to foster increased emotional closeness and overall happiness among family members.

We have implemented three distinct categories of innovation in toy and game design. The initial innovation undertaken by our family pertained to the utilization of DUPLO. The DUPLO blocks were organized and utilized to create supplementary materials and accessories for the presentation of eldest child innovative materials. These materials were subject to scrutiny in the YIIX2017 and INNOCOM 2017 innovation competitions, where elder son emerged victorious and was awarded the title of Young Researcher. The exploitation of DUPLO blocks in the innovation competition in which the individual has taken part is illustrated in Figure 3.



Figure 3: DUPLO, an Accessory for Innovation



The second innovation pertains to the utilisation of diminutive LEGO blocks (depicted in Figure 1) as a design element. This innovation was developed through a collaborative effort between our eldest son and students from Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UNIMAP), and was subsequently entered into the international innovation competition The International Engineering Invention Innovation Exhibition (i-ENVEX) 2018, where it was awarded a silver medal (as shown in Figure 4).



Figure 4: Innovation Model Using LEGO

The stress therapy we offer is implemented through innovative means, with toys serving as the primary instrument. The aforementioned invention was able to secure two gold medals and one bronze medal at the SIC2021, IMIT-SIC2021, and VIC2020 events. The incorporation of LEGO/Kre-O/DUPLO in this innovative approach facilitates the recognition of the alphabet among young children, as depicted in Figure 5. The child exhibited proficient cognitive abilities by demonstrating aptitude in recognising the alphabet, counting, identifying colours, and shapes in a prompt manner, while also displaying contentment during playtime. There has been a noticeable improvement in his concentration and ability to effectively convey information.



Figure 5: LEGO as an Innovation Tool



Publication of Working Papers and Chapters in Books

The toys that were collected are not only a material for our stress therapy, but they are also a material for the publication of papers that our family is working on together. Five papers have been presented and published with success. Our first proceeding paper is *Solar smartphone: A greener solution* was presented by our eldest child in the International Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities (ICOSAH) 2017 at Open University Malaysia, Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. The full paper was published in proceeding paper under ICOSAH 2017 as shown in Figure 6.

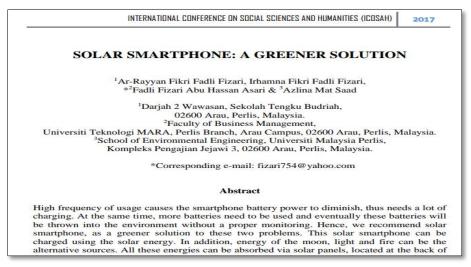


Figure 6: Proceeding Paper (First)

In 2018, we have presented and published three different proceeding papers related with toys in two different international conferences. Paper title Flood = Electricity + Water + Storage + Solar Garbage Trapper - Dam was presented in Technology, Science, Social Sciences and Humanities International Conference (TESSHI) 2018 at Rainbow Paradise Beach Resort, in Penang, Malaysia. The paper was published in proceeding paper under TESSHI 2018 as presented in Figure 7.

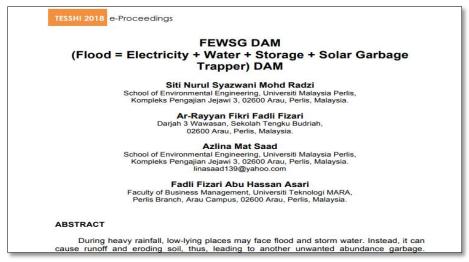


Figure 7: Proceeding Paper (Second)



A few months after that, we presented paper title *Hotwheels: Let the children tell the tale* in the International Conference of Business Management (ICBM) 2018 at Vouk Hotel Suites, Penang, Malaysia. This paper was successfully published in the proceeding paper of ICBM 2018. Figure 8 presents the screenshot of proceeding paper third.



Figure 8: Proceeding Paper (Third)

In 2019, we were very pleased when our paper which revolved around the analysis of our favorite toys was accepted to be presented at International Conference on Design Industries and Creative Culture (Design DECODED) 2019. The paper, *KRE-O not LEGO! A succinct analysis of the development and design* was also successfully published by the organizers as a proceeding paper as displayed in Figure 6..

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON DESION INDUSTRIES & CREATIVE CULTURE 2019	DESIGN Decoded
KRE-O BUKAN LEGO! ANALISA RINGKAS PERKEMBANGAN & REKABENTUK	
Ar-Rayyan Fikri Fadli Fizari ¹ , Irhamna Fikri Fadli Fiz	ri ¹ , Azlina Mat Saad ² dan Fadli Fizari Abu Hassan Asari ³
² Pusat Pengajian Kejuruteraan Alam Sekitar, ¹ Inasaad 3 ³ Fakulti Pengurusan dan Perniagaan, Universiti Te	02600 Arau, Perlis, Malaysia. <u>u@vahoo.com</u> Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), Malaysia. <u>/@vahoo.com</u> @vahoo.com
ABSTRAK	
Kre-O merupakan percubaan kedua Hasbro dalam memecahkan monopoli Lego, dalam industri permainan berasaskan blok. Menerusi kerjasama dengan syarikat permainan blok Korea, Oxford; siri-siri berasaskan jenama terkenal seperti Transformers, GI. Joe dan Star Trek telah dihasilkan, Justeru, kertas kerja ini menerangkan secara ringkas tentang keistimewaan Kre-O berbanding Lego dari segi rekabentuk asas dan kompleks. Juga, sejarah perkembangan Kre-O sebagai alternatif kepada Lego. Turut difokuskan, bagaimana siri dominan Kre-O iaitu Transformers bertahan selama tujuh tahun. Diharapkan kertas kerja ini manpu menjadi asas kepada penyelidikan yang lebih menyeluruh berkaitan industri permainan yang bernilah bilion USD.	
Katakunci: Hasbro, Kre-O, Lego, Permainan blok, Reka	bentuk
1.0 PENGENALAN	

Figure 9: Proceeding Paper (Fourth)

Last but not least, our fifth paper is also written based on our real experience as parents in overcoming the problem of speech delay. We use the toys in our house during the movement control order (MCO) to help stimulate our youngest child. The paper of sharing our real experience, was successfully presented at International Conference on Education & Languages for Students and Adult Learners (ELSA) 2021 and published in the proceedings. Figure 10 screen captured the fifth proceeding paper.





Figure 10: Proceeding Paper (Fifth)

In addition to the proceeding papers, our family also successfully published two articles in the chapter in the book published by the organizer of the Virtual International Conference (VIC) 2020). Both articles were produced during the first movement control order. We as a family are together looking for ideas to be made into game-based innovation products. We also received a positive impact by playing the game that was created. Figure 11 and Figure 12 exhibited the screen shots of our published papers.

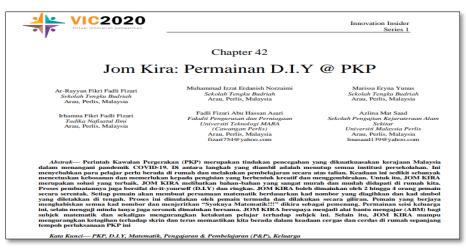


Figure 11: Chapter in Book 1





Figure 12: Chapter in Book 2

Our participation in innovation competitions and conferences held in various places has given us the opportunity to share our products and papers that revolve around toys and games. Not only that, we as a family had the opportunity to walk and see various places on vacation. This gives us the opportunity as a family to relieve stress and strengthen family ties. On the other hand, our children admit that they are very happy. In fact, the first child admits that he is not only happy, but more confident in facing his days.

Our passion for toy collecting is, in all honesty, the driving force behind the release of all of these publications. While this is going on, we are planning to write a scientific paper so that we may introduce the concept of using this toys as a type of mind treatment to the general public. To a certain extent, the use of toy therapy has been effective in assisting us in managing the stress associated with continuing our Ph.D. studies. The ability to better regulate our stress enables us to concentrate on our studies and complete them to the best of our abilities. When we are successful in managing our stress, not only do we become more conscious of the state of our own mental and physical health, but the health of our family also improves. Together as husband and wife, we were able to graduate with honours in 2021 thanks to His permission. Alhamdulillah.

Conclusion

Each person has responded to stress in their own unique way, using a variety of coping mechanisms. Every person needs to choose their own path that is optimal for them and is also realistic. However, the efforts that we share in facing and coping with stressful situations are a part of it which has had a positive impact on us as a family, particularly on husband and wife as well as children during the duration of continuing our studies at the Ph.D. level. It is our sincere hope that others will be able to profit from this relatively modest relationship of ours in the course of resolving stressful problems.

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