

The Therapeutic Power of Bricks: Integrating LEGO® Activities with Counseling Theory

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Building with LEGO® bricks is a favorite activity for many children (and adults!) all around the world. There is just something so special about connecting these colorful pieces together and the endless opportunities for our imagination and creativity to bloom. My first year as an elementary school counselor, I bought a small tub of LEGO® materials to have in my office in case students needed something calm to do, and thought it might also be a nice way to break the ice and build rapport with students. Eventually, it became something that I used as a bit of a behavior incentive for small groups if the students followed directions and participated in small group lessons. The LEGO® bricks worked wonderfully for all of these things, but the more I opened up that tub, the more I began to see the smiles on my students' faces, the deeper levels of conversation that would occur, and the positive impact on social-emotional growth as they would build together. In those moments, I knew that these little LEGO® bricks were powerful and that I needed to find ways to purposefully use them to support my students.

Building a Brick-Based Approach to Counseling

Around this time, I came across the work of different artists who used LEGO® materials as an art medium to create sculptures and various types of artwork. As a counselor who loved using both art and LEGO® activities with students, I began to explore the possibilities of using LEGO® as an art medium for students to explore and discuss various social-emotional topics. The experience was incredible and began an important journey in developing intentional and meaningful strategies for integrating LEGO® activities with my professional practice as a school counselor. The possibilities and the benefits have been greater than I could have ever dreamed and the use of “Brick-Based Counseling” activities have become foundational in my professional practice and a defining characteristic of my counselor identity.

Constructing a Foundation for Self-Expression, Accessibility, and Inclusion

One of the most obvious benefits of utilizing LEGO® activities is that they are fun. Putting a tub of LEGO® bricks on the table can very quickly help to establish a positive and safe environment for children when they come to participate in a group or individual session. The element of play is engaging and can help alleviate feelings of anxiety or worry around counseling for many. This can go a long way in establishing trust and positive relationships in the counseling office. Having LEGO® materials to hold, fidget, or build with can do wonders in creating a more comfortable tone for helping students or clients open up and engage in conversation around different social-emotional topics. This is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the benefits of incorporating LEGO activities in counseling though. There is so much potential inside each of those small bricks to help children process, explore, and communicate during both individual and group counseling sessions.

By using LEGO® materials as an art medium, we can provide a creative and meaningful space for self-expression and exploration of complex social-emotional topics and life experiences. For most

children, LEGO® materials are playful and non-threatening medium that they are comfortable engaging with and that requires minimal skill or talent to participate in. This makes it an accessible and easy-to-implement strategy for counseling sessions for a wide range of ages and ability levels. One of the greatest benefits of this approach is that it is less dependent on having well-developed language skills to verbalize and discuss complex topics, which can be challenging for younger children, clients with communication-related disabilities, clients who speak multiple languages, or even for clients who are more introverted. The hands-on nature of utilizing LEGO® activities in a therapeutic setting helps to promote a more inclusive counseling experience by enabling clients to create visual representations that can help facilitate more meaningful verbal discussion or allow greater communication simply through what they built.

Even for those who do not have any communication barriers, discussing certain topics such as a traumatic loss can be difficult to verbalize, and the opportunity to build with LEGO® bricks can provide an empowering pathway for reflection, self-expression, and client sharing.

Over the the past several years working with students, I have found that building with LEGO® bricks can be applied to many different situations and a wide range of social-emotional topics. The versatility of using LEGO® activities is truly incredible. Whether you are building a character to externalize and represent a significant emotion, creating a sculpture of a coping strategy, or constructing a scene to envision a solution to a problem, the possibilities are limitless in how you can utilize LEGO® bricks to explore and address a wide variety of social-emotional topics or needs. Additionally, I have found that utilizing LEGO® activities aligns very well with numerous counseling theories and techniques. Let's take a look at a few examples of how LEGO® bricks can be integrated with different approaches and techniques.

Theoretical Applications of Brick-Based Counseling

Adlerian

Concept: Striving for Superiority, 4 Crucial C's (Capable)

Activity: Clients will build a LEGO® model representing a personal strength and discuss the impact of that characteristic in their life or in a specific context, such as coping with a traumatic event or loss.

Client-Centered

Concept: Unconditional Positive Regard

Activity: Clients will build a model that shares who they choose to be today, such as personal characteristics they want to exhibit, challenges they are working to overcome, or depictions of other life events or values. There is no right or wrong way for the client to build or express their ideas using the LEGO® materials. For example, a client may build a model representing a desire to take better care of their physical health through exercise, or they may choose to build a structure that represents an emotion they are trying to cope with, such as loneliness.

Gestalt

Concept: Rosebush Technique

Activity: Clients will build a rosebush using LEGO® materials and discuss the various colors, shapes, or other characteristics represented, and how they relate to their own identity.

Narrative Therapy

Concept: Externalizing the Problem and Influence Mapping

Activity: Students will create a creature, animal, or other structure using LEGO® bricks to externalize and personify a problem they are dealing with. Create additional structures to represent locations or events in the client's life where the problem affects or does not affect them and discuss by moving the LEGO® creature to the various other structures created to map the influence of the problem.

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy

Concept: Challenging False Beliefs

Activity: Students will create a LEGO® model representing a negative belief they have about themselves and discuss how this belief impacts them. Then, they will deconstruct their model and rebuild it into a structure that represents a positive belief about who they are and how this new mindset will benefit or impact them.

Solution-Focused Brief Therapy

Concept: Miracle Question

Activity: Client will build a model depicting positive changes that would occur in their life if they had a magic wand granting them the power to change their life problems. This could also be applied to a specific problem to help clients envision a possible solution or desirable outcome.

Family Systems

Concept: Family Dynamics

Activity: Clients build a scene, room, or diorama using LEGO® bricks to represent members of their family and discuss each person's characteristics.

Building Your Program

Now that we have discussed some of the benefits and applications for using a brick-based approach, here are a few tips to help you get started!:

1. You don't need a lot of materials. A simple tub of Classic LEGO® bricks is really all you need. Purchasing expensive LEGO® sets from popular movies or other themes is unnecessary. The goal is to provide clients with a blank canvas and a supply of bricks to express their own ideas. As your collection expands, you may find that you have an interest in adding specific themes or types of characters to your collection, such as using superheroes to help facilitate conversations around personal strengths.
2. LEGO® Minifigures® or characters are nice to have and can open up a lot of possibilities for integrating role-playing, drama, narratives, exploring family systems, creating social stories, and more. You can already do so much with just bricks, but adding characters opens the door to

additional options. Use www.bricklink.com to order individual characters or other parts (e.g. food, animals, etc.) to enhance your collection.

3. Materials can be cleaned and presorted into sandwich bags for groups and sessions for additional safety. Directions for cleaning materials are available from the LEGO® website. Avoid using spray disinfectants as they leave a sticky chemical residue on materials. Personally, I prefer to use dish soap and water to clean materials, and then spread them out on a towel overnight to dry.
4. As your collection of materials grows, you may want to invest in some storage solutions. Avoid deep or tall container as they can be difficult to find pieces in and may be hard for kids to reach into. Shallow trays or containers usually work best. Organizing pieces by color can be helpful depending on the amount of materials you have.
5. As you begin implementing LEGO® activities, explore ways to integrate with or augment activities and techniques you already use. If you use bibliotherapy, is there a scene inspired by a story that could be built using LEGO® bricks? Could your clients take photos of their LEGO® structures and then join them together to create a beautiful collage? How about asking clients to write a poem that goes along with their LEGO® build? Maybe they could even make a brief therapeutic LEGO® stop-motion animation film? Embrace creativity and the many possibilities to build meaningful and engaging counseling experiences using LEGO® bricks!

About the Author

Derek Tulluck is an elementary school counselor, professor, and the author of Brick-Based Counseling 1 and 2 from Youthlight. For more ideas, follow Derek on social media @BrickCounselor or visit www.BrickCounselor.com. He lives in the Seattle area with his wife and 2 children.