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Hidden Wounds of the Inner Child: A Systematic Review on The Psychological Effects of Childhood Trauma in Adulthood

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Abstract. Childhood trauma refers to the lasting impact of adverse experiences during early life that continue to shape behaviour, emotions, and social relationships in adulthood. This study aims to systematically review empirical evidence on how childhood trauma influences adult psychological patterns and identifies effective therapeutic approaches. Using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, a comprehensive search was conducted across Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scopus. Inclusion criteria were intentionally stringent—focusing only on studies published within the last 15 years, written in English or Indonesian, and directly examining the effects of childhood trauma on adult life. From 967 identified records, only 7 met all inclusion criteria, reflecting the rigorous screening process and ensuring the high relevance and methodological quality of the final selection. The synthesis of findings reveals consistent patterns: adults with unresolved childhood trauma often exhibit low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and relational difficulties. However, therapeutic approaches emphasizing selfawareness, emotional regulation, and inner child healing demonstrate positive recovery outcomes. Overall, this review underscores that understanding the specific emotional and behavioural patterns rooted in childhood trauma, along with tailored therapeutic interventions, is essential to fostering long-term psychological well-being. Future studies are encouraged to deepen empirical exploration through longitudinal designs.

Keywords: Childhood Wounds, Wounded Inner Child, Childhood Trauma, Psychological Impact

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Introduction

Childhood wounds, which are often perceived as invisible traumatic experiences, can affect an individual's life into adulthood (Aini & Wulan, 2023; Koh et al., 2025). The term wounded inner child describes the emotional and psychological impact of negative experiences that occur in childhood, which are then carried over into adulthood (Afrilliani et al., 2024; Salimah & Mursalin, 2023). These wounds can take the form of neglect, physical or emotional abuse, loss of parents, or even anxiety related to environmental uncertainty (Fatima & Shahid, 2020; Padli et al., 2024). Although often hidden, these childhood wounds

have a significant long term impact on the mental health and behaviour of individuals in the future (Prasetyo et al., 2024; Sari et al., 2023; Selviani et al., 2023).

It is important to understand that childhood trauma not only affects an individual's emotions and behaviour, but also shapes the way they interact with the world around them. Research shows that individuals who experience childhood wounds tend to have unhealthy relationship patterns, both with others and with themselves (Marois et al., 2024; Nurani, 2023). These patterns can include difficulty regulating emotions, feelings of worthlessness, and an inability to cope with stress or conflict in a healthy way (Norida, 2024; Sari et al., 2024).

Although the impact of childhood wounds can vary between individuals, research shows a strong correlation between traumatic experiences in childhood and psychological disorders in adulthood (Nyoman et al., 2024; Prasetyo et al., 2024). Some of the disorders often found in adults who experience childhood wounds include anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and difficulty in building healthy interpersonal relationships (Ilham, et al., 2024; Indika et al., 2023; Sari et al., 2025). In addition, childhood injuries can also contribute to physical problems, such as sleep disorders, eating disorders, and heart and immune system health problems (Sari et al., 2025).

The study of the wounded inner child has grown rapidly in recent decades, especially in the fields of clinical psychology and therapy (Hasanah & Rahmadsyah, 2025). Various therapeutic approaches, including self-awareness based therapy and emotional therapy, have been developed to help individuals affected by childhood wounds (Ilham, et al., 2024; Ilham, et al., 2024; Sari, et al., 2023; Selviani et al., 2024). This therapy aims to enable individuals to recognize and understand the feelings and experiences of childhood that still affect them, as well as provide tools to heal these wounds.

In terms of behaviour, individuals who experience childhood wounds tend to develop unhealthy self defence mechanisms (Zahra et al., 2023). For example, individuals can avoid situations that trigger feelings of discomfort or anxiety, or even get caught up in destructive patterns of behaviour such as addiction or harmful relationships. These patterns often form in response to a childhood inability to cope with trauma, which ultimately creates a cycle that is difficult to break (Dewi et al., 2023).

In addition, childhood wounds can also affect an individual's ability to build and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships (Sudarwanto et al., 2021). Experiences of neglect or violence in childhood can lead to feelings of unworthiness, which form unhealthy patterns of dependency or a tendency to shy away from deep relationships (Panggabean, 2023). These impacts can be felt in romantic relationships, families, and friendships, where individuals have difficulty trusting others or feel insecure in social interactions.

However, despite the many studies that discuss the effects of childhood trauma, there are still many individuals who are unaware of these wounds within themselves. In fact, some people may feel that their childhood experiences were not "severe" enough to be considered trauma. Therefore, this study will also highlight the importance of a better understanding of childhood wounds, as well as the importance of recognizing and treating these wounds as the first step in recovery.

Overall, this article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of childhood trauma and how it shapes adult life. Unlike previous studies that tend to focus on a single dimension, whether psychological or spiritual, this study offers an integrated synthesis of psychological, psychospiritual, and religious-cultural perspectives within a single analytical framework. This multidisciplinary approach is essential for understanding the complex nature of childhood trauma, which is rooted not only in individual psychological mechanisms but also influenced by spiritual meaning and sociocultural context. By systematically combining these perspectives, this study aims to fill gaps in the existing literature and provide a more holistic foundation for developing therapeutic models that address the emotional, behavioural, and existential dimensions of healing childhood wounds.

Method

Research Design

This study uses a literature review approach to analyse various studies related to the impact of childhood wounds on adult life. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to integrate previous research results, identify patterns of findings, research gaps, and theoretical and practical implications in the context of healing childhood wounds (wounded inner child). To ensure the rigor and transparency of the review process, this study follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Haddaway et al., 2022). The PRISMA method was applied in four main stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

Data Sources and Article Search Process

Article searches were conducted using academic databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scopus, which include publications from various international and national scientific journals relevant to the topic. The article search process focused on research published in the last 15 years to ensure the relevance of the findings to current conditions.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria used in the selection of articles include: articles that directly discuss childhood wounds or wounded children, articles that focus on adults who have experienced the effects of childhood trauma, articles that discuss therapeutic approaches to healing childhood wounds, and articles published in English or Indonesian. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria include: articles that are not relevant to the research theme, articles that do not include empirical data, articles that discuss childhood trauma in the context of non-adult populations, and articles published more than fifteen years ago.

Search Strategy and Keywords

The article search process was carried out using keywords such as "wounded inner child," "childhood trauma," "psychological effects of childhood trauma," "impact of childhood wounds on adulthood," as well as other variations of keywords related to childhood trauma and healing therapy. Each article found was then evaluated and analysed based on relevance, methodological quality, and its contribution to understanding the effects of childhood wounds on adult life.

Article Selection and Analysis Process

Article search results were selected through three stages: Initial screening: conducted based on titles and abstracts to remove irrelevant articles. Eligibility assessment: reviewing the full text to ensure compliance with inclusion criteria. In depth analysis (reviewed studies): evaluates the methodological quality and relevance of the research results to the study objectives. Data analysis is carried out by grouping the main findings based on the themes, therapeutic approaches, and psychological impacts studied in each article.

Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out by identifying the main themes that emerged in the selected research, including the types of trauma experienced in childhood, their impact on the mental health and behaviour of adult individuals, and the therapeutic approaches used for recovery. The results of this literature analysis are expected to provide deeper insights into the importance of recognizing and addressing childhood wounds as part of psychological recovery in adulthood.

Results

The article selection process in this study followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which aim to ensure transparency, accuracy, and reproducibility in the literature review process. The PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1 illustrates the systematic stages carried out, starting from the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion processes, which ultimately resulted in seven articles that met the criteria and were analysed in depth. Figure 2 shows the visual network display from the VOS viewer obtained from the collected article data.

At the identification stage, the initial search yielded 967 articles obtained from three main databases, namely Google Scholar, PubMed, and Scopus. These three databases were chosen because they have extensive coverage of international and national scientific publications relevant to the fields of psychology, counselling, and trauma studies. Of these, 452 duplicate articles were removed to avoid data duplication. In addition, 23 articles were automatically eliminated by automation tools because they did not match the expected keywords or content structure. Furthermore, 63 articles were also removed for other reasons, such as incomplete publication data or topics outside the context of childhood trauma. After this process, 429 articles remained for the next screening stage.

The screening stage was conducted by reviewing the title and abstract of each article to assess the suitability of the topic with the research focus, namely the effect of childhood trauma on adult life. Of the total 429 articles, 214 articles were excluded because they did not explicitly discuss the psychological or behavioural impact of childhood trauma experiences. Thus, 215 articles proceeded to the full text review stage. However, of these, 178 articles were not fully accessible (due to limited access or inactive links), leaving only 37 articles that were successfully downloaded and reviewed in depth.

Next, at the eligibility stage, a comprehensive assessment was conducted on the 37 full text articles to ensure their suitability with the inclusion criteria, namely relevance to the topic of childhood wounds and their impact in adulthood, the existence of empirical data,

theoretical clarity, and publication in English or Indonesian. From the evaluation results, 30 articles were eliminated with the following details: 21 articles were not available in open access, 6 articles were considered to lack theoretical clarity, and 3 articles were written in languages other than English or Indonesian.

The final stage, namely inclusion, resulted in 7 articles that fully met all research criteria. These seven articles had good methodological quality and high relevance to the research focus, so they were used as the basis for the literature synthesis process. These articles were then analyzed to identify patterns of findings, theoretical implications, and therapeutic approaches used in the healing process of inner wounds (wounded inner child) in adulthood.

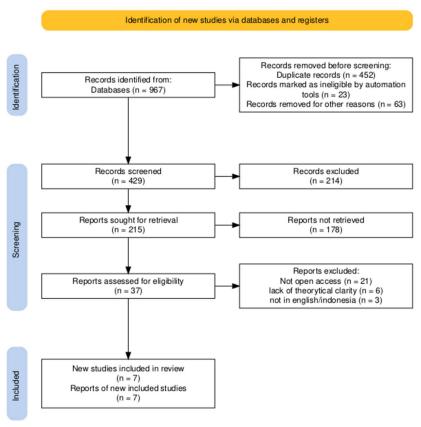


Figure 1. Reporting selected literature for Systematic Reviews based on the 2022 PRISMA flow diagram (Haddaway et al., 2022)

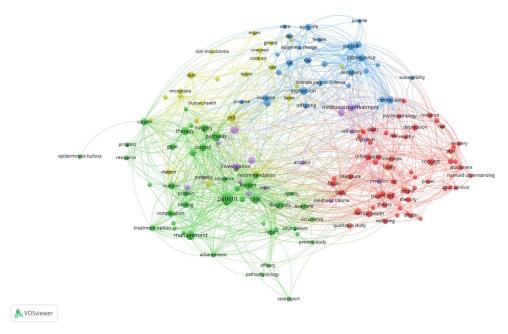


Figure 2. Keyword mapping from the initial search collection

This research review explains the importance of journaling in regulating emotions. Articles that met the inclusion criteria were consolidated in a table containing the authors, research methods, samples, and results. The findings from the analysis of 7 research publications can be presented in table 1 as follows:

Table 1. Review results of selected articles on childhood injuries in adult life

No	Authors	Methods	Research Focus	Key Findings
1	(Raposo et al., 2014)	Experiments	The effect of childhood wounds on the personality of female students	Childhood emotional neglect and abuse are strongly correlated with adult psychopathological symptoms, including low self-esteem, anxiety, and emotional instability. Trauma during early development increases the risk of personality disorders and maladaptive relational patterns.
2	(Novitasari & Nugrohadi, 2021)	Mixed methods	The process of psychospiritual healing of childhood wounds	The transformation from the experience of hurt to the experience of love requires self-awareness and social support
3	(Wang et al., 2025)	Quantitative SEM analysis	The impact of childhood trauma on adult mental health, risk factors for suicide, and stress appraisal mechanisms	Childhood trauma correlates with scores for depression, anxiety, defeat, entrapment, stress appraisal, and perceived stress; stress appraisal and perceived stress mediate the effects of trauma on mental health and suicide risk in adulthood.
4	(Kurniawaty, 2012)	Qualitative Case Study	The psychological dynamics of self injury	Psychospiritual therapy— integrating mindfulness, forgiveness, and emotional

5 (Singh et al., 2025) Experiments The influence of parenting on the inner child The concept of the inner child and the healing mechanism (Surianti, 2022) Qualitative Case Study The concept of the inner child and the healing mechanism (Eka & Lafdiyah, 2023) Study (Eka & Lafdiyah, 2023) Study Qualitative Case Study Pain into self-acceptance and growth. Highlights the therapeutic role of spiritual meaning in trauma recovery. Dysfunctional parenting styles are associated with insecure attachment and emotional dysregulation in adulthood. The findings reinforce that parental warmth and security in early years protect against later psychological trauma effects. The inner child experiences that continue to influence adult behavior and identity. Healing requires acknowledgment, emotional validation, and integration of the wounded self. Spiritual healing, particularly through faith-based reflection and repentance, enhances emotional resilience and self-regulation. The study emphasizes the cultural-religious dimension in trauma recovery among					awareness—effectively facilitates
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Based on the results of a review of the seven articles listed in Table 1, it can be concluded that childhood trauma has a profound effect on an individual's psychological and behavioral development in adulthood. Experimental research by (Raposo et al., 2014), shows that emotional wounds experienced during childhood have an impact on personality formation, especially in female students, which is characterized by low self-confidence, emotional trauma, and difficulties in social interaction. This finding is reinforced by a study by (Singh et al., 2025), which found that parenting patterns have a significant influence on the formation of the inner child, which ultimately determines behavioural patterns and social relationships in adulthood. Meanwhile, phenomenological research by (Novitasari & Nugrohadi, 2021), highlights the process of healing childhood wounds through a psychospiritual approach, in which the transformation from painful experiences to experiences of love requires self-awareness and strong social support.

In a similar context, Surianti (2022) explains that the inner child is a manifestation of unresolved past experiences that can influence an individual's behaviour into adulthood. Research by (Wang et al., 2025) also Investigating the relationship between childhood trauma experiences and various psychological consequences in adulthood, particularly depression, anxiety, and suicide risk factors such as feelings of defeat and entrapment. This study highlights that perceptions and assessments of stress are important mediators in the relationship between trauma and mental health outcomes in adulthood. These findings provide a basis for the development of psychological interventions that are more focused on stress mechanisms as mediators of childhood trauma effects. On the other hand, Kurniawaty

(2012) identifies that traumatic experiences in childhood can trigger self-harming behaviour as a form of psychological defense mechanism to relieve emotional pain. Adding a broader perspective, Eka & Lafdiyah, (2023) offer an Islamic viewpoint that emphasizes that religious and spiritual approaches can be effective methods for understanding and healing childhood emotional wounds. Overall, these seven studies show a strong link between traumatic childhood experiences and psychological health in adulthood, with an emphasis on the importance of self-awareness, social support, and therapeutic approaches—both psychological and spiritual—in the process of healing inner wounds.

Discussion

Childhood trauma profoundly influences psychological, emotional, and relational development throughout adulthood. The synthesis of seven reviewed studies reveals three central and interrelated topics: (1) the impact of childhood trauma on personality formation, (2) the emergence of maladaptive defense mechanisms, and (3) therapeutic and healing modalities that integrate psychological, psychospiritual, and cultural-religious approaches.

Impact on Personality Formation

Findings from (Raposo et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2025) indicate that early adverse experiences shape fundamental personality traits and self-concept in adulthood. Raposo et al. (2014) found that unresolved emotional wounds from childhood are associated with higher rates of anxiety and personality disorders, while Singh et al. (2025) demonstrated that parenting patterns directly influence the development of the "inner child," shaping emotional security and interpersonal behavior in later life. Similarly Surianti (2022) conceptualized the inner child as a manifestation of unprocessed childhood experiences that continually influence adult behavior patterns. These studies collectively highlight that personality formation is not static but dynamically molded by early emotional experiences. This convergence of evidence strengthens the argument that adult maladaptive traits such as dependency, avoidance, and low self-esteem often stem from unmet childhood emotional needs.

Maladaptive Defense Mechanisms

A second topic relates to the formation of unhealthy defense mechanisms as a coping response to unresolved trauma. Kurniawaty (2012) revealed that self-harming behaviours often serve as attempts to externalize internalized pain. This finding aligns with Wang et al. (2025), who identified that stress appraisal mediates the relationship between childhood trauma and adult mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Together, these studies suggest that adults who experienced early trauma tend to misinterpret stressful events as personal threats, reinforcing maladaptive coping cycles. Surianti, (2022) adds a qualitative perspective, illustrating how unresolved experiences in the unconscious mind resurface as self-sabotaging behaviour or emotional numbness. Critically, while these findings converge on the persistence of unhealthy coping patterns, they also emphasize the potential for transformation through awareness-based interventions.

Therapeutic and Healing Modalities

The final topic explores healing processes that combine psychological insights with spiritual and cultural meanings. Novitasari & Nugrohadi, (2021) describe psychospiritual healing as a process of transforming pain into self-compassion through self-awareness and community support. This transformation aligns with the Islamic perspective of healing proposed by Eka & Lafdiyah, (2023) which underscores the role of spiritual connection and forgiveness in addressing deep-seated emotional wounds. The integration of these perspectives suggests that effective healing requires not only cognitive restructuring but also spiritual reconciliation and social validation. Together, these findings provide empirical support for a holistic therapeutic model that honors the interconnection between mind, spirit, and culture—an approach consistent with the integrative framework proposed in this study.

Across these topics, the reviewed literature collectively demonstrates that childhood trauma produces complex, multidimensional effects that require an equally multifaceted response. The phenomenological insights of Surianti, (2022) on unresolved emotional pain resonate with the experimental findings of Raposo et al., (2014), who showed measurable psychopathological outcomes in adults with childhood adversities. Similarly, Wang et al. 2025) empirically support the mediating role of stress appraisal, reinforcing the theoretical foundation of psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioural explanations. However, while most studies converge on the importance of emotional awareness and self-regulation, only a few (Eka & Lafdiyah, 2023; Novitasari & Nugrohadi, 2021) explicitly integrate spiritual and cultural dimensions revealing a research gap that this review aims to address.

Emotionally, individuals who experience childhood wounds may have difficulty managing the emotions that arise (Cuthbert et al., 2024). This can manifest as an inability to express feelings in a healthy way, avoiding confrontation, or even getting stuck in self-destructive patterns of behaviour. In some cases, childhood wounds can lead to more serious mental disorders, such as chronic anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Monfort & Afzali, 2017; Septiana, 2021). These psychological impacts not only affect personal life, but also influence social relationships and individual careers in adulthood (Latifah, 2021).

In terms of interpersonal relationships, childhood trauma can affect an individual's ability to form healthy relationships (Greenstein, 2025). Experiences of neglect or violence in childhood can lead to feelings of insecurity and an inability to trust others (Aprilia & Yoenanto, 2022; Muis et al., 2015). The relationship pattern that forms can be unhealthy emotional dependence or a tendency to distance oneself from emotional closeness with others. In addition, individuals who have experienced childhood wounds may feel unworthy of love, which can hinder the development of healthy and fulfilling relationships (White, 2012).

On the other hand, recovery from childhood wounds can also be done through a therapeutic approach that focuses on self-awareness and emotional recovery (González et al., 2019; Mansfield et al., 2025). Inner child healing-based therapy aims to help individuals realize and understand childhood wounds that still affect adult life. Through therapy, individuals can learn to overcome childhood trauma, improve self-esteem, and build healthier

social and emotional skills (Vlah Tomičević & Lang, 2021). Various emotion based therapeutic approaches, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and self awareness based therapy, can provide individuals with the tools needed to heal these wounds (Björkenfeldt & Gustafsson, 2023).

However, while therapy can provide significant help, many individuals are unaware of the childhood wounds within them or consider them to be problems that do not need to be overcome. Acknowledging childhood wounds is the first step in recovery, which often requires support from family, friends, or a professional. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness about the impact of childhood trauma and the importance of dealing with it to prevent more detrimental long-term effects.

Overall, the impact of childhood wounds on adult life is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires serious attention from individuals and professionals. Recognition and treatment of childhood trauma can pave the way to recovery and personal growth, which in turn will improve the quality of life and psychological wellbeing of individuals. With a better understanding of childhood wounds, it is hoped that individuals can overcome their impact and achieve a more balanced and healthy life.

Novelty of the Research

This study offers a novel contribution by integrating various theoretical and empirical findings on childhood wounds (wounded inner child) into a comprehensive framework that links early trauma with adult emotional, behavioral, and relational patterns. Unlike previous studies that focused on specific trauma types or therapeutic approaches, this review systematically synthesizes multidisciplinary perspectives including psychological, psychospiritual, and cultural religious viewpoints within a single analytical model. Furthermore, by applying the PRISMA methodology, this research ensures methodological rigor and provides an updated synthesis of the latest decade's findings (2011–2025), offering new insights into healing mechanisms and self awareness based interventions for adults affected by childhood trauma.

Implications and Contributions

This study makes an important contribution to strengthening theoretical understanding of the relationship between childhood trauma and psychological development in adulthood. Practically, the results can be used as a reference for counselors and psychologists in designing interventions for healing emotional wounds based on self-awareness and social support. From a policy perspective, these findings emphasize the importance of child trauma prevention programs through family education and mental health literacy. In addition, this study opens up new directions for interdisciplinary studies that integrate psychological, spiritual, and cultural approaches in efforts to heal childhood wounds.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations, including its reliance on secondary sources, which means that the results of the analysis are greatly influenced by the quality and availability of the articles reviewed. In addition, variations in research methods and contexts in each study limit the generalizability of the findings. This study also did not conduct quantitative analysis, so the results are descriptive and interpretive in nature.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review highlights that childhood trauma exerts a multidimensional impact on adult life, influencing psychological, emotional, behavioural, and relational functioning. Through a rigorous PRISMA-based synthesis, this study integrates findings across psychological, psychospiritual, and cultural-religious perspectives, providing a holistic understanding of how unresolved childhood wounds shape adult well-being. The review emphasizes that healing cannot rely solely on cognitive or behavioural interventions but must also incorporate self-awareness, emotional regulation, and spiritual reconciliation as integral components of recovery. This comprehensive synthesis contributes to the development of more inclusive therapeutic frameworks that honor both the psychological mechanisms and the deeper existential dimensions of trauma. Future research is encouraged to expand this integrative model through longitudinal and culturally grounded studies to further explore the long-term effectiveness of multidimensional healing interventions.

Author Contributions

R.T.L. played a major role in research design, literature collection and analysis, and writing the main manuscript. S. contributed to reviewing the methodology, validating the analysis results, and final editing of the manuscript. Both have read and approved the final version of the article for publication.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declares that there is no potential conflict of interest in the conduct of the research, writing, or publication of this article.

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