



# Sandtray in the Schools: A Developmentally Appropriate Intervention

Stephen A. Armstrong, Ph.D, LPC-S, RPT-S, CSC

Texas A&M University-Commerce

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[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)

[www.sandtraytherapyinstitute.com](http://www.sandtraytherapyinstitute.com)







# Sandtray Therapy

- An expressive mode of psychotherapy that involves the unfolding and processing of intra-psychic and interpersonal issues through the use of sandtray materials as a nonverbal means of communication (Homeyer & Sweeney, 1998).

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



## Why use Sandtray?

- Many students between the ages of 9-13 (and older) have trouble expressing themselves verbally
- They may be able to but unwilling to disclose certain kinds of issues and experience various emotions with a counselor

[steve\\_armstrong@tamuc.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamuc.edu)



## Allows Indirect Expression

- Sandtray allows students to use objects rather than words to express emotion and issues that are difficult for them to discuss
- Metaphor increases a feeling of safety and provides an emotional distance that many prefer

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Today's Presentation

- I want you to see a session with a 10 yr old boy that takes place in a school
- I also want to increase your interest in sandtray as a helpful tool to use with students ages 9-13 (and older)
- Help you better understand how and why it works

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Sandtray with Children

- Focus on behavior as much as words
- Pay close attention to the creation of the scene, the selection of miniatures and the nonverbal behavior of the child as she is creating the scene
- For example, did the child rush through the creation of the scene?

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)





# Children

- Children under 14 often have difficulty expressing and exploring feelings
- They tend to lack the ego strength to stay with a feeling or feel an emotion in depth

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Six Core Conditions

- Most people believe that there are only three core conditions (Wilkins, 2010) but Rogers (1957) proposed six core conditions as necessary and sufficient for change
- One: Two persons are in psychological contact
- Two: The first, whom we shall term the client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious
- Three: The second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent or integrated in the relationship



# Challenges for School Counselors

- Core conditions one and two can be problematic if student is not a self-referral
- If child/preadolescent does not want something from you, the process is more complicated if you're going to establish real contact and if the child/adolescent is going to have real motivation
- Real change is difficult



# Six Core Conditions

- Four: The therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the client
- Five: The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate this experience to the client
- Six: The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved



## Core Condition Six

- Six: The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved
- This condition also can be a problem with students who come involuntarily because they can deflect the conditions



# Self-awareness & Experiencing in Elementary School Children

- Tremendous pressures from teachers, parents and administrators to fix the problem asap
- Why is it important to focus on self-awareness and experiencing of emotion?

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



## Kirschenbaum and Henderson (1989)

- “As humans grow from infancy to adulthood, an internal rift gradually develops, a rift that separates our immediate awareness from our own deeper “experiencing.” In order to receive approval and love, we learn to suppress those feelings and expressions of ourselves that are deemed unacceptable to the important caretakers in our lives.”



# Helping Children Reconnect to Whom They Really Are

- Humanistic sandtray therapy is one of the best means of facilitating a process in which clients of all ages can begin to reconnect to who they really are rather than who they think they should be.

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)





## Two Sandtray Approaches

- Up until recently, I have trained graduate students, play therapists, licensed professional counselor interns (LPC-I) and practitioners (including school counselors) to use sandtray as a structured activity- like video
- Recently, one of my LPC-I supervisees who is a school counselor used an unstructured approach that was very effective

steve\_armstrong@tamuc.edu



## Sexually Abused Boy

- 11 year old who was sexually assaulted by a 16 yr old
- Created scene much like a younger child in play therapy
- Narrated scene without much processing from school counselor



# No Directions Needed

- Boy came in and asked if he could use the other toys. He used play therapy toys as well as the sandtray and miniatures to create a scene of danger, threat, protected space, vigilance and risk

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Steps in Structured Sandtray

- **Prior to the session:**
- Collect tray, sand and miniatures
- Play sand, child therapy toys website
- Display miniatures on table or shelf
- Homeyer and Sweeney recommend minimum of 300 miniatures
- We recommend using sandtray if child trusts you



# Beginning the Session

- Allow at least 30-35 minutes if possible
- Give student directions- may use general direction or topic
- Prompt: “I would like you to create a scene of your life (family, life at school) the way it is now. Try to make the scene about your life the way it really is.”



## Scene Creation Phase

- You may want to limit the number of miniatures the student uses because some use too many and tray is extremely cluttered
- Sit facing student ready to respond but no need to talk unless student talks to you
- Light quiet music can be relaxing



# Processing Phase

- With many children ages 9-11 this can be challenging
- If child doesn't feel safe he/she may be guarded
- Don't force things- explore but don't pressure



# Post Session Phase

- Take picture of tray
- When breaking down tray, do not dismantle in front of child
- May be helpful to use picture of tray in future





# Children

- Limit the number of symbols that the child may use
- Stay with the metaphor or symbol: “The dog is over here by itself.” Allow the child to own the symbol or maintain the safety of the symbol. The child doesn’t have to talk about how each symbol relates to her.
- Do not be in a hurry to shift the focus from the symbol to the child.



# Children


- Unlike adults whose trays remain stationary, the tray becomes active with movement of miniatures when children are processing.
- They go back and forth from "here and now" to story telling quite quickly.
- The level at which they are able to process varies quite a bit from child to child.



# Children

- It is an effective way to work with those children who are too old for "play therapy" but too young for talk therapy.
- Children tend to play with the sand as they talk.
- Once children begin processing they may want to return to the miniatures to add an item to better represent what they want to express.



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- Presenting problem-client molested by relative who was put in jail
  - Scene represents client and his family on one side of the barrier and the perpetrator on the other side.
  - He discussed how his mother is trying to protect his little sister by not talking about the incident in front of her so he put her behind the barrels
  - He is the oldest child and he feels pressure to protect his brother and sister from being hurt and that is why he is between his siblings and the perpetrator.
  - Scene is fenced because he feels trapped in the situation. He expressed feelings of anger, guilt, hurt, fear and broken trust.



# Techniques with Children

- Have the miniatures talk to the other miniatures.
- Point out polarities and have children try to describe where (in their bodies) they are experiencing the feelings.
- Many times I supply feeling words based on information that I hear the client expressing and kids are great about "owning" or "rejecting" the emotion word.
- Silence can be very powerful. Sometimes it can be too powerful for a child so they start in with a story. Use your judgment on how much silence.



## Pre- Adolescents & Young Adolescents

- Processing time varies widely
- Topical trays can be helpful
- Topics might include a scene of family, school, friends, opposite sex, body image



# Facilitating a Process of Self-exploration and Awareness

- Self-expression and self-exploration are the foundation of humanistic sandtray therapy
- The sandtray therapist's role is to facilitate self-exploration and self-awareness

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)





# Different Method of Facilitating Awareness and Exploration

- More focus on here and now
- Use of descriptive questions
- Focus on polarities
- Accentuating significant statements and process

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Here and Now

- It puzzles me when I see that many play therapists are quite good at working with young children in the here and now but not older ones. Clients tend to leave the moment but counselors must know how to gently guide them back to it for optimum results. Feelings occur in the moment and working with them is most effective in the here and now.

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Facilitation vs. Interpretation

- Humanistic approach avoids interpreting sandtray to the client. The client leads the session for the most part. Interpretation is left up to the client. Even if the therapist has a hunch about the meaning of a symbol or group of symbols, this is not usually disclosed to the client.

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Humanistic Sandtray Resources

**Basic:** *Sandtray Therapy: A Practical Manual, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011)*

**Intermediate:** *Sandtray Therapy: A Humanistic Approach (Armstrong, 2008)*

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# Humanistic Processing

- Feelings and polarities are explored
- Here-and-now focused
- Awareness in the moment is emphasized
- Goal of knowing and accepting self

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Facilitating Awareness and Growth

- Growth and awareness are enhanced by focusing on process more than content experience
- Through a here and now focus, issues emerge that may not have been introduced previously

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Coping vs. Working Through

- Coping is important. Children who are not coping well should not be encouraged to deeply explore their feelings.
- However, coping is not the kind of work that is required in humanistic sandtray. A willingness to experience feelings is not about coping.

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Working Effectively with Feelings

- Getting to feelings
- Staying with the feeling and going deeper into it
- Knowing what to do when the client stops the feeling

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)





# Value of Deeper Work

- Experiencing emotions fully
- Deeper shift or change
- Movement with core issues rather than symptoms
- Not about coping—it's about diffusing, shifting, being at home, self-acceptance

steve\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu



# Experiencing Feelings Fully

- Rogers (1989) noted that once “a troubling feeling has been felt to its full depth and breadth, one can move on. It is an important part of movement in the process of change” (p. 151).

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Awareness vs. Insight

- Insight about why
- Awareness about how and what
- Insight about analyzing
- Awareness about noticing

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Awareness

- Awareness can be unsettling
- It can be after the fact or in the moment
- “The more that we can be nonjudgmental toward ourselves as we notice patterns or habits, the more we will be able to grow” (Armstrong, 2008)

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Facilitating Awareness

- Stay with the feeling
- Have client describe rather than analyze the feeling- you cannot analyze a feeling and experience it at the same time
- Ask about physical aspects of the experience

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Facilitating Awareness

Helpful questions for accentuating the obvious:

- What is it like ....?
- What are you experiencing in your body as you feel \_\_\_?
- Describe the physical feeling for me.
- What are you noticing right now in your body?

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Polarities

- Look for polarities
- Bring polarity into client's awareness
- Work with one a time
- Focus on here-and-now
- Validate both sides

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)



# Noticing Polarities

- I want to lose weight, but I can't ...
- I'm really upset about it, but I shouldn't be.
- When asked, "Is this something that you want to change?", client responds hesitantly.

[steve\\_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:steve_armstrong@tamu-commerce.edu)