

The Power of Worlds in the Playroom

By Theresa Fraser

Sandtray worldplay is a powerful psychotherapeutic intervention that can be used individually with children, teens and adults as well as during group process. “Currently, there are two schools of Sandtray therapy - a continuation of the Sandplay approach as developed by Dora Kalff, and Sandtray-Worldplay as created by Dr. De Domenico. Although these two methods differ in respect to theoretical assumptions, both schools are experience focused, both honor the natural process of the unconscious, and both are non-interpretative” (Kwasniewski, 2005. p.70).

Retired Michigan Sandtray Therapist Millie Ericson states that the Sandtray process is “a wonderful tool for opening up that center within us. With this approach, one has a small tray filled with sand and a wide selection of miniatures with which one builds a world in the sand. From the world that emerges, story and experience helps to enlighten our life and path” (Ericson, 2010). This intervention is therefore also very appropriate to use as part of a supervisory relationship as what shows up can provide an alternate or more in depth view of a clinical concern.

The steps of Sandtray Worldplay support a client centred approach. “The aim is to help the client, even in the beginning stages of therapy to take full responsibility for his/her journey. The therapist relates to the client and supports and midwives this journey. The primary learning that is reinforced is that the source of wisdom and healing lies within the client self: the self directs the play, the self implants wisdom and reality into the play; the self informs the way the client experiences his/her own play” (De Domenico, 2002).

This article will briefly chronicle the journey of one sandtray builder. She is Mary, age 10, who is currently in foster care. She is awaiting the courts to decide if her parents will become long term visit parents or if she and her two siblings will return home. The three children were removed from their

parent's care as a result of domestic violence and neglect. Mary has been in the same foster home for the past year and with the exception of episodes of tantruming, her foster parents report that she is functioning well in her current placement.

In the initial play therapy session, Mary was encouraged to select miniatures or images to create a world in the sandtray. She chose a tray with blue sand and then placed images therein. She "built" in silence and with great focus until she was ready to introduce me to the figures that she had placed in the sandtray. She titled the world: "life". Down the middle of the tray she placed a fence and introduced me to one side of the world with children and parents who were scattered with backs to each other participating in individual past times. She noted that some of the children in this realm felt forgotten. On the other side was a larger family gazing at each other in a circle with children and adults playing together. When invited to add, take away, or move images, she placed one character in the middle of both experiences (adding that this little girl wanted to be in all spaces at once in this world). Placing her with a foot in each world honored the character's ambivalence.

Thus begun Mary's therapeutic journey using sandtray to express and process her feelings about being in foster care and about all the adults she has been connected to in her life.

In a subsequent session Mary created a wedding scene in which there was a Bride and Groom as well as elders from generations past and children not yet earth born. All were present to honor this rite of passage for a couple that the little girl hoped could keep the promises that marked this day. Sadness was the feeling Mary identified in this world as she stated that the bride and groom wanted to be good to each other but they let other things get in the way of their personal and family commitments.

At no time did Mary verbally draw connections with what was built in the sandtray to her current life experiences. Dr. De Domenico teaches students that psyche will interpret worlds when psyche is ready. Therefore a

sandtray/worldplay therapist vows that only the builder can translate what the world means for them as the symbols can mean different things to different people based on their own individual realms of experience. That said, with each world built and experienced, Mary's ability to verbalize feelings and needs increased outside of the sandtray room. For example, in past sessions, she stated to me that she wants her parents to move to the same city as her foster parents so she can have everyone together. In more recent sessions, she has said that she hopes her parents will complete the tasks asked of them by the judge so her family can be reunited. She is also able to identify future support persons to ensure that she and her siblings are "well taken care of" if the family is in fact reunited.

Sandtray Worldplay has also helped Mary to process the anxiety and loss she is experiencing as a result of recognizing that she may soon be leaving a foster family and community that has provided her with a sense of safety and belonging.

Sandtray Worldplay has provided Mary with the time, space and tools to acknowledge and process her experiences. The sand, water, and miniatures were however, only the beginning. What appears to have come after is:

- Self awareness
- Increased awareness and understanding of her family system
- A desire to ensure that those around her can hear her so she does not feel forgotten again.

Utilizing the Sandtray Worldplay approach with Mary has acknowledged that she is the holder of her own healing and wisdom.

References

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About The Author

Theresa Fraser, MA, CPT, works with children, youth, and families. She is a founding clinician/manager of clinical services at a Children's Mental Health Agency. In 2009 she published the book *Billy Had to Move* to help children deal with the foster care experience. She has provided workshops internationally to foster care providers about the challenges of daily service provision for children who have experienced trauma and attachment disruptions. She has been a part-time Professor at Humber and Mohawk Colleges, and is a Certified Play Therapist with the Canadian Association for Child and Play Therapy. She is currently the President of the Canadian Association for Child and Play Therapy. She completed the six levels of Dr. De Domenico's Sandtray Worldplay training program.