Understanding Children through the Sandtray

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Mary Rose Baldacchino

School Counselor
Family Therapist
Accredited Play Therapist
Filial Play Practitioner
Sandplay Practitioner
MA Arts in Education
Sandplay Therapy History

- Margaret Lowenfeld ...A paediatrician and a Freudian psychiatrist ... London .... sought for ways to explore children's thinking and feelings.

- She was one of the first therapists to consciously consider the healing aspect of children's pictures as a means of overcoming their disturbances.

- In 1911 she was inspired by HG Wells' book 'Floor Games'.

- The Lowenfeld World Technique uses trays filled with sand and collections of miniature toys, representing all aspects of their daily lives, to enable children to portray their inner worlds. It gave children the opportunity to express themselves non-verbally with small figurines in a sand box.

- In 1937 Jung became aware of Lowenfeld's technique in Paris.

- In 1954 Dora Kalff a Jungian analyst was exposed to Lowenfeld's technique in Zurich.

- Dora Kalff who wished to work with children saw a potential in combining Lowenfeld's World Technique with Jung's symbolic, archetypal orientation.

- Dora Kalff later created the term 'Sandplay' to differentiate her Jungian-oriented technique from Lowenfeld's 'World Technique'.

She (Margaret Lowenfeld) states that the production of worlds seems to be halfway between that of dreams, that are an unconscious creation, and art, that draws from the conscious, in the creation of structure and form, and the unconscious in the form of imagery. (McNally 2001:6)
Sandplay, Sandtray, Sand Worlds

Emotional

An autonomous process with little or no verbal comment or explanation.
A profound sometimes wordless rapport.

Art and sandplay therapy may not involve the therapist should the child prefer to screen him out (McNally 2001). The necessity to ‘do nothing’ may be difficult for the therapist/carer who is working with a child. If the therapist/carer has not enough training he/she might inadvertently impose upon the child’s self-regulating process of development. The issue of ‘I know better than you know because you-are-a-child-and-I-am-an-adult’ can halt the process of healing and the development of personality. (Jung, C. W. Vol. 17, Chap. 7.)

Making a world in the sand, gives a child the opportunity of making sense of his or her experience and gaining some control over his or her world in which adults appear so powerful and sometimes threatening.

As an expressive technique which is not dependent on verbal ability, Sandplay offers the child an age appropriate method for self-expression and therefore, self understanding through self-confidence. Likewise, the symbols chosen for use in Sandplay are also seen as representing something in ourselves. In this manner, through free, creative play, unconscious processes are made visible in a three-dimensional form.

“The medium of sandplay has the advantage of not triggering a child’s shame at not being a good artist, a frequent block to art therapy. Energy is freed through this process and individuation is facilitated. Along with freeing the child from a sense of shame at his inability to create art, sandplay provides a specific arena of play or area of containment for the projection of the child’s dynamic processes”. (McNally 2001:9)

The client is given the possibility, by means of figures and the arrangement of the sand in the area bounded by the sandbox, to set up a world corresponding to his or her inner state.

Observation of both children and adults during the process (of building a World), suggests that there are differences between the inner experiences of children and adults during the construction of a World. In children there is more excitement
and less reflection. In adults, for the most part, the reflective element is stronger; yet in both, the same complete absorption in the process is observed. (Margaret Lowenfeld 2007). In either of the cases, where the client experiences difficulties in verbal expression of the real emotions or adopts a defensive position, a map for the healing process can still be seen in the Sandplay images. “The Sandplay picture is to the psyche what an x-ray is to the body.” (Harriet S. Friedman).

(APAC) Other helpful equipment to have on hand is water, matches, glue, tape, dollhouse, wax (helpful in putting objects together, such as a bird atop a house, and plastic wrap so water will stay in the lakes and not be absorbed into the sand. Clay or play dough and other art supplies that allow clients to make their own figures are especially important. It is often a very significant part of the therapeutic process to make materials and create something entirely of one’s own.

The Tray

• 2 different sizes
  - 22” x 35” x 4” or 88cm x 56cm x 10cm (APAC)
  - 20” x 28” x 4” or 51cm x 73cm x 10cm (Jungian)

The size of the tray corresponds to what the eye can easily encompass.

• Have 2 trays ... one wet ... one dry
• An ample supply of sand ... fine
• Set it up perfectly flat... (like a blank canvas)
• On the floor with under 4’s.
• Waist high with others so that the individual can work comfortably.
• Wide supply of objects in ample numbers, including many of each kind ... small, different categories. In short, everything that exists in the world, as well as in fantasy, is made available. (See attached list)
• Try to have some order in your shelves. Avoid the "baby with the tigers" syndrome, in which figures end up in inappropriate or scary places. This will unsettle both children and adults.

The Helper

• needs to create an empathic presence, a holding space in which the child can work out his experience, but the carer does not need to know how it works.

• provides a free and protected space
• o physically
• o psychologically.

• adopts an empathic presence. ... (most interventions are for the carer’s benefit as s/he wants to know where at the child is.)

• assimilates the feelings and atmosphere of the process and might reflect on the content of the tray.

• in an emotional sense enters the sand tray and participates empathically in the act of creation.

• does not do any validation of the tray with children.

The Child

• As sandplay process develops and deepens
  o A sense of wonder is felt ‘I can do anything I want.’

• Decides whether to remove the tray or not. Sometimes it is better that the child,
  o Leaves the tray behind,
  o Cleans the tray,
  o Sees a picture of the tray.

Positioning

• We are usually sitting opposite the child, hence looking from the back of the tray.
• Look at the tray from the child’s side.
• Sitting beside the child could be too invasive
• Therefore not too close not too far.
Building a Helping Relationship with the Child

The non-directive approach helps the adult and the child to establish a positive relationship between them. A relationship based on trust and respect. Once an alliance is established the child feels safe to refuse an adult intervention. This behaviour is an indication of the child’s positive development and self esteem. Within a supportive relationship children will work out their fears and hurts in their dramas. In the miniature world of play, they find triumph and safety, they discharge their anger, they come to accept their losses, and they build new worlds based on their hopes and their dreams. According to McNally (2001:5) a repressed child will not be able to expend energy upon the objects provided for symbolic play until he has found the therapeutic relationship a safe haven.

Axline Principles of Play Therapy

Much of the current play therapy practice is based upon Virginia Axline’s work.

Axline was influenced by the person centred approach of Carl Rogers. She is recognised as the originator of non directive Play Therapy. Her well known book ‘Dibs: In Search of Self’ written in 1964 which describes how she worked with Dibs and how he was able to heal himself over a period of time is an excellent introduction to the subject. Axline in turn influenced Violet Oaklander who added a gestalt therapy approach to play therapy and extended the ‘tool-kit’ concept as described in her book ‘Windows to Our Children’. Dr Mark Barnes, the founder of PTI, integrated all of these approaches in his work with children, as described in the ‘Healing Path With Children’ and set the world’s first standards in play therapy training and education.

Her eight principles state that the therapist:

1. Develops a warm and friendly relationship with the child.
2. Accepts child as is.
3. Establishes a feeling of 'permissiveness' to enable the child to express himself freely.
4. Is alert to recognise and reflect back the child's feelings in a way that the child gains insight into his behaviour.
5. Respects the child's ability to solve his own problems by making choices to bring about the necessary change in the behaviour.
6. Does not attempt to direct the child’s actions or conversation in any manner. The child leads and the therapist follows.
7. Does not hurry the therapy, but follows the gradual process at the child’s pace.
8. Establishes only those limitations necessary to anchor the therapy to the world of reality and make the child aware of his responsibility in the relationship.

These principles may appear simple but their impact can be great.

**Skills needed**

**Genuineness**

For the children to experience a growth within the context of a person-to-person relationship the adult in relation to children must

- be a real person
- be willing to shed stereotyped roles.
- acknowledge his/her own reactions, values and self.

It is through our genuineness and our aliveness that we can touch our children. We serve as models for our children. *(Gerard Corey 1997).*

**Empathy**

Empathy is the ability to enter into the other person’s frame of reference, seeing the world as he or she sees it, entering into their shoes, sensing their feelings as if they were your own. Moreover it means to communicate this perception sensitively and in a language that helps the other person feel understood. It involves listening, understanding the content, picking up the feelings, and communicating those feelings and their meaning accurately.

As the therapist empathizes with the protagonists in the child’s dramas, the child feels increasingly supported, and the child’s needs, fears, traumatic experiences, etc., emerge more and more fully in the play. Since play represents the attempt of children to organise their experiences, it may be one of the few times in children’s lives when they feel more in control and thus more secure. *(Landreth 2002)*
Unconditional positive regard

In Landreth’s words (2002) Respect for the person of the child and a prizing of the child’s world are not activities of the mind. They are genuinely felt and experienced in the inner person of the therapist (adult) and are sensed and felt by the child, who deeply appreciates and values the therapist (adult) for such unconditional acceptance. This relationship with the child in the playroom (classroom), then, is a mutually shared relationship of acceptance and appreciation in which each person is regarded as an individual.

As Sue Parker Hall (www.sueparkerhall.co.uk) puts it, each persons needs are simple:

- to be respected and allowed the dignity
- to be creative
- to feel useful
- to be seen and accepted for who s/he is
- to tell and express own story / truth
- to love and be loved

She continues to write “It is my experience that a lively, warm and supportive therapeutic relationship can help us to meet some of these needs.

A therapeutic relationship can’t change the past, but it can support us to come to terms with the experiences we have lived and can make a difference to our future”.

Therefore in our therapeutic role we are not to help the child face the reality of his life, but to help him externalise the pain and come to terms with it and move on.

Many clinicians believe that it is play in the presence of an understanding, accepting adult that provides the conditions for healing. The therapist’s understanding and presence in the reality of the present is the child’s anchor in the storm. (McNally, 2001:20, 21)
The Symbols,

- Are a conceptual form
- Have greater depth than the obvious outward meaning
- If powerful, may lead to many thought paths.
- Are more than a sign. A sign is clear and direct, whereas a symbol has a depth beyond its external form.

- “It is important to recognise that the unconscious awakens in the selection of the figures and the shaping of the sandplay.

- … … we will often observe that the therapy really gets started at the moment the client is able to surrender to the play”. (Kallf 2003 : xi)

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Burying

- Valuable, precious objects,
  A wonderful aspect of self which we do not acknowledge
  So tell me about it.
- Because it is so painful … do not want to look at it right now.

Ignoring

- Ignored or rejected objects represent represses or rejected parts of the psyche. (McNally 2001:13)

Chaos / Disorganisation

- Chaos is always about transition and change.
- Chaos is of value because it is about change … transition.
- Chaos and peace are mirror images of each other.
Benefits of Sandplay

- Facilitates the individuation process
- Frees creativity, inner feeling perceptions and ............ bringing them into outer ........
- Creates bridges from the unconscious to the conscious.
- Invites spontaneous play, no right or wrong way.
- Allows defences to diminish because it is not threatening.
- Functions as a natural language.
- Empowers the client by allowing movement from position of victim to creator and by impacting his / her own course of therapy.

What to look for when observing

Objects

- Choice of objects
- Order of placement of objects
- Movement of objects
- Interaction between objects.
- Interaction between object and client
- Objects chosen but not used.
- Use of space in tray.
- Direction ... facing
- Buried objects grouped

Client

- Body language
- Body movement
- Facial expression
- Concentration
- Mood
- Verbal ... non verbal

Therapist

- Body
- Affect ... emotions
- Thoughts ... mind
- assumptions
MINIATURES FOR USE IN SANDTRAY

LIVING CREATURES.

a. ordinary man, woman, child  
b. soldiers from at least two different armies  
c. entertainers, dancers, circus, sports figures, etc.  
d. people from the historical past: knights, cowboys and Indians, etc.  
e. people from different races and cultures  
f. animals — domestic and wild  
g. 1 from the past — prehistoric

FANTASY/FOLKLORE.

a. Cartoon characters — Disney, Smurf, my little pony etc.  
b. Comic Book... characters — Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman  
c. Educational— Sesame Street, Muppets, etc.  
d. Other world- — Space creatures and explorers  
e. Monsters — all kinds, vampires to the Hulk, witches, Godzilla, etc.

MODERN MYTHS. — Hero vs. Villain themes (choose a few collections)

a. Star Wars collection  
b. Masters of the Universe collection  
c. GI Joe collection  
d. Transformers, Robots, etc.

STORY BOOK CHARACTERS.

a. The Wizard of Oz, etc.  
b. Fairy Tales Characters — Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, etc.

STRUCTURES & LANDSCAPE.

a. houses, castles, fire stations, gas stations, etc  
b. blocks which can be put together to represent structures fences, stone wall imitations, etc.  
c. trees, bushes, flowers and plants of many varieties

TRANSPORTATION

a. bridges or blocks which can be used for a bridge or overpass; cars, trucks, trains, planes  
b. road equipment, farm equipment, police cars and helicopters transportation signals (stop, signs, etc)  
c. school desks or equipment  
d. hospital equipment, beds, nurses, stretchers, etc.

IMAGES

a. from Nature — shells, rocks, crystals, wood  
b. from Myths and Books — wizards with wands or crystals, wise man or woman with crystals, animals with crystals i.e. Unicorn, Pegasus, etc.  
c. from fantasy stories - Merlin, King Arthur, Yoda from Star Wars, etc.
Reading / Reference List - Play Therapy


