Solutions in the Sand

Strategies for Using Sandtray in Counseling with Children
"If play is the language, then the miniatures are the words. Just as an empty canvas provides a place for artistic expression, so the tray provides a place for the client's emotional expression."

History of Sandtray Therapy

- 1911: *Floor Games* (HG Wells, 1911, as discussed by Turner, 2004)
- 1929: *World Technique* (Margaret Lowenfeld)
  - Later adaptations include *World Test, Village Test, Erica Method, Little World Test*, and other projective techniques.
- 1937: Carl Jung observed/analyzed Lowenfeld and *World Technique* at a conference in Paris.
- 1937: *Dramatic Productions Test* (Erik Erikson)
- 1950’s: *Sandplay Therapy* (Kalff, student of Jung)
- 1970’s: Sandtray in child-centered play therapy (De Domenico, 2008)
- 1990’s-current: *Humanistic Sandtray* (Armstrong, 2008); Adlerian approaches (Even & Armstrong, 2011; Bainum, Schneider, & Stone, 2006; Sweeney, Minnix, & Homeyer, 2003)
“According to Piaget (1951) play is the leading source of development in preschool children” (Boik & Goodwin, 2000, p. 10). Sand and water are extremely powerful tools to use in fantasy play. A safe environment is created in a sandtray where children (and adults) can “create a world that provides concrete testimony to inner thoughts and feelings” (Boik and Goodwin, p. 10).

If you ask a child to describe their problem, or why they are exhibiting a specific behavior, they generally cannot answer. They are not being defiant, but do not possess the words or understanding to verbalize the answer. When given a sand tray, they can unconsciously process the problems and behaviors. As for adults, true healing may need to come from the child within.
As an extension of play therapy theory...
- Children communicate better with metaphor through play (Kottman, 2001)
- Play is a voluntary exercise within a world of rules and expectations
- Play is free from evaluation and judgement
- Play encourages fantasy and the use of the imagination
- Play increases involvement and interest
- Play helps develop the self

(Caplan & Caplan, 1974)

Homeyer & Sweeney (1998)
As an extension of (INSERT ANY) therapy...

Requires a therapeutic relationship:
- Safe, warm, trusting, core conditions...
- “…dynamic interpersonal…to fully express” (Landreth, 2002)

Image credit: Sandra Webb Counseling
As an extension of Adlerian theory...
Children view life subjectively, draw meaning from their experiences (Dreikurs, 1964; Kottman, 2003), and have a tendency to form inaccurate perceptions (Kottman, 2001).

Private Logic (and resulting behaviors)

Healthy/Adaptive
-- I Count, am Capable, feel Connected, and have courage
-- Encouraged
-- Social interest (cooperate & contribute)

Unhealthy/Maladaptive
-- Attention, Power, Revenge, Inadequacy
-- Discouraged
-- Safeguarding tendencies

Children often display these in behavioral and other non-verbal ways.
Other Assumptions

1. Sandtray... gives expression to non-verbalized emotional issues
2. ... has a unique, kinesthetic quality
3. ... creates a necessary therapeutic distance
4. This safe distance enables abreaction – emergence of deeper-level emotions and life themes
5. With families and groups, sandtray is inclusive
6. ... naturally provides boundaries/safety
7. ...allows therapeutic metaphors to emerge
8. ...helps overcome resistance, under- and over-talking
9. ...empowers a sense of control

Homeyer & Sweeney (1998)
Sandtray Therapy Defined

“Sandtray therapy is an expressive and projective mode of psychotherapy involving the unfolding and processing of intra- and inter-personal issues through the use of specific sandtray materials as a nonverbal medium of communication, led by the client(s), facilitated by a trained therapist.”

Homeyer & Sweeney, 1998, p. 6
Preparing for the Sandtray Intervention
Materials

- Sandtray
  - 30x20x3 inches
  - Other types/sizes
  - Portability

- Sand
  - Medium Fine, white sand
  - Sterilized
  - Silica sand
  - Ocean/ sand (not beach sand)

- Miniatures
  - People
  - Animals
  - Vegetation
  - Buildings
  - Vehicles
  - Fences & Signs
  - Organic Items
  - Fantast
  - Cartoon/Movie
  - Spiritual/Mystical
  - Landscaping
  - Household

Homeyer & Sweeney (1998)
Creation of the Sandtray Scene

“Some sandtray therapists believe that the healing process in sandtray is in the creation phase of sandtray only (Boik & Goodwin, 2000)…other therapists use the sandtray as a springboard for verbal interaction.”

Armstrong (2008)
Setting up the Scene

Say: “Here is a collection of miniatures. You may use as many or as few as you would like to create a picture in the sand.”

- Make a scene in the sand about your life right now
- Make a scene in the sand about something you remember
  (Even & Armstrong, 2011)

Other variations:
- Build a world, create your world
- Make a scene of how things are at your house
- Direct and specific prompts

Armstrong (2008); Homeyer & Sweeney (1998)
Creation of the Scene

Child role: Believe and experience safety – psychological, emotional, spiritual, physical

Counselor role:
- Facilitate the child’s engagement in the process
- Trust the process; don’t rush or talk too much
- Minimal encouraging and tracking is okay
- Be attentive & observant – fully present
- Avoid premature interpretation

Even & Armstrong (2011); Homeyer & Sweeney (1998)
Most scenes are not static!

- Many children treat sandtray like play therapy…
- Children rarely create a static scene
- Be ready for the scene to change, become alive, shift gears, and move beyond the physical tray
- Be mindful of not leading the child in this way by tracking too much...he may change his scene to please you (don’t over-track what the child is doing)
Processing the Scene

An active facilitation of “exploration, expression, awareness, and discovery” (Armstrong, 2008).

Even & Armstrong (2011)
Processing the Scene

- Take a picture of the scene before processing
- Say: “Tell me about your scene/memory in the sand.”
- Maintain the focus on the scene (not the child directly) UNTIL the child shifts the focus by identifying him or herself.
- Avoid interpretation, but be tentative and curious
  - “I wonder what this thing is doing right here?”
- Consider the general theme of the scene and look for patterns repeated in subsequent trays.

Even & Armstrong (2011)
“That soldier needs to keep the tiger and dinosaur from getting too close.”

Child: “Yeah, I don’t like it when they yell at me!”

Staying with the metaphor reduces defensiveness and safeguarding, and promotes our ability to enlarge the meaning.

Even & Armstrong (2008)
“How does that feel right now, thinking about that grave?”

Child: Sad

What is that sadness like for you?

Where do you feel sad in your body?

What color is it?

What shape?

How would it feel if you could hold it in your hand?
Processing: Working with Polarities

- Any conflicting need, want, behavior, goal
- Start with the one that the child feels the strongest emotional connection with in the moment
- Remember, polarities always display disintegrated parts of the self

“Work time vs. Party Time”

Even & Armstrong (2008)
Early recollections always tell us something about the child & her experience now

Use the scene as “the way in.”

Watch for and respond to non-verbals while the child describes the scene

“I see how your face looks mean when you tell me about that monster.”

“Right now, it seems like you don’t want to talk about that part of your scene.”

“You look really surprised by that!”
Say: “If this scene was part of a movie about you, what would you want to call it?”

- The person of the child (a description)
- What the child is doing to get (behavior)...
- What the child wants or needs (goal)

“A Lucky Kid on a Fun Day Feeling Important”
“Scared Scaredy Cat Wants His Mommy All to Himself”

Even & Armstrong (2008)
References


