

# Sandplay therapy

Alan Penny describes the benefits of using sandplay as a therapeutic tool with children who might otherwise find it difficult to express themselves; Karen Clark shares a case study



DESIGN PICS/ALAMY

*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 the intellect has wrestled in vain.<sup>1</sup>*

The tray used in sandplay is the free and empty space where clients can choose to create their own world, allowing their inner voice to speak. Sandplay allows the client to be available to their innermost feelings, representing in images what is happening to them not only in their outer world but also allowing them access to explore their inner world in a non-verbal process.

The therapist supplies a sand tray, water and as many objects and materials that can be collected and thought of. Sandplay can be used with children, adults, couples, families and groups, but is especially effective with children and young people as 'play' and 'sand' are familiar to them.

Throughout our childhood, most of us played in the sand or dirt and by doing so most clients will find it hard not to conjure up a childhood memory, as such sandplay can evoke powerful memories for client and counsellor.

There are no boundaries to expression as far as sandplay goes. Each client will do what is necessary for them at the time, which the therapist must trust without judgment, a challenge for many of us.

*Sandplay therapy is a prime facilitator for the individuation process.<sup>2</sup>*

Sandplay allows the use of imagination and provides a natural mirror for the individual. It is also a doorway to innermost feelings with symbolic language used to communicate feelings and experiences in a safe and accepting environment.

## Theory and history

Sandplay therapy complements many models of counselling, such as gestalt and cognitive approaches, and can become part of the person-centred approach if requested by the client, once it has been made available for them to consider. Along with interventions of reflection and open questioning, sandplay is valuable during counselling once trust and rapport have been established.

Sandplay has been traced back to the sand paintings of the American Navaho Indian<sup>3</sup> tribes, where they were used for rituals of healing and enhancing communication between participants.

Sandplay therapy became popular in the late 1920s with the likes of Melanie Klein, Anna Freud and Erik Erikson using play and creativity as part of the therapy process, especially for children. In 1929 Margaret Lowenfield, a British paediatrician, originated the 'World technique'<sup>4</sup>, also known as 'Worldplay', which was the precursor to sandplay.

In 1911 HG Wells wrote *Floor games*<sup>5</sup>, believing that play provided an environment for the expansion of innovative ideas. Wells told how he participated with his two sons, using pieces of wood, paper, plasticine and miniatures of people and animals, playing games and making cities and islands. He made an important contribution in recognising the activity of creative imagination. Lowenfield was inspired by Wells' book, and said 'Have the created world confront its maker, rather than having the therapist confront the maker of the world'.

Jung, of course, was also a forward thinker in the use of imagination and creativity in the growth of individual process. In the 1950s a Swiss Jungian analyst, Dora Kalff, studied with Lowenfield and adapted the world technique, naming it sandplay.

## The benefits

Sandplay is highly effective in facilitating a process that allows the freeing up of creativity and inner feelings, perceptions and memories to surface into outer reality. The client may regress into past experiences and this must happen in a safe and secure environment, monitored by the therapist. Sandplay can create bridges from the unconscious to the conscious, from nonverbal to verbal, revealing

## Case study: Working with transition and change using sand trays

This case study illustrates the power that sandplay therapy can generate in an individual in the first session, enabling the therapy to be structured and focused, and shows a few indicators to be looking out for.

The way you work will depend very much on your theoretical background but it is important to remember to give the client space and time to create, to observe and notice, and never to assume that you know what is in the sand tray.

In this example I have chosen, as I often do, two sand trays to demonstrate how I might work with transition or change in a client's world.

I have used the scenario of a client who is worried about starting a new school. She has had to change schools due to bullying and social exclusion. We work on preparing for her to start at the new school.

In sand tray 1 I asked the client to create a picture of what it was like for her in the previous school. I was asking her to create her 'world' as she experienced it at the school she has just left. In sand tray 2 I asked the client to create her 'world' as she would like it to be in her new school.

It is important to give the client as much time as she wants to create these sand trays. While she is creating the sand tray, I would be looking out for any indications of the way she may be feeling. The key is to watch and notice, rather than interrupt and make assumptions.

Here are a few things to look out for while you are observing:

- **Body language** Does it change in any way while she's creating? Does she start to appear withdrawn? Is she shaking or does her breathing change? If so, what may that indicate? Does she seem angry or upset at any particular time?

- **Which objects?** The choice of objects is important but be careful not to make assumptions. In both these sand trays the client seems to have represented herself by using the smallest person

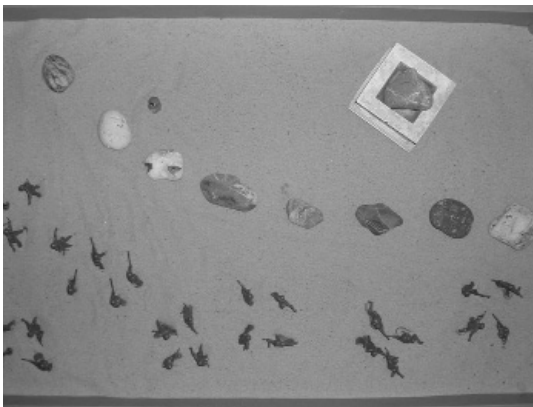
in the set of Russian dolls. She used the same object in both trays. This could be an indicator of how she feels, it could be that she just didn't think to use anything bigger to represent herself in the second tray. Or it could even be that the object representation in the second tray is different to the first.

- **The way the 'world' is created** Does the client carefully place the objects? Do they forcefully push them into the sand? Do they bury them? Do they talk to them as they put them in the tray? Do they act differently with different objects, perhaps being gentle with one and rough with another? Notice all of these things and possibly use it in reflection when the tray has been completed.

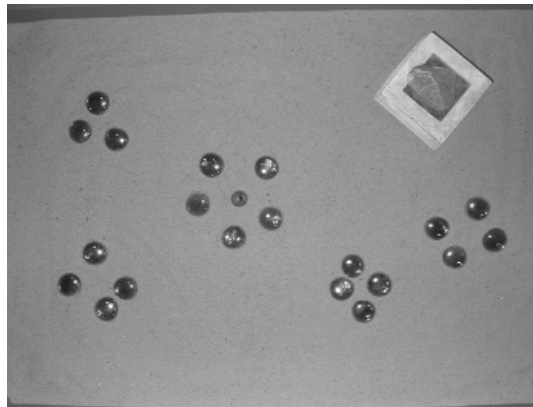
- **The length of time taken** Particularly useful when working with two sand trays. For example, if the client takes very little time creating the first sand tray and a long time with the second, what could this indicate? It might be easy to presume that this is because she wants to get away from her past and look to the future. However, it could mean that the client is really concerned about the issues involved in attending her new school and is actually spending a lot of time on it due to her concerns. Discuss this with the client and find out what she feels and thinks.

- **Appropriate questions** Questions relating to the sand tray. For example, if you were in the sand tray, where would you be? If this 'person' could talk to this 'person', what would they say?

By the client creating two different 'worlds', you are allowing her to express thoughts, feelings and behaviour without the need for verbal communication. If the client had been asked to verbally describe experiences in her previous school and her expectations of her new school, she may not have been able to communicate this as effectively as with the aid of the sand trays.



Sand tray 1



Sand tray 2

hidden material. It can also invite spontaneous play; there is no right or wrong way in sandplay therapy. As it is often perceived as being non-threatening it can also allow defences to subside, especially in children where it can function as a natural language and as a common language among diverse cultures. It can empower the client to move from victim to creator. It is important that therapists experience sandplay first hand and discover its power. Unless we have examined who we are through sandplay, it will be difficult to be effective in understanding the client's world.

### The therapist's role

It is important that we act as a container for the client, holding what is happening in the sand tray and the room. It is also important to actively listen and observe without judgment or distraction, and be totally present in order to help the client make links in the sand tray. During this we are assisting the transition of the client's unconscious content into their consciousness, supporting the emotions that are evoked and helping the client express their feelings. The opportunity is there to explore the client's creation and to witness and reflect back to them their process. Validating and strengthening their experience is essential but it is not for the therapist to interpret.

While sandplay therapy is a powerful technique it may not be beneficial to all clients. There are times when it should be delayed, altered or not used at all. It is most effective when used by clients who are willing and able to self reflect, and hold a desire to be healed and a willingness to be involved in therapy. This may be many of your clients but it is vital that the client agrees to make use of the sand. You may feel that some clients would benefit from sandplay therapy, yet it may take some time before they agree to take part, if at all.

Clues about clients' and practitioners' attitudes towards the idea of 'playing in the sand' include negative verbal comments, retreating from the trays, body tensions and facial expressions. Never force the issue if resistance is shown; clients should always be able to opt out at any time.

Clients who have excessive emotional energy and those with obsessive compulsive disorders, dissociative personalities or ritualistic behaviour, ought not to be given access to sandplay due to its potential to exacerbate their problems by amplifying their behaviour and creating further anxieties.

There are distinctions between working with children and adults. For children, play is a natural process whereas for adults it may be a distant memory and a part of them that has been lost. Children lack the inhibitions that we adults become conditioned to, they are more physical in their play. Children tend to be less verbal or theoretical and more practical, which can sometimes hinder the

therapist in evaluating their progress and exploring the play. Children are often ignorant of their inner state. Developmental phases often dictate the objects selected by children. In the first phase, ages six and seven, animals and vegetation dominate; from 11 to 12 years, battles and conflicts take over; and through adolescence real life can appear and a sense of social being is acknowledged.

### Supervision

As far as supervision is concerned photographic evidence can provide a true sense of the client's process. The therapist, depending on the frequency of the sessions, can relate to the supervisor the various stages of the therapy, with the individual recording forms. These consist of what objects they used and how, and also how the sand was arranged. They also include the client's verbal or non-verbal reactions, as well as their own reactions and what they noticed, and explanations of their reflections. This enables the therapist to identify and monitor their professional and safety aspects and gives credence to each session stage by stage. It is advantageous if the supervisor has experienced the power of the sand tray themselves.

It is important to be aware of transference and counter-transference during sandplay. The client may see the counsellor as the bad or good mother or the stern father, etc. Be aware also that mistakes may be made about the client in both a positive and negative sense, creating counter-transference. What is needed in the session is to transform the transference and counter-transference into that of reality in the here and now, involving the client's and counsellor's possibilities and limitations.

Sand trays can be an emotive tool when working with children and young people. Their power cannot be overestimated and caution should be exercised even by the most experienced counsellors to ensure that children's and young people's experience of sand tray work is safe and effective. ■

### References

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- 4 Lowenfeld M. Understanding children's sandplay: Lowenfeld's world technique. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press; 2005.
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