A Brief Introduction to Sandtray Therapy

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Judith Bertenthal-Smith, MS, LPC, ALPS
“Often it is necessary to clarify a vague content by giving it visible form...Often the hands know how to solve a riddle with which intellect has wrestled in.”

Carl Jung
Sandtray Therapy

Definition

The therapeutic use of a collection of miniatures in a sandtray. It is a non-verbal expressive and projective mode of psychotherapy where the sandtray and the miniatures are the medium of communication. It is client led and the therapist is only the facilitator. The process seeks to promote safety and control for the client so that emotionally charged issues can be addressed utilizing the sandtray.

(Sweeney, 2011)

“Expresses the inexpressible”
Margaret Lowenfeld-British pediatrician, first individual to utilize sand tray as therapeutic technique. Influenced by H.G.Wells’ *Floorgames (1911)*.

Developed, established *World Technique* at **Institute of Child Psychology** in 1930’s in London.

In 1950’s Dora Kalff introduced to *World Technique* and studied under Lowenfeld. Kalff incorporated Jungian psychology, Eastern philosophy and Lowenfeld’s *World Technique* into **Sandplay**.
## Difference between Sandtray and Sandplay.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sandtray</th>
<th>Sandplay</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open to many different</td>
<td>Rooted in Jungian Psychology</td>
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<td>theoretical orientations.</td>
<td>Utilizes <strong>World Technique</strong></td>
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<td>More adaptable</td>
<td>Sandplay therapists receive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>certification from International</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Society for Sandplay (<strong>ISST</strong>) (45 Hrs.)</td>
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Both sandtray and sandplay at their heart are expressive techniques that are rooted in the psychodynamic tradition and the Jungian concepts.
Sandtray

- Often used as an adjunct to traditional therapy.
- Compliments many different approaches and theoretical models.
- Beneficial with resistant clients (especially adolescents), trauma clients.
Why Use Sandtray Therapy?

- Gives expression to non-verbalized emotional issues.
- Has a unique kinesthetic quality.
- Creates necessary therapeutic distance for clients which creates a safe place.
- Naturally provides boundaries and limits.
- Provides a unique setting for the emergence of therapeutic metaphors.
- Overcomes client resistance. Provides needed communication vehicle for clients with poor verbal skills.
- Cuts down on verbal defensiveness.
- Intrapsychic issues may be assessed more thoroughly and more rapidly.
Which populations benefit from Sandtray?

- Traditionally used with children.
- Has been expanded to use with adolescents, adults, couples and families.
- Useful with clients who are introverted, have trouble verbalizing, are tense.
- For clients who over-verbalize or intellectualize.
- Useful in school counseling.
- Can be used as an assessment tool.
Therapist as facilitator.

- Must have belief in reality of symbolic intrapsychic images.
- Ability to spontaneously enter fully into the experience.
- Ability to let go and “step-back” from the experience by first utilizing the observer function and then terminate experiential involvement and switch to reflective function.
Materials

- Sand
  - Play Sand (Free of contaminants).
  - Colored sand
  - Rice or corn meal (easier to vacuum) **Cannot be used with water!**

- Sandtray(s)
  - Rectangular trays. One for dry sand one wet sand tray, where water can be added. Approximately 30 by 20 inches, about 3 inches deep. *(Sandplay trays have very specific dimensions and are made of wood and are expensive).*
Miniatures

- Are the words, symbols and metaphors of the client’s nonverbal communication.
- Professional literature suggests a *minimum* 300 miniatures be available.
- Should represent your clients world.
- Caveat- *once you begin collecting miniatures it becomes an obsession*, the presenter is not responsible.
- *Helpful hints*- dollar stores, yard sales, gumball machines, cracker jack boxes, cake decorating suppliers.
Categories of Miniatures

- People
- Animals
  - Prehistoric, domestic, wild
- Buildings
- Transportation
- Vegetation
- Fences/Gates/Signs
- Natural Items
- Fantasy
- Spiritual/Mystical
  - Western and Non-western religious symbols
- Household Items
- Landscaping and Other Accessories
- Miscellaneous Items
  - Medical, drug related items
Using the Sandtray

- Introduce Sandtray. Usually unnecessary with children.
  - In Non-directive: minimal or no directions are given. “Here is a collection of miniatures, you may use as many or as few as you like. Look at them, then select the few that really ‘speak’ to you. Place them in the sand, and create a scene or a world in the sand.”
  - For clients who seem overwhelmed by the free and unstructured experience you might give them a specific task. i.e. “Make a scene of how you feel when you come home from work.”
  - Ask the client to explain their world.
While the completed sandtray is important, equally important is the construction of the sandtray by the client.

Watch for placement of figurines.

Watch for sub-scenes in the tray.

Barriers and bridges.

Be aware of the developmental level of the client.
- Visually observe sandtray.
- Emotionally observe sandtray.
- Evaluate the organization of the sandtray.
  - An empty world
  - An unpeopled world
  - A closed/fenced world
  - A rigid world
  - A disorganized world
  - An aggressive world
Processing the sandtray cont’d

- Explore the theme or the metaphor of the content through interaction with the client.

- Watch for movement over sessions within the sandtray.
Cross-cultural Implications

- Be aware that the same figurine can have significantly different symbolic meaning in different cultures. (i.e. snake)

- When working with an unfamiliar culture, sandtrays can be a means in which client can share relevant information.

- Do not make assumptions.
Things to remember

- Participation is always voluntary.
- Be careful with interpretation.
- Watch for repeated patterns in sandtrays.

