

CLINICAL EDITOR: This article discusses the power of metaphor and Sandplay. The author suggests varied meanings that can be gleaned from metaphors communicated by children when they use symbols and movement in miniature in the sandtray.

Metaphors in Miniature

Exploring The Power of Sandplay

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“The Sandplay picture is to the psyche what an x-ray is to the body.”
– Harriet Friedman

After 25 years of using sandplay therapeutically with children of all ages, I am increasingly awed and inspired by the amazingly creative and powerful work-play this modality makes possible.

This therapeutic mode was created initially by children in the playrooms of Margaret Lowenfeld (1979) in 1920s London. It was further developed into a therapeutic modality by Dora Kalff (1980) in Switzerland. Sandplay, the therapeutic use of miniature toys and sand contained in trays, taps into the natural and spontaneous play of children. Miniature toys, displayed in an easily accessible way, make any setting familiar and comfortable; invite fantasy play in children of all ages and build rapport. These toys create a bridge to the therapeutic situation.

Sandplay readily offers the most essential elements of play therapy. The child easily leads the way, choosing the content, pace, process, and outcome of the play. Individual styles are accepted. A child can be silent or narrate every move; the child can play independently or initiate extensive interaction with the therapist. The child can spontaneously play leaving toys in a jumble, or carefully and artistically create an expressive image. Whatever their abilities; success is guaranteed. No talent or technique is needed. Anything created is easily changed. The process of healing takes place

internally while the child plays with the sand and figures. This is accomplished without the need for interpretation, verbalization, or conscious awareness.

The sandplay process involves the whole child: the senses, emotions, thoughts, and behavior. Because the body and mind are fully engaged, this experience creates neural pathways in the brain, develops new memories, and builds internal resources which can be called upon in later real world situations. Many children, even the most anxious or angry, hyperactive and distractible, seem able to concentrate their attention, to work with a kind of meditative focus that gives them access to a deep level of psychic functioning.

Sandplay makes the abstract concrete. As opposed to virtual forms of play, figures are tangible; symbols can be handled as well as seen. Images can be combined into clusters which communicate visually and simultaneously many meanings as opposed to the linear-sequential restrictions of verbal therapy.

The process of making scenes with miniatures allows clients to be in complete control, while limiting responsibility to a tiny, manageable world. With structure and form, experiences become meaningful and hidden aspects of the child's self can be expressed and acknowledged. Imagination can be given free rein, behavior rehearsed, and obstacles defined and



overcome. Resources can be discovered and utilized and fears faced. Conflicts can be resolved, solutions generated, and relationships explored. This can be accomplished on a symbolic, unconscious, and non-verbal level. This allows for the revelation to occur in silence. 'Unspeakable' events and secrets can be revealed while concealing from the child's conscious mind what the child is not ready to confront. Thus, deeply troubling situations can be worked on without re-traumatizing or disturbing functional defenses. Potentially damaging post-traumatic secret rituals are released into the tray (Gil, 1991). Worst fear scenarios can be played out with different endings, with humor, and with hope. Chaos can be contained and directed into creative purposes.

The sand tray absorbs fear, anger and hurt as these feelings are revealed in play scenes. Shadow elements can be brought out into the light, handled, seen, acknowledged, and integrated. Superheroes and other allies can be introduced to balance the shadow power, and used to help fight internal battles (Kalff, 1980). By responding within the child's own chosen metaphor, a therapist is able to build a "co-transference" relationship based on mutual respect, learning, and caring (Bradway & McCoard, 1997). Entering the world of and developing empathy for the troubled child is considerably less problematic when buffered by sand, tray, and miniatures. Aggression and anger played out in miniature stay within the comfort and acceptance levels of most therapists and the controllable anxiety levels of most children. Photographs provide a visual record of the child's creations, and deepen the therapist's understanding of changes taking place over time.

How then does sandplay help children accomplish the goals of play therapy? Creativity, imagination, and visual, 'right brain' learning are fostered by the materials and the freedom to use them in "almost any way" children choose. The process naturally leads to a positive sense of control over their 'small world' and a sense of responsibility for their actions and creations. The tray and its contents provide a metaphorical and reflective mirror which the child self-creates and thus becomes able to 'own'. An intimate therapeutic relationship can develop with less dependence, because it is buffered by the tray.

Ego development and other psychological processes can be observed in the child's use of objects in the sand tray. Fences and signs imply an ability to identify one's own limits, while

construction equipment provides the power to build. A healthy ego is symbolically able to nurture babies and animals or give guidance as a police officer or as a tribal leader. Soldiers, bodyguards and athletes are often positive ego figures. As ego strength grows, shadow symbols take on less menacing form (Henderson, 1964).

Developmental growth factors are encouraged by sandplay work. Choice making is integral to sandplay: deciding which figures to use and how, what to save, change, destroy, remake. Choices become more conscious and mindful as the client's work proceeds. Problem solving skills lead to creative solutions, such as how to keep the sand tunnel from collapsing or how to express anger in powerful yet non-aggressive ways.

Mastery is developed through the opportunity to act out negative situations in the miniature metaphor. A sense of constructive power replaces victimized vulnerability. The positive power of magical thinking, the sense that our own efforts make transformation possible, can, in the sand tray, become integrated into tangible reality. Once children have imagined positive, resourceful solutions, they are much more likely to achieve them.

Self-discovery leads to age appropriate identity formation encouraged by the diversity of figures. The opportunity to safely express and explore all aspects of who they are and hope to become, allows children to observe, respect and value themselves, develop autonomy and self-efficacy. As children show their strengths to the observer, they begin to integrate them into a more positive self-concept. Thus a tiger and a rabbit find ways to co-exist, compete, and play. The Buddha, the Beast, and the divine Baby are recognized as valid players in a child's psyche.

Children work with the sand and the figures on normal developmental tasks, an opportunity often missed in troubled childhoods. The search for object constancy becomes miniaturized 'hide and seek', burying and retrieving in the sand. Categorizing, learning about similarities and differences, forming connections (family groups of like animals) and separations (opposing sides of battles) is facilitated by the multitude of miniature figures.

The tray provides boundaries and creates a tangible "special play space" which activates the child's imagination, inviting the placement of figures. The visible, tangible, but non-restrictive

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containment helps children to accept, create, and expand limits in their lives. Overly rigid boundaries become more flexible as demonstrated by the child adding a gate, thus allowing vehicles to move more freely. And overly fluid boundaries are strengthened as fences and signs structure a scene and roadways contain traffic.

The miniature collection combines both realistic and fantasy images of all kinds, offering an abundant, rich vocabulary for the child's language of play. Bridges, birds, babies; treasure, toilets, turtles; fire, fences, flowers; scary shadow figures, monsters, sharks, dragons, nurturing or protective power figures, strong people, lions, dolphins, keys, weapons, shells, and coins are tools which offer much variety in sandplay. With these tools displayed, children feel permission to explore and reveal ugly and beautiful, scary and safe, painfully broken and magnificently whole aspects of their lives. Collections can be tailored to special populations (cultural items, ethnic figures); different ages (sturdy, colorful, and large for pre-school; intricate, ambiguous, artful and natural for adolescents); and made portable to carry to schools, homes, hospitals, camps and many other settings. Thus, with some thought, energy, and creativity, sandplay can be effectively used with diverse populations and settings and can engage even those who are resistant.

The inclusion of mythological and fantasy figures from diverse cultures and historical eras connects children to the collective unconscious of archetypal symbols and the accumulated wisdom of humankind. Archetypes are most clearly in play when the

images that appear in a sand tray represent cultures or religions to which the child has had no direct access (Jung, 1964). Spiritual images encourage expression of an aspect of a child's life that rarely enters the playroom. As children connect to these collective and spiritual energies they do not feel so alone in their suffering (Kiepenheuer, 1990).

As a play therapy, sandplay offers unique advantages. Sandplay combines the benefits of other frequently used play techniques: As with puppets, play with miniatures involves movement, verbal expression, and invitation to shift identities. Like art, sandplay concretizes feelings, non-verbally externalizes the internal, and leaves a tangible product. As with a doll house, children use the materials to explore family, relationship, and belonging issues. Sandplay facilitates storytelling, making it possible for even very young children to identify characters, conflict, possible allies and resolution in their life stories (Hunter, 1998). Sand, like clay, helps children who are afraid of making mistakes since it is easily fixed (Oaklander, 1978).

Through contact with the sand and miniatures that sandplay makes available, children find access to the depths of the psyche, the collective unconscious where meaning and healing are generated. What their spirit can believe in, their mind can imagine and their body can express through creative play.

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