

# THE INTERCONNECTION OF THE INNER CHILD, TRAUMA, AND NOSTALGIA

The Art and Science of Play: Nostalgia as Play

**How could we use play to challenge, motivate, and heal from trauma through feelings of nostalgia in order to reconnect with one's inner child?**

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## Abstract

Art and play can refer to the power of creative expression and how it allows the mind to learn meaningful information about the world and humankind. Human social development is grounded in play, as playful behavioral patterns have been noted to promote prolonged happiness. The terms art and play capture the accumulation of culture that humans have refined to express their emotions and rich history. As the world's future leaders, it is vital for us to learn more about an important life stage: childhood. Having analyzed the Honors Study Topic, *The Art and Science of Play*, we found ourselves intrigued by Theme 6: Nostalgia as Play. Our research study had the intention of understanding how people can use play to challenge, motivate, and heal from trauma through feelings of nostalgia in order to reconnect with their inner child. The phrase "Art and Science of Play," leads the mind to think about the complex and beautiful connection between art and play. Both terms can be considered to be one in the same such that they create a safe environment for people to learn and express themselves in a way that they might not be able to due to disadvantages. The theme "Nostalgia as Play" can serve as a way to recall memories, reflect on life, and our current state of being. Nostalgia helps individuals destress and focus on what matters. It is important to address the impacts our childhood experiences have on our well being. Whether a person had a fulfilling or negative childhood, they are bound to hold onto memories from that time period for the rest of their life. Additionally, the act of sharing one's memories triggers the creation of empathy, which is a powerful force that allows people to flourish. Our childhood memories carry emotions that account for the perspectives we use to navigate life.

We reviewed numerous scholarly articles, research papers, blogs, and other sources to expand our knowledge on the topic of the inner child, trauma, and nostalgia. Honors In Action is

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about helping communities, we had surveyed various Santa Monica College students questioning them about their own childhood experiences and relationships with healing and nostalgia. After studying each survey response we were inspired to host a virtual event where our undergraduate research team and other fellow attendees watched a presentation on the inner child that was hosted by a Licensed Clinical Psychotherapist known as Dr. Dawn-Elise Snipes. The presentation by Dr. Snipes addressed various factors that contribute to shaping a child's personality which could manifest into adulthood. She provided more of a psychological perspective on the topic of trauma and explained why certain patterns of behavior develop. Our research team felt accomplished knowing the video helped to open up a very important dialogue that promoted healing. The format of this project upholds the American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines that also reflect the Phi Theta Kappa Honors Program outline.

*Keywords:* Inner Child, Trauma, Nostalgia, Healing, Motivation, Growth, Learning, Challenge, Mistakes, Comfort, Character Development, Sentiment, Loneliness, Self-Care

### **Theme**

Our team focused on Theme 6: Nostalgia as Play.

### **Research Component Objectives**

- Evaluating how childhood experiences impact our current and future patterns of behavior, whether it is positively or negatively.
- Studying ways in which play and its associated nostalgia can influence how one copes with childhood trauma.

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- Learning how art mediums can trigger and help to heal wounds that the inner child may have developed from trauma.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of our study was to: 1) investigate how our inner child impacts our day to day life 2) understand how nostalgia can subconsciously bring back memories that help to heal the inner child. “Art and Science of Play” addresses the expansion of perception and the impacts play has on brain development. The use of creative methods to learn more about a concept that ultimately leads to a greater and thorough understanding is a shared experience. Furthermore, play and experimentation are notable factors that contributed towards various, if not all, scientific breakthroughs. The mediums we used during the most informative years of our life hold immense power over how we heal and reprogram our minds. To elaborate on such statements, the act of playing games during one’s childhood has a crucial role in forming one’s identity and in retrospect those moments have the ability to become beautiful happy memories. Unfortunately, this recollection of memories is not always positive. Nostalgia is such a raw, imperfect state of being that ultimately leaves people vulnerable. This theme is thought-provoking as it is an experience that every individual knows about and is impacted by. We all hold nostalgia close to our hearts when it comes to thinking about our childhood, whether it be positive or negative. Our emotional memory connects us to ourselves and to other people and we utilize our senses to help transport us to a certain time and place in the past. Therefore, play can be used as a way to evoke these emotions and memories through nostalgia when they connect to core moments and relate to significant points in our life or characteristics that we strongly identify with. The survey we organized was thoroughly thought out in a way that does

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not trigger any traumatic events in one's mind but still allows participants to reflect on their past through an analytical and sentimental point of view. The responses we gathered allowed our team to conclude if our research question could be addressed or not. Based upon the information we obtained, we developed a plan of action that involved learning more about the inner child and trauma through a psychological perspective.

Our research team selected various keywords to focus our study on. We are interested in nostalgic memories, healing the inner child, and the formation of trauma. Emotionally and psychologically growth can help one to become a more loving, compassionate, and positive person. Additionally, growth helps one build better relationships with themselves as well as with others. The importance of mistakes is that it allows for a person to learn and expand their knowledge. Most times, one is never able to know whether they are good or experienced at something without giving it a try and seeing if it was truly a mistake or not. Mistakes are incredibly important learning moments. Mistakes teach us how to interact with others and it helps us to establish boundaries between what is right and wrong. It helps shape our personalities and consciousness as we grow. Learning from one's mistakes gives us an opportunity to bounce back and provide us a driving force. Without such force in our lives, one is more vulnerable to getting burnt out quickly and then default to a stagnant position in life where they feel like they cannot move past a certain barrier. With motivation, one is constantly more energetic and accompanied by a positive mindset. Without motivation, we tend to procrastinate or stay in a "comfortable" position that does not trigger any sort of growth. Each of the keywords we chose are related to and have an impact on mental health, which can be positive or negative depending on the person's outlook on life. They can also serve as a guide to help people navigate their life by first evaluating where they are at. Rather than relying on motivation which will come and go

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in waves, people should practice mindfulness, being present, and learn to view mistakes as a learning curve, while becoming comfortable with challenges. This can help reduce feelings of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Comfort is an important key word because it can help us feel calm or at peace during stressful situations. In addition to this, shared cultural moments are incredibly important as we continue to live in an increasingly globalized world. Emotional intelligence skill sets, such as empathy, are becoming more and more prized in mainstream society. While many of us easily think about empathy and emotional intelligence within our own known cultural environments, being able to expand to international cultural shared moments is important as we progress as a species.

### **Background**

The phrase “Art and Science of Play” can be used to remind communities the importance of embracing one’s creative side. Moreover, it provides people insight into how the brain processes movement and new creations born from creative expression. People learn the significance behind finding a balanced relationship between entertainment and learning. Both parts are factors that promote people's progress, and individually help to establish an enriching and overall positive atmosphere for people to harmoniously manage that relationship. The combination of terms can be associated with fun and the development of new skills. The topic draws from the work of neuroscientists as they too find themselves intrigued by the influence play has on humankind. Rooted within art and play is the union between having fun and learning, through creativity, knowledge, and various disciplines of education. Within the study of psychology, for instance, researchers may investigate the connection between the neural processes of creativity versus cognition. The terms can make the mind wonder about the

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psychological benefits of play and the reasons behind such benefits, which can tie back to the exploration of trauma and how play contributes to the healing process.

The phrase can bring to discussion the combination of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and artistic qualities to innovate and create new inventions. Looking through a telescope captures that combination of art and science, since it describes the use of a scientific object which has a purpose of viewing magnificent and captivating stars. Play in itself can go beyond just having fun and can actually hold other motives like helping people feel connected to environments and society. Art and play overlap in numerous ways, as play can be thought to be an art form that is grounded in science, with a focus on integration and interconnectedness. Play is something people of all ages benefit from and it can even be argued that incorporating activities revolving around play can increase one's lifespan. Art is a form of self expression whereas science focuses on logical processes. Play is known to fall under both categories, as it serves as a type of self expression that reflects on ideas that people find to be exciting and engaging, while remaining abstract, yet creative. "Art and Science of Play" can be associated with imagination and dreams. It helps to expand on the saying that life imitates art and vice versa.

Life is interpreted as being made from the mediums known as art and science. Play impacts people's actions and attitudes, as it can help individuals destress and make for fulfilling moments. Art needs science and science needs art, when paired together one can expect a meaningful outcome. Nostalgia helps to unite us with our childhood memories and reminds us of our personal growth. There are numerous psychological benefits associated with nostalgia, which may include increased levels of optimism, self-esteem, and clarity. Nostalgia can be provoked from numerous things, such as words, movements, objects, certain sensations, and people. It is



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important to be in touch with our memories since it creates a space of connection to who we are. There is much value within reconnecting with one's inner child. Generations have shared experiences of playing with video games and toys, and ultimately it is these memories that bring us closer together. The simple act of holding a childhood toy has the power to bring the person comfort by taking them back to a less stressful time. Many individuals are diagnosed with dementia yearly, they each face difficulties when trying to recall memories. Nurses and other professionals use play to help patients resurface memories. Nostalgia is not limited in regards to its cause, as the term can be connected to television shows, technological creations, scents, and so much more. The theme allows people to reminisce on the past and revisit their memories. It can also unlock forgotten memories and help us to stay grounded. Nostalgia can motivate people in regards to showing them the light at the end of the tunnel. It reminds people of their potential and invites them to better prepare for who they want to be in the future.

In order to heal from trauma one must acknowledge the benefits that arise from talking about such trauma. Also, knowing someone else experienced the same type of traumas can help one move through the healing process much faster. Play, whether done through the act of consuming media or participating in video games, can take one down memory lane. People have memories of where they played, and traveling back to these locations can help them come to terms with what happened in their childhood. Play has the ability to remind one of their happy moments from childhood. It has the power to make someone retrace their past and reconnect with their inner child. It is vital for play to take place somewhere that allows one to be vulnerable. Allowing one to be vulnerable with others can make them regain their trust in others. Play opens the door for people to connect with their child-like innocence they may have lost due to trauma. Play allows us, as humans, to represent and connect with audiences. In a world where

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people feel like they are alone and going through trauma, people need to seek play. One must aim to understand the cause of their trauma. Through the art of play, people can experience feelings of nostalgia by reconnecting with a toy or playing games from their childhood, while feeling reassured that, at this time, they are safe. In addition to this, play can be considered a great outlet to let go of internal pain. The power of play should not be overlooked, since it can help one to overcome former negative feelings that branched from traumatic experiences.

To reconnect with one's inner child, one should invest in acts of play that they are passionate about. Moreover, one major benefit of play is helping to reduce one's stress levels. The human brain associates memories with emotions, but one can say that the brain does not understand the concept of time. Therefore, people can use play to time travel back to a nostalgic state, and heal their inner child. Play can be used to heal past trauma in multiple ways. For example, allowing oneself to do things they could not do as a child can help them to surpass the regret they once felt. Play can remind people of positive memories and can promote productivity. Nostalgia is considered a helpful tool for recalling memories, reflecting on life, and admiring our current state of being. Furthermore, within our study we acknowledge that all trauma is valid and worth healing. Musicians play music, the way kids play with friends. By playing music, we are able to reconnect with our inner child, feel hidden emotions, have a cathartic experience and heal. We can play music to feel nostalgia by listening to songs from our childhood to transport us back to the past. Music can help one come to terms with reality but also allows for one to escape any reality. Music therapy in itself can help in understanding and expressing feelings. This brings into discussion how music is associated with emotions, and emotions heavily impact memory. In the sense that the stronger the emotion the stronger the memory. So when people connect with music on an emotional level, whether it is relating to the lyrics or being touched by the

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instruments, the subconscious mind is making note of such time periods and songs.

Watching movies is noted to be a great activity to do when one wants to relax the mind and connect with their younger self. Children are often considered to be more carefree and fearless. Movies can help people take on such mindsets even if it is just for a moment. Movies are powerful in various ways, which can explain why many people have movie collections they safely store for when they want to revisit the past. Books have narratives that focus on themes that are universal, therefore, readers are able to project their own specific experiences--which may be experiences of trauma--but in a masked manner that they can then process and reflect on in their reading. We can read novels to feel nostalgia by coming back to books that we read during our childhood, as our favorite books from childhood allow us to feel innocent once more. Nostalgia is commonly associated with playing music, watching movies, and reading books. All cases share that feeling of comfort and allow the mind to use its incredible imagination. These acts have a heavy impact on our mood and well-being more than we think. Music is known to reach people when they are at their happiest and lowest. Playing music can help one to heal from past trauma by allowing us to connect with our emotions on a deeper level. Certain lyrics have the power to translate our emotions. Music can help one connect to their feelings that they otherwise might not be able to access, and once they can access these feelings they can process them and move through them.

Listening to music is a full experience that vibrates your senses and sends pleasant signals to the brain that create an almost spiritual like experience. Music helps bring the body into a state of relaxation and activates the parasympathetic nervous system which can help in times of anxiety or stress and can help you begin to heal from your past trauma. This artistic medium allows us to time travel back to a time where we experienced trauma and can serve as

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the lifeline we may have not had during that time. Lyrics can also do well in comforting us such that it states things we wish we had heard during our childhood. Moreover, lyrics allow us to feel heard and can truly make our feelings feel validated. Knowing others went through a similar experience makes us feel less alone, which is beneficial since experiencing a traumatic event can be isolating.

Listening to music provides us the opportunity to submerge ourselves into the words, the sounds, and the story; it brings us to our own stories and creates a connection to the past. By doing this, we reflect on some key moments in our lives and how they have made an impact on our current selves. Music is considered a universal language that can help one to disconnect from the real world and provide that moment of time to reflect and improve from negativities that one has experienced. Although music genres are diverse within themselves, they all share the quality of helping someone with their personal development. Music is considered to be associated with therapeutic effects such as bringing about behavioral changes. Movies are connected to our visual and auditory senses, the combination of both makes the mind truly expand its perspective and feel all the emotions the directors, screen writers, actors, and producers hoped to depict. By watching movies we love, we are able to connect with our feelings on a deeper level as we can relate and empathize with the characters. We can also heal from past trauma by seeing a character in the movie go through a similar experience and overcome it, therefore giving us the motivation and hope to be able to battle our past trauma ourselves. Watching our favorite movies also gives us a sense of comfort, which allows us to get a feeling of nostalgia and cheer us up. Watching movies can trigger emotions and take us back to a nostalgic time that reminds us of ways we were able to conquer obstacles in life. Movies that depict situations and feelings similar to our own lived experiences, allows us to feel less isolated. It is a universal experience to feel as

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though we are the only person to have experienced a particular trauma, but trauma comes in all types, meaning that we are not alone.

Watching movies can be nostalgic because it can bring up topics or situations of past memories. Movies have the power to spark several emotions in an individual and seeing how a character in a storyline deals with a similar situation can promote healing. Movies allow us to calm down, as certain genres can lower levels of anxiety. If a character in a movie is going through a similar situation as we are, we can see how that character handles the situation and give us ideas of how we can handle it ourselves. Watching movies can bring nostalgic memories of the past and allow us to express past emotions that we were not able to express in the past. This accounts for why movies can help one from trauma and feel comforted, as the scenes have grown to reflect our favorite childhood memories. Furthermore, movies are a great way to connect with old memories. Movies bring a storyline, characters, music, and much more into consideration which makes it easier to recognize our past. There are many movies and TV shows that make certain generations feel nostalgic, such as *Grey's Anatomy* (2005), *Gilmore Girls* (2000), and original Disney movies. These movies provoke emotions like happiness and security in viewers. When people watch a movie they are brought into a different world and can heal from trauma by recognizing their own life in such storylines.

Movies allow viewers to revisit their past memories and storylines that they may have forgotten about. By rewatching and reconnecting with characters, scenes, and music from movies, they are able to feel as though they are back in the timeframe of the original time they had watched the movie. Movies have storylines that are filled with emotions that can help one better understand their trauma. Scripts can give one redemption of something they have been through and can validate their experiences. The act of reading also has its benefits, as one can

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completely immerse oneself into an unknown world. For example, the *Harry Potter* (1997) series brings many people back to their childhood and serves as an escape from the real world. By reading a book and learning about the perspectives from which people view things and the emotional, ideological, and cultural history behind them, not only will we be better able to deal with past trauma, but we will also be able to organize our own actions needed to remove the factors that create trauma. Numerous books, if not all, contain valuable life lessons shared by the authors, which is something that promotes healing. History books, for example, allow the current and future generations to better understand their ancestors and how they overcame trauma and difficulties. Reading books to feel nostalgia can be very helpful when recovering from past trauma because it can be a great way to broaden one's perspective. Meaning that reading literature can help us feel better about ourselves, and our past and future. Books allow us to relive scenarios and circumstances we are reading in almost a cinematic scenario in our head. Creating such images in our head can allow us to relive our trauma, and allow us to feel less isolated, gain a better understanding of emotions, and allow us to heal. Music, movies, and books all help us take part in a nostalgic state as they each depict something unique and promote self expression.

### **Literature Review**

Inner child is a term that has caught the attention of many in recent years, including our undergraduate research team. We have dedicated much time and effort towards analyzing how people could use play to challenge, motivate, and heal from trauma through feelings of nostalgia in order to reconnect with their inner child. We were not the only researchers drawn to such topics, as the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Health and Well-Being* concluded

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that reflecting on one's inner child can promote self-discovery in older individuals. Moreover, the scholarly article points out how the inner child gradually becomes more and more present as the individual gets older. In addition to this, *The Play Therapist* published a blog that addressed benefits of play therapy with adults. For many people who have experienced abuse, neglect, household dysfunction and trauma, verbally expressing themselves can be difficult. It may be easier to express themselves and their trauma through play and to begin the healing process of their inner child while also relieving stress. Dr. Cohut (2021) explored the psychology of nostalgia, along with its benefits and impacts on human life. While nostalgia can be associated with feelings of homesickness and anxiety, it is also connected to various advantages that positively play a role in experiencing changes in life. Cooks-Campbell (2022) was intrigued by inner child work, which she defined as being a method of identifying and resolving childhood trauma. Her article acknowledges that adult behaviors are influenced by our childhood experiences. Inner child work focuses on reparenting ourselves to meet our unmet needs. This type of self-discovery aids in the understanding of our actions, triggers, desires, and needs.

Adults can be no different from children in specific ways, as researcher Olson-Morrison (2017) discusses how play therapy is helpful for children, but also adults with complex trauma. Play can help heal areas of social, emotional, and cognitive development compromised from chronic interpersonal trauma exposure in early childhood. Raab (2018) addresses the importance of reconnecting with our inner child. She emphasizes that as children we tend to get hurt and this carries out into our adult lives and how we interact. Not only does she state that we carry emotional burdens but that our body does as well. To cope with such burdens, she suggests reconnecting with our inner child as it would allow us to better understand ourselves. A podcast episode on *Speaking of Psychology: Does nostalgia have a psychological purpose* (2019) was

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directed by licensed psychologist Krystine Batcho, where she describes nostalgia as being an emotional experience that unifies our senses of who we are over time. It serves as a motivator to remember our past selves and experiences, which then serves as a reflection of who we are today and who we want to be in the future. This podcast captures a full circle reflection and it begins with a reflection of the past to a point of growth for the future. Our team had the intention of learning more about the importance of one's inner child and gradually that led us to seek a focus on nostalgia and play. We wanted to dive into the complexity of childhood experiences with a focus on self-discovery and growth.

An important aspect of our research is to evaluate how greatly one's inner child can be affected by the words and actions of people whom they are close to. Routledge (2019) states that nostalgia plays a key role in fostering close-knit relationships between family relatives and friends. This emotion also exaggerated the feelings related to following through one's social goals and wanting to seek connection. A key concept that was investigated in order to grasp the significance of inner child was trauma. Johnston (1997) analyzed the use of art and play therapy with victims of sexual abuse and trauma from childhood. Her research article is a literature review that discusses how healing can come about through the exploration of our inner child and expression of emotions and thoughts through the act of play, art, and play therapy. Research done on *Self-regulatory interplay between negative and positive emotions: the case of loneliness and nostalgia* (2010) addresses correlations between negative and positive emotions with loneliness and nostalgia. Nostalgia generally connects with a positive emotional state, while loneliness connects with a negative psychological state. Analyzing key differences and similarities between the two is helpful in regards to better understanding social and emotional anxiety and other psychological disorders. Bas (2021) examined the relationship between mental health and



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academic achievement among adolescents. This was an interesting approach since mental health is associated with healing and academic achievement is connected to rewards, nonetheless both are part of our childhood. Healing one's inner child is not a simple process, however, with motivation it is possible to do. *Psychology Today* published an article on motivation which stated that it gives people the willingness to keep pushing and gives them a chance to become aware of a greater purpose. Dube (2021) wrote a blog on the inner child where she mentioned that the act of connecting and doing the activity you loved as a child can recreate memories. As well as sharing stories and pictures with loved ones. She reminds readers to enjoy the small pleasures in life as we did when we were children, which is a valuable piece of advice. Gil (2010) described sand play as a method to direct the healing process of children who experienced trauma. She states that play allows the brain to reach its full potential.

Article on “The Power of Play for Addressing Trauma in the Early Years” brings forth that people can use play to heal from trauma by changing the narrative of the story as we play. As adults we are presented with the power to change the endings of traumatic stories, resulting in a healing process. British psychoanalyst, David Crenshaw (2008) explains the approach of release therapy and how it can assist in healing. Trauma is a topic that continues to be studied by many professionals as it heavily impacts the actions one partakes in as an adolescent and adult. He describes play as a safe act children can participate in to heal from trauma. Crenshaw states how powerful imagination is as it allows one to effectively explore the emotions associated with traumatic events. Research on “Altering the development of the dopaminergic system through social play in rats: Implications for anxiety, depression, hyperactivity, and compulsivity” was done in the year of 2021. This study took on a physiological approach when discussing the role of dopamine, as it is a chemical that performs important functions in various parts of our body,

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including the brain. It was concluded that having not been social during childhood could be one of the factors contributing to the emergence of mental illness. This was helpful to our research team since we got to gain a new perspective on how childhood experiences affect us later in life. Ludden (2020) described nostalgia as typically brought on by retrieval cues, such as being around friends and family or listening to music, since such circumstances can bring back old memories. Nostalgia was also found to be more recurring in people who are feeling low or depressed, as it has also been found to boost one's mood and increase a person's outlook on life.

A scholarly article on “Lost or fond? Effects of nostalgia on sad mood recovery vary by attachment insecurity” (2015) states nostalgia as being a recollection of memories involving human interactions. Being in a nostalgic state is thought to help one cope with loneliness and other typically negative scenarios and feelings. An important takeaway from such studies is acknowledging the value within expressing oneself openly and honestly at our own individual pace. Malchiodi (2020) discusses the effectiveness of play therapy and dives into research studies that promote play therapy as being a form of relief to children. Furthermore, Author Raypole (2021) wrote an article on how to heal our inner child. She mentions reconnecting with our playful side and incorporating fun and simple pleasures into our life so that it can rekindle the positive emotions of our youth. Doing this and forms of meditation can help individuals heal from trauma. These articles and research studies allowed our team to gain a great background in the concepts of play, inner child, nostalgia, trauma, and healing.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

Sixteen Santa Monica College students that range in age, major, and background. The age range of our participants can be described as being from seventeen to thirty nine. The participants were selected randomly and not due to any similarities apart from being a student at Santa Monica College. Their student status of being a part-time or full-time student was not of our interest.

### *Materials*

With the use of Google Forms, we collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Our survey consisted of a total of five sections. The first section addressed how the personal information of all participants will be kept private. It also consisted of contact information of who to reach in the case that they may have any questions or concerns. The second section required participants to input their personal information which verified they are indeed a student at Santa Monica College. The third section was most important as it had a drop down menu that consisted of twenty three questions. The survey provided each participant the space to address three required questions and two optional questions. They were also required to state their age, as it was of importance to our research. The fourth section informed participants that they have the option to be contacted in the future once our team obtains our research conclusions. The fifth and final section allowed the participants to reflect on our survey and provide us feedback on how we can better collect data.

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### *Procedure*

All participants were directed to answer three required questions and were given the option to address two optional questions. They each stated their age for research purposes. The twenty three questions they were allowed to choose from were associated with the following keywords: inner child, trauma, nostalgia, healing, motivation, growth, learning, challenge, mistakes, comfort, character development, sentiment, loneliness, self-care. One question directly asks participants how they practice self-care, which allowed our research team to better understand how they subconsciously care for their inner child. Another question asked participants about a memorable experience they recall when having been lonely. The responses to this question provided us insight into how they coped with loneliness and how nostalgia can trigger such memories.

### *Limitations*

After reflecting upon our research methods as community college students, we have gathered some notable limitations. We as a team gained so much knowledge through this process but we indeed found ourselves aware of ways in which we could have improved our study. If this research study were to be replicated, we would encourage the researchers to seek a larger sample size. If we had more time to work with, our team would have preferred to interview every single one of the participants. We found it important to seek participants from all age groups, but we surely would have had greater results if we had invited people outside of Santa Monica College to participate in our study. Our project was conducted under the supervision of other students, it would have been beneficial to have received guidance from a professor or other research professional. After analyzing our results, a handful of us found ourselves more in favor of the

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study having been a double-blind experiment. Due to the lack of time, the research survey we used within our project was not accepting responses for more than two weeks so that limited our project. As researchers, if the study were to be replicated we advise to take more time to formulate the survey. Since our undergraduate research team consisted of students, with mixed backgrounds in research, our study did have such limitations but nonetheless, our time and effort resulted in helping ourselves, our participants, and the greater Santa Monica College community participate in a self-discovery journey.

### Results

Figure 1: Twenty Three Research Questions

#### Set of Questions:

Who is the person you go to when you are feeling alone in life?

What person or role model helped you overcome childhood trauma?

Describe an experience where you felt homesick. Was there a particular person and/or object that helped you cope with such feelings?

Do you have any nostalgic memories which help to heal your inner self?

Which of these four words do you associate with your feelings of nostalgia: comfort, anxiety, growth, and/or challenges?

What would you say to your inner child?

What memories do you recall from your childhood?

How has childhood trauma affected your self perception?

How do you think childhood trauma or PTSD affected your relationship with your inner child?

How do you practice self-care?

In what ways did your past feelings and behavior impact your current self-care routine?

Describe a moment or event from your past that you reflect on often. How does the event make you feel today?

What activities did your younger self find challenging?

Describe a childhood memory of yours that led to personal growth.

Explain the context of your favorite dream.

What has helped you to overcome trauma?

Who brought you comfort after experiencing a traumatic/negative childhood event?

What brings you peace and comfort when you are feeling stressed?

How does reflecting on nostalgic times make you feel?

Describe nostalgia.

Describe a memorable experience of when you were alone.

Describe one of your most precious childhood memories.

What do you feel most nostalgic about?

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Figure 2, 3 and 4: Pie Chart Representing First Set of Questions Answered

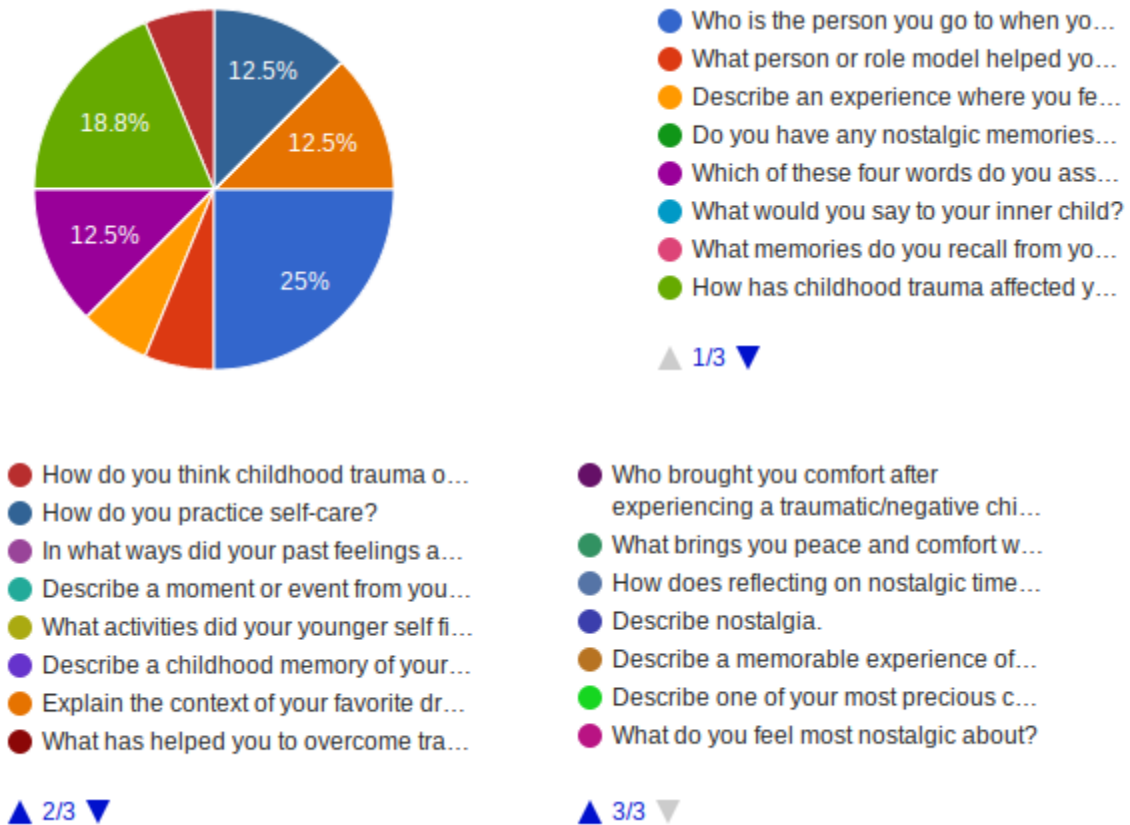


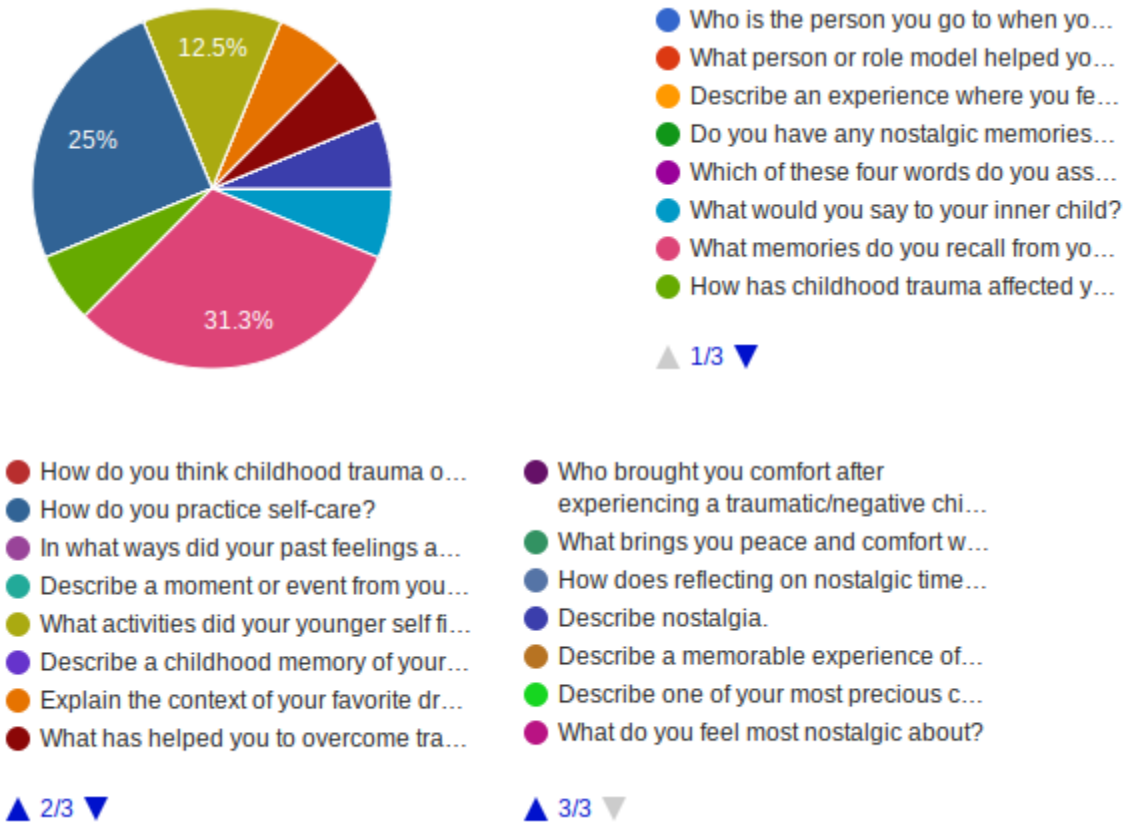
Figure 5, 6, and 7: Pie Chart Representing Second Set of Questions Answered



# THE INTERCONNECTION OF THE INNER CHILD, TRAUMA, AND NOSTALGIA

- How do you think childhood trauma o...
  - Who brought you comfort after experiencing a traumatic/negative chi...
  - How do you practice self-care?
  - What brings you peace and comfort w...
  - In what ways did your past feelings a...
  - How does reflecting on nostalgic time...
  - Describe a moment or event from you...
  - Describe nostalgia.
  - What activities did your younger self fi...
  - Describe a memorable experience of...
  - Describe a childhood memory of your...
  - Describe one of your most precious c...
  - Explain the context of your favorite dr...
  - What do you feel most nostalgic about?
  - What has helped you to overcome tra...
- ▲ 2/3 ▼                      ▲ 3/3 ▼

Figure 8, 9, and 10: Pie Chart Representing Third Set of Questions Answered



# THE INTERCONNECTION OF THE INNER CHILD, TRAUMA, AND NOSTALGIA

Figure 11, 12, and 13: Pie Chart Representing First Set of Optional Questions Answered

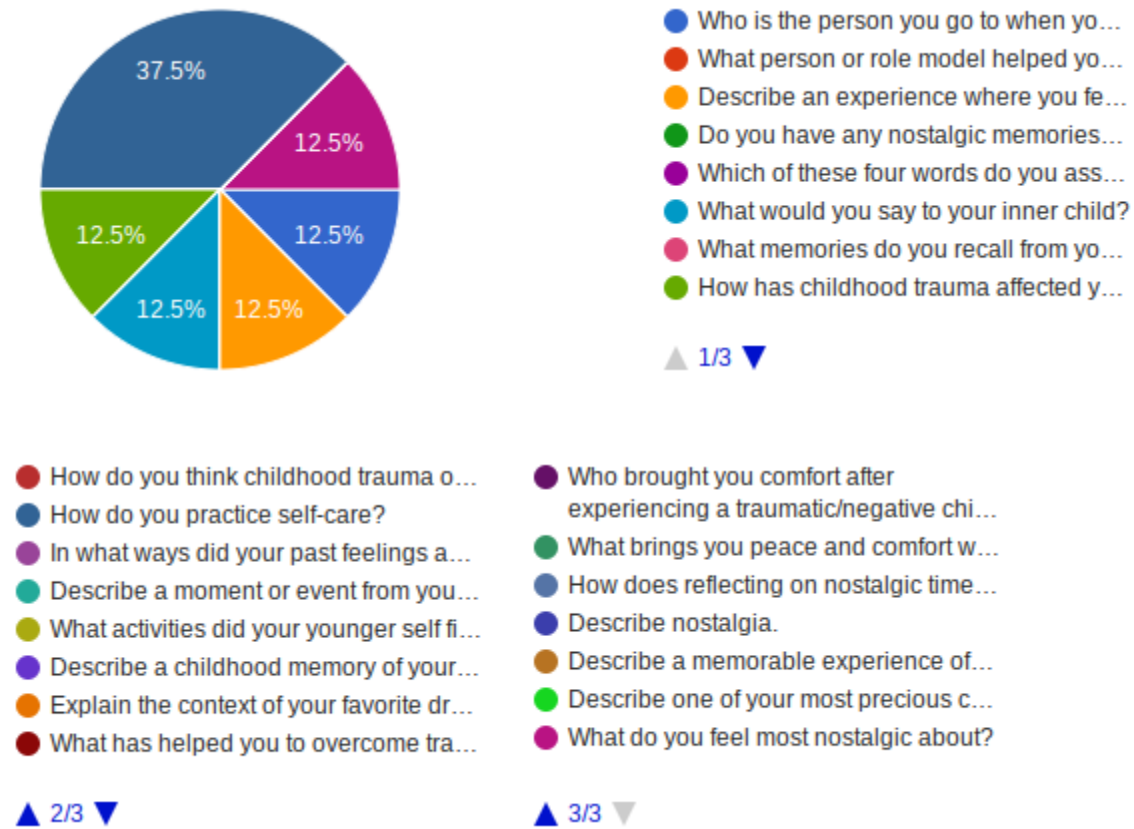
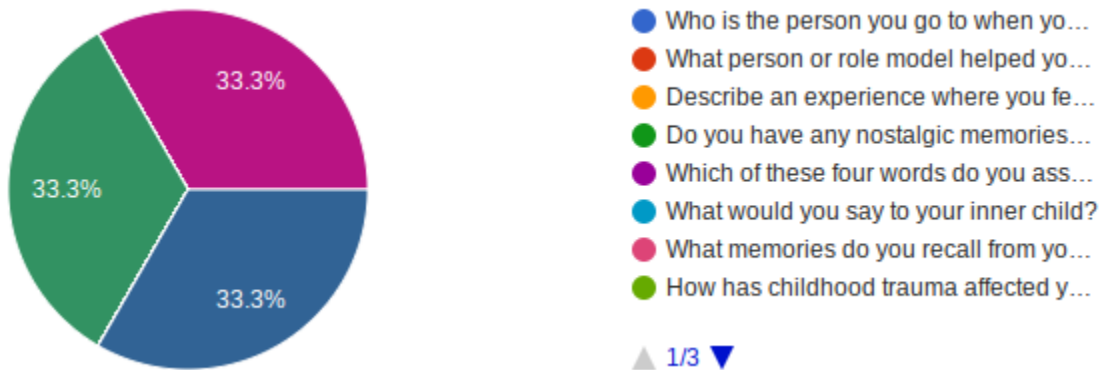


Figure 14, 15, and 16: Pie Chart Representing Second Set of Optional Questions Answered





# THE INTERCONNECTION OF THE INNER CHILD, TRAUMA, AND NOSTALGIA

- How do you think childhood trauma o...
  - How do you practice self-care?
  - In what ways did your past feelings a...
  - Describe a moment or event from you...
  - What activities did your younger self fi...
  - Describe a childhood memory of your...
  - Explain the context of your favorite dr...
  - What has helped you to overcome tra...
  - Who brought you comfort after experiencing a traumatic/negative chi...
  - What brings you peace and comfort w...
  - How does reflecting on nostalgic time...
  - Describe nostalgia.
  - Describe a memorable experience of...
  - Describe one of your most precious c...
  - What do you feel most nostalgic about?
- ▲ 2/3 ▼                      ▲ 3/3 ▼

Figure 17: Bar Chart Representing the Age Range of Participants

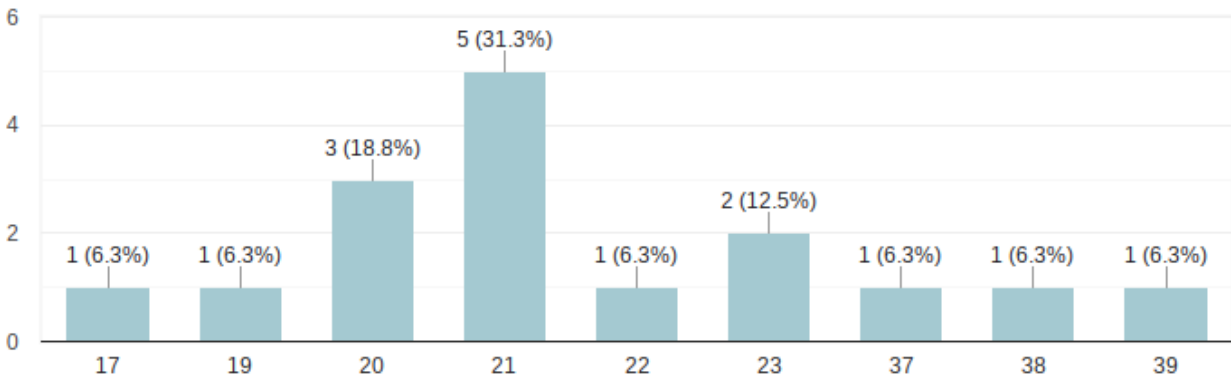


Figure 18, 19, 20, and 21: Selected Amount of Participant Responses

- 2. How do you think childhood trauma or PTSD affected your relationship with your inner child?**
  - a. Upon starting my journey of healing my inner child through therapy, I've realized that my PTSD and childhood trauma has definitely impacted how I view my younger self. Prior to putting in such work, I unknowingly neglected my inner child by suppressing uncomfortable feelings and disregarding my own needs because they were inconvenient. I would put myself in situations that would trigger my inner child, which ultimately made it harder to heal from my childhood trauma. Since my inner child was not healed from my PTSD, I found myself being attracted to toxic people because I grew up in an unstable environment my entire life- making myself small simply made sense. Presently, my inner child is considerably more listened to and I make an effort to be more attentive to my needs, so the relationship is significantly more positive.
- 3. How has childhood trauma affected your self perception?**
  - a. I look at myself with a very critical eye. I am my biggest hater.
  - b. Self doubt is incredibly hard to overcome regardless of how much success is achieved. Constantly lying for acceptance and approval takes away from feeling proud. But when things go wrong it's immediate affirmation.
  - c. Childhood trauma leads me to this day, where I struggle to get along with others.
  - d. I consider it a defining event of my life
  - e. I see myself as a very shy and quiet person because I didn't have a voice in my family when I was little. I also developed perfectionism and demanded too much from myself because this is what I'm used to, even though now nobody demands that from me.
  - f. This is actually something I have been trying to figure out for some time. I know it affected my relationships with others and myself, I just don't exactly know why. I don't know what is trauma and what is personality, I don't exactly distinguish my childhood mistakes from that of my parents and those who raised me. I know their stories definitely messed with my perception of my own intellectual maturity, independence and opened up ways for some recurrent feelings of being stuck.

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### 7. Explain the context of your favorite dream.

- a. Something relieving. But also eye-opening, like a wake up call. Nothing specific though.
- b. I'm flying and feeling totally at peace and free.
- c. My entire childhood I was raised by my grandmother who died of cancer during my sophomore year of high school. While her death was not sudden, it came as a shock. When I first moved to Los Angeles, I had a dream about her. I had never had dreams about her so vividly and she looked so healthy, she looked like how she did when I was a child. I'd also never lucid dreamt before, yet I knew it was a dream, I was able to ask her questions, and I was aware that she was gone. This experience felt like a sense of closure I never got before she was gone, and I will look back on it fondly.
- d. My favorite dream was when I successfully got drafted from an NBA team and saw a huge smile from my family.

### 8. How do you practice self-care?

- a. One way is writing in my journal
- b. going out with friends or hiking
- c. I work out a lot
- d. Simple: take a shower, make my bed, touch some grass, give out hugs and most importantly, have open conversations with myself.
- e. I often feel as if I am overly critical of myself. I try practicing self care by taking a step from what I am doing and try to let go of the little things in my work.
- f. I try to find myself some alone time to mediate and journal my thoughts.
- g. I've started just being nice to myself. Not feeling bad when I'm tired or overwhelmed. Letting calm just take over. If I'm tired I don't say that I'm lazy. I honor what I feel. But I also encourage myself that it is not permanent so that I know to go on.
- h. I don't really do this
- i. Exercise, stretching, reading
- j. By spending time with my closest friends.

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### 11. What would you say to your inner child?

- a. I would say you are enough. And the opinions of others mean nothing. Don't believe negative comments but also positive comments from others shouldn't hold so much weight. People live so much for external influences. At the end of the day if it's not bringing you peace, it's not worth placing value in.
- b. "none of this is your fault."
- c. You are seen, you matter
- d. I think about this question quite frequently, and the biggest thing I would tell my inner child is that none of the things I've been through are my fault. I struggled a lot with self-blame as I was growing up, and I needed my younger self to know that it was never my job to try to fix everyone. I was often put in a situation where I had to take care of my much younger siblings, and I internalized the fact that they had to grow up in so much instability. My inner child remains very jaded even today, and I'd tell her that things genuinely do get better with time. I'd also apologize for neglecting her for so long, and not giving in to her needs in healthy ways.
- e. Take every day one step at a time. Go day by day. What is hard today may be easier tomorrow, even if it's only a tiny bit better.

### 12. Describe nostalgia.

- a. Nostalgia is like Plato's love. It is the longing for something you can never have, a wholeness that can never be achieved. It's that feeling in your heart that you know is bad, but feels so good. When your heart is filled with memories and joys from the past, but your mind knows it can never go back to that time. Nostalgia is torture, the idealized passed that haunts the present.
- b. Nostalgia is when you get a distinct feeling when reminiscing on a certain period of your life that you can't quite feel wholly, only vaguely. It makes you yearn for that nostalgic moment, yet you know you can never re-experience it again, it's a vain emotion.

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### 14. What has helped you to overcome trauma?

- a. Facing it, instead of shoving it in the past and forgetting about it. Not being afraid to think about it. Using it to my advantage.
- d. Working inch by inch. Not looking so far in the future of what my life can be. Looking so far in the future made it overwhelming that I wasn't even close to where I should be. Now I don't look back, I just concentrate on moving forward. I know what my goals are. But it's so much easier when I look just a few steps at a time. Often when looking too far ahead it's so easy to get distracted and discouraged. It sounds very limiting. But concentrating on the small goals makes everything seem more achievable. I'd sometimes look too far in the future and end up being so overwhelmed I didn't want to even start.

### 15. What activities did your younger self find challenging?

- a. Doing things on my own that required me to put myself out there. Such as entering buildings by myself that I had never been in before, calling people that I didn't know etc.
- b. Socializing. I used to have a far lower social battery, but I've just faked it over the years and it somehow has been more natural for me. I now can choose whether to be introverted or extroverted by demand. I also have gotten more comfortable with myself, so I feel that I try just enough, in the sense that I will not do something that crosses my boundaries (whereas my younger self would totally just do that to please others, so I sacrifice my own comfort and happiness).

### 16. What memories do you recall from your childhood?

- a. My grandmother's cruelty
- b. Memories often involve being mistreated by family members.
- c. I recall a lot of memories but the ones I've been thinking a lot of lately are ones with my father
- d. Making dinner with my mom, and the awesome smell filling the house.
- e. memories of happiness and sadness

## Discussion

Sixteen participants filled out our research survey, each answered three questions and a handful of them answered two optional questions, as a result we obtained over forty eight insightful responses. A participant shared they liked to remind themselves about the bigger picture when confronted with a stressful scenario. The bigger picture referred to being healthy, genuine, being surrounded by good people, and being kind. This response stood out because various times one finds themselves feeling defeated and overwhelmed that it can be extremely beneficial to remind oneself of what truly matters. Additionally, someone responded that listening to music and focusing on a distraction brings them peace and comfort when feeling stressed. Music is a great way to distract someone from things they are dealing with. It helps to

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serve as an outlet to transfer emotions in a different direction. A participant shared practicing self care by reflecting on nostalgic times. They feel as if doing so allows them to see how much they have grown while also giving them a sense of comfort. This response succinctly expresses the emotions that many people feel, especially when looking back at their past. It also helps people better understand their inner personality. Whereas, one of our other participants stated they practice self-care by hanging out with friends and going hiking. Although the response may be short, it identifies the ways that we are able to feel comforted by taking care of ourselves. Being with friends makes us feel comforted, and hiking allows us to connect with mother nature. Both ways help in promoting our health, mentally and physically, and help us engage in mindfulness, an important aspect of practicing self-care.

It should be noted that hanging out with friends, or in other words, our chosen family holds so much value. As some of the individuals that come from dysfunctional and unsupportive families rely on such friends during their darkest times. Another individual stated they practice self care by writing in their journal. The act of journaling has always been practiced by society and it is extremely helpful when our mind needs to relax and wind down. Writing in a journal every day is a great way to practice self care because it allows us to get all of our thoughts and feelings down on a page. Journaling can help one lift the weight off of their shoulders, whether that is trauma or stress. Writing emotions and experiences down can help one transfer that negative energy and release it into the world. As a result, this can help someone begin their healing journey. One of our participants mentioned participating in online games and playing music as their way of practicing self care. Moreover, someone stated they practice self care by saying motivating and kind statements to themselves. The goal of self care is to alleviate stress and promote happiness. Self-care is a set of actions that a person takes to prioritize or maintain

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their mental wellbeing.

Another response that was quite revealing was how a participant was asked what they would say to their inner child and they responded with a short statement that reads as none of their experiences was their fault. This brought our team to realize how many of us carry a lot of guilt from past mistakes and traumas. Speaking with kind words towards your inner child is a great way to settle anxious thoughts, it is important to be kind towards oneself. The survey also incorporated a question asking participants who they go to when they are feeling lonely. One participant stated the designated person is their best friend, which is an excellent example of how having a significant individual in one's life can provide one a sense of security. Another participant shared that they go to their mom, which made us as researchers reflect upon how our guardians are typically our life-long built-in companions. Apart from this, one participant felt drawn towards answering the question that asks them to describe nostalgia. Their response can be summarized by saying that nostalgia is a distinct feeling from having reflected on a specific moment from the past. The feeling is bitter sweet since it is a positive experience but it makes the mind aware that one cannot go back in time to re-live such time. This response is interesting because it captures the conflicting emotions we have in relation to our past. The feeling of nostalgia can bring one back to a happy moment, and while there is gratitude for having that experience, there is also pain that it cannot be revisited in that way again. There is light brought to the difficult combination of feelings one endures in a nostalgic moment.

Our survey incorporated questions that were designed to be thought-provoking such that the individual was able to self-reflect. A participant shared that their childhood trauma was a defining event in their life, when questioned how their childhood trauma affected their self perception. Their response accomplished the goal of having them become more self-aware.

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Furthermore, another participant stated their childhood trauma still follows them and contributes to the challenges they face when meeting new people. This made our team gain insight into how childhood trauma can negatively impact one's emotional connections with others. Childhood trauma can considerably make it hard for people to trust others as their guard fears they will experience the same pain they felt in the past. Our survey responses ranged in length, some were quite short while others were lengthy, however, all were meaningful. A participant provided us a thoughtful response to a question that asked to share how they think childhood trauma or complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) affected their relationship with their inner child. They shared that having gone to therapy to heal their inner child led them to realize how their childhood trauma and PTSD greatly influenced their self-perception. Prior to such therapy sessions they were unknowingly harming their inner child by disregarding their trauma and getting associated with negative and toxic individuals. This participant is actively listening to their inner child and is no longer suppressing their feelings. This personal response was brave and inspiring because the respondent describes their journey with their inner child.

One of our participants stated they associate the word comfort with their feelings of nostalgia, which brought a positive light upon the concept of nostalgia. When a participant was asked what person or role model has helped them to overcome childhood trauma, they responded with Batman. This character is named Bruce Wayne and Batman is his secret identity. Batman is a superhero and Bruce Wayne had lost his mom and dad when he was a kid. As a child, he had fallen in a cave filled with bats, which led to trauma. One afternoon, when his parents took him to watch a play, there were acrobats hanging and they flared young Bruce Wayne's fear of bats. He had a panic attack and needed to leave the theater. After doing so, his parents were mugged and murdered. Bruce Wayne blamed himself for their death and was forced to dive right into his



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fear such that he became fear itself: The Batman. The participant having mentioned Batman as being someone who helped to guide them through a traumatic event was powerful since Batman took the trauma he had and transformed it into motivation to help others.

### **Plan of Action**

Having had gained a glimpse into how many individuals perceive their inner child, nostalgia, and interpret their trauma reassured us that we wanted to create a plan of action that addressed all of the above. We searched for ways in which we as an undergraduate research team could help people better understand the roots of their trauma, the existence of their inner child, and the impact our younger self has had on our present self. We developed numerous questions to ask professionals in regards to such themes. Our goal was to learn more about the process of healing from trauma, how our personality is developed, and if certain activities promoted healing. Considering play therapy is often used with children to help heal childhood trauma, we were questioning if such method is just as effective for young adolescents and adults. We hoped to have learned if there was a way to measure healing arised from traumatic events. Dealing with such events is not easy, so we seeked to understand ways in which we can connect with the events in a healthy manner.

As a team we were interested in knowing how beneficial it is to seek professional help rather than healing by oneself. We wanted to expand our knowledge upon why certain people search for nostalgia after experiencing trauma. The results from this research study sparked our interest in what the misconceptions are regarding anxiety and trauma. The topic of the inner child has gained attention these past decades, so we felt drawn towards learning if nostalgia has an evolutionary explanation to its purpose. As our plan of action we wanted to learn more about the

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inner child through a psychological lens. This was accomplished by having gained valuable insights from Dr. Dawn-Elise Snipes, who is a Licensed Clinical Psychotherapist. She obtained her PhD in both education and counseling. Her background in psychology made her an ideal candidate to help our team better grasp the concept of the inner child. We held a virtual meeting where we invited all Phi Theta Kappa members to join us in watching Dr. Snipes teach us about the inner child, childhood trauma, and coping mechanisms. Dr. Snipes was not present at our virtual event but her informative YouTube video on *Healing the Inner Child (2021)* was played during our meeting. Before it was played, a trigger warning was announced. Dr. Snipes went over five main objectives during the presentation. She informed viewers upon what the inner child is, what behaviors could have traumatized the inner child, as well as the impacts trauma has on the inner child. Her presentation consisted of describing core issues that people face when their inner child has been harmed. Dr. Snipes concluded the presentation by addressing strategies that have been found to heal the inner child.

She had shared with viewers that when our inner child is not healed or in the process of healing from childhood trauma, we tend to take on traumatizing behaviors that we ourselves had experienced. The video stated how to detect when our inner child has been hurt, making note upon how it can be subtle things that can hint our inner child is wounded. Hiding one's feelings, being a perfectionist, and/or distrusting are some examples of such traits that indicate one's inner child is in need of healing. To best connect with one's inner child, Dr. Snipes recommends actively listening to the inner child's needs, processing grief, and to identify what triggers negative thoughts and emotions. A handful of event attendees felt comfortable to share out loud their own current state of relationship with their inner child. They expressed the presentation to be helpful, eye opening, and a great motivator to indulge in their inner child. One individual

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stated that healing the inner child is an important piece of information to spread. Having had a video that welcomes people to reflect back on their past, promoted growth in many ways. A grand takeaway from the presentation of Dr. Snipes was the value behind acknowledging the pain and trauma one may still be holding onto. An attendee shared having felt as if her feelings were being validated during the presentation.

Trauma, especially during our childhood, is a very sensitive subject for many, as it can resurface negative and painful memories and emotions. The presentation by Dr. Snipes addressed various factors that can contribute to shaping a child's personality that can manifest into adulthood. The video was known to have resonated with many attendees. With the help of Dr. Snipes' various attendees were able to take on a more psychological perspective on their trauma. She had provided viewers an explanation for why we have certain patterns of behaviors. The video was considered to be reassuring, alleviating, and educational. Our research team felt accomplished knowing the video helped to open up a very important dialogue. The behaviors that Dr. Snipes mentioned that were known to have been harmful to the inner child were surprising to some attendees since they were not aware that certain behaviors such as belittling someone or bullying them was constituted as traumatizing. A keyword that the presentation focused on was grief. Attendees felt comforted to hear that allowing yourself to grieve for what they did or did not experience growing up was okay as long as they remember to focus on the present.

What was incredibly insightful about the presentation was how it displayed to viewers examples of traumatizing and internalized behaviors. Being knowledgeable about the kind of behaviors that may cause childhood trauma is imperative, as people may unintentionally exhibit such behaviors. Attendees found themselves realizing how childhood trauma is not always

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obvious and dramatic but can instead be subtle. Being informed upon these situations provides people the power to create a more positive and welcoming environment for others. Although time flies and we all grow up, we all have an inner child within ourselves and it is vital to be sympathetic with ourselves and others.

### **Conclusion**

Our research project on “The Art & Science of Play: Nostalgia as Play” led us to develop our research question which questioned how people could use play to challenge, motivate, and heal from trauma through feelings of nostalgia in order to reconnect with their inner child. The survey questions and responses we created provided us insight into how trauma can have a large impact on how one views and cares for themselves. The research question was designed to touch base on a range of perspectives and experiences that many people have gone through during their childhood; most notably trauma. Additionally, our participants were presented with the opportunity to go through a process of self-exploration which allowed them to reflect, and grow from their past. Based on the information presented by our participants, we can conclude that our research question was addressed due to the diverse set of questions asked. The participants gave responses to the questions that they felt were the most relevant to their lives, and this provided us with insight on their experiences of nostalgia. We do want to acknowledge how everyone experiences moments differently, so, we cannot state we found an answer to our research question that represents all beings. Nonetheless, we were able to obtain a broad range of information which addressed our research question. However, a broad range of information can be more challenging to analyze as it allows for a subjective interpretation.

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Childhood trauma leaves an impact on a person and such experiences contribute to their physiological and psychological development. Many of our survey responses offered us valuable information upon how trauma and nostalgia is perceived. Acknowledging traumatic events and letting those unfortunate things go is not easy, the process of healing can be difficult at first for many, but it is a journey that is worthwhile. Through the act of healing, the energy associated with our trauma can be released and is able to be filled with positive energy that will help us develop a life that we love. Our participants helped us to understand how they actively heal from childhood trauma. Past childhood experiences can have an immense impact on the way we perceive and interact with the world. Participants were able to reflect on past trauma and explain what methods of play they use to heal. The survey questions we formed as a group allowed us to view the different perspectives of self-healing through childhood trauma. The varying responses from participants provided us much insight into how others define, interpret, or perceive their trauma. We aimed towards finding out how people connect with their inner child, we accomplished this by having asked our participants about the context of their favorite dream within our survey. This question gave us a better understanding of what objects or settings they associate strong emotions with. The survey responses we gathered made note upon significant figures, feelings, and activities that have positively, as well as negatively impacted one's relationship with their inner child, and such complex emotions are a key part to highlighting the truth of nostalgia.

Allowing participants to accept and address certain feelings that were present during their childhood allowed them to work through their trauma. When one is healing from trauma, it is helpful for them to take care of themselves during the process. Finding out the

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ways people take care of themselves while healing, provided us insight into what methods may have aided an individual in taking care of themselves or in meeting their needs as a child. Play can have a cathartic impact on healing and recovering from trauma. It can simply redirect one from a negative train of thought or, more complicatedly, replace traumatic memories. The responses we obtained allowed us to make connections between childhood experiences and psychological states. Play is considered to evoke nostalgia and promote healing. Through interactions with one's inner child, a person is able to demonstrate care and attention to their subconscious mind and be in touch with their wants and needs. Our survey accomplished gaining thoughtful responses that gave us a glimpse of the experiences of our participants, experiences that helped to shape them. Certain survey questions were worded such that they allowed for participants to open up about their childhood trauma and better understand their persona. Their responses helped to unfold a form of cause and effect of childhood trauma. Through their self-reflection, they were able to address any possible inner conflicts they may have developed from having experienced such trauma. Our undergraduate research team learned from each participant the importance of cherishing and being mindful of one's inner child.

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