EFPT Psychotherapy Guidebook

Sandplay Therapy

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Brief historic overview

Sandplay therapy (SPT) is a therapeutic intervention created, in the late 1950s, by a psychologist, Dora M. Kalff (1904-1990), in Switzerland and now used worldwide. Dora Kalff combined techniques from pediatrician and child psychiatrist Margaret Lowenfeld, the developer of the original sand-tray intervention – a play technique for child psychotherapy she called «World Technique»), from her analytical psychological Jungian training and from eastern philosophical beliefs, in particular Zen and Tibetan Buddhism and Taoism.¹

Carl Jung was the first psychoanalyst to consider using creative techniques in therapy. In his view, the unconscious contains archetypal elements which come to mind in form of symbols, prone to be used as constructive elements in the therapeutic process. These symbols are presented to the ego by way of dreams, fantasies and spontaneous creative acts.²

Description

Therapy takes place in box-like containers referred to as sandboxes (a tray with 30x20x3 inches / 52x72x7 cm filled with sand), toys (a variety of play figures: human beings, animals, buildings, vehicles, plants, fences, stones, landscapes, fantastical beings, etc.) and sometimes water to create scenes (lakes or rivers) that represent people's inner thoughts, struggles and preoccupations.¹

The sandbox and figures are used as tools to alleviate the communication between the therapist and the patient. It makes not only the unconscious themes and conflicts accessible, but also allows patients to modify and change their inner thoughts and emotions. They put the toys inside the tray in order to create a world that reflects their life while the therapist observes without interrupting. In the end, there is a discussion about the toys' arrangement and the sense attributed to it: patients may share their ideas about the picture and the therapist may ask for additional information. Kalff called the container «the free and protected space» for the non-verbal and symbolic expression of the patients' inner world. She refers to the play as part of the self-regulating capacities of the psyche and the therapist should take a nonjudgmental, nondirective attitude in the process. In the majority of the studies, 10-12 sessions were applied to the patients, on a weekly basis, however the whole process may take years in some cases.³

Image 1. Photography taken in the office of Dr. Marcela Bianco in Porto, Portugal.

Image 2. Photography taken in the office of Dr. Marcela Bianco in Porto, Portugal.

This type of psychotherapy is mostly applied to children showing difficulties in expressing their feelings, but can also be applied to adolescents or adults having difficulty expressing emotions related to some form of trauma, distress, disability or migration issues by reason of the nonverbal approach. It has been applied rather successfully in patients diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder, Emotional Attachment Problems, Addictive Behaviours, Social Behaviour Problems and in Juvenile Delinquency and also in scholar contexts. This approach also presents a useful option for children victims of sexual assault as shown in a recent longitudinal study. It showed key findings in children aged 7-10 years-old such as that characters commonly are involved in a set of aggressive

behaviour and one of the most miniatures employed is snake, that carries the connotation of causing harm and generate fear and may be symbolically related to sexualized aspects and feelings of the experience of abuse. Sand therapy emerges as a useful tool for the treatment of child victims of sexual abuse.⁴

Nowadays it is used worldwide, even by therapists without a psychodynamic background. The professional societies in Japan, Korea and China are among the largest in the field of psychotherapy worldwide. There has been an increase in its application to victims of natural disasters, such as earthquakes or tsunamis.⁵

This method became gradually used outside Switzerland and with time, Dora Kalff found the need to provide a more formal structure for the study and practice of Sandplay Therapy. The International Society for Sandplay Therapy was founded in 1985 and since then, many efforts have been put in practice to adapt to national needs.⁶

Main Indications

- Addictive Behaviours;
- Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder;
- Emotional Attachment Problems;
- Juvenile Delinquency in adolescent and also in scholar contexts;
- Victims of Sexual Abuse;
- Social Behaviour Problems.

Efficacy

Despite its use worldwide, it is interesting to note that publications on SPT are underrepresented in scientific journals. A systematic review found 16 Randomized Controlled Trials and 17 efficacy studies, which found significant improvements for a variety of child and adult mental health problems.³ It seems to be useful in helping patients with post-traumatic stress, disabilities or language problems, which conventional therapies do not give response to.

Comment from an expert and or quote from a famous psychotherapist (founder)

"The Sandplay has shown me to be a beneficial and effective non-verbal technique when used in conjunction with analytical psychotherapy. The attractiveness of the cupboard full of miniatures and the sand tray itself has aroused great interest from my adult patients, who are attracted to create scenarios and dramatizations with great ease. The silent, neutral, free, and protected space provided allows the playful and creative expression of conflicts and psychological wounds, often unconscious for the patient. It is also possible that the

patient builds a picture of a situation, apparently conscious, but proves to be broader and deeper when we observe the symbolism and the richness of the final scenario presented. Besides, patients can also portray their dreams in the sand tray, providing complementary material for analysis. The improvement and progress of many patients are remarkable as the scenarios are being developed during the course of psychotherapy, with the release of the creative and healing energies of the unconscious itself. Thus, the Sandplay technique allows a portrait, or series of portraits and plots (when there are dramatizations), in which the process of psychological elaboration of the patient's conflicts can be observed."

Marcela Alice Bianco - Psychologist. Specialist in analytical psychotherapy

"Sandplay is an extremely valuable technique in psychotherapy and complementary in psychological assessment, especially in children and adolescents. As it presents a framework that facilitates the playful, creative, and projective expression of psychological contents, there is practically no need for many explanations for the use of this technique. It is very common to spontaneously address the miniatures and express scenarios, narratives, and dramatizations. This context, by itself, facilitates and expands the therapeutic alliance and promotes mental development. Such evolution can be seen in a new attitude of the person in relation to life and the very nature of the mind: the ability to relate creatively to the internal and external reality. As it enables the amplification of the symbol, the main method of analytical psychology, it stimulates the prospective and evolutionary action in the personality towards its potential for the search for self-regulation called the individuation process. As a psychotherapist who has worked for over twenty-five years, I can say that each session at Sandplay is a fascinating and meaningful adventure!"

João Carlos Vaz Furtado – Psychologist. Specialist in analytical psychology.

Comments and personal thoughts from a trainee with interest in Sandplay Therapy

«Sharing the workplace with Dr. Marcela put me in contact with sandplay therapy and awakened my curiosity to know more about it. The nonverbal approach of this psychotherapy makes it a very interesting alternative in individuals with disabilities, autism spectrum disorder or dementia who still do not respond to traditional psychotherapies.»

Margarida Albuquerque, Psychiatry Trainee, Hospital de Cascais, Portugal

Books, manual, videos, published online courses or international association:

- https://www.isst-society.com/sites/default/files/documents/STUDY_OF_SYMBOLS_Jan-2018.pdf
- Kалff, Dora M (1980). Sandplay: A Psychotherapeutic Approach to the Psyche. Temenos Press.

- Sweeney, Daniel S; Homeyer, Linda E (2016). Sandtray Therapy: A Practical Manual. Routledge.

International Societies:

- **International Society for Sandplay Therapy** - <https://www.isst-society.com/>

National Societies (Europe):

- **SSTJS** - Société suisse pour la Thérapie par le Jeu de Sable - <http://www.sstjs.ch/>
- **NVST** - Nederlandse Vereniging voor Sandplay Therapie - <https://www.sandplaynederland.nl/>
- **AISPT** - Associazione italiana per la sandplay therapy - <https://www.aispt.it/>
- **LSST** - Latvijas Smilšu spēles terapijas biedrība - <http://www.smilsuspeles.lv/>
- **DGST** - Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sandspieltherapie - <https://www.sandspiel.de/>
- **BISS** - British and Irish Sandplay Society - <https://www.sandplay.org.uk/>

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1. Mitchell RR, Friedman HS (1994). Sandplay: past, present and future. New York: Routledge.
2. Samuels A (1985). Jung and the Post-Jungians. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
3. Roesler C (2019). Sandplay therapy: An overview of theory, applications and evidence base. The Arts in Psychotherapy, 64:84-94.
4. Tornero M, Capela C (2017). Change during Psychotherapy through Sand Play Tray in Children That Have Been Sexually Abused. Front Psychol, 8:617.
5. Chen CR, Shen HY (2009). Sandplay productions of students with lost relatives in earthquake. Chinese Mental Health Journal, 23 (4), 264-269.
6. Martin Kalf: On the History of ISST, in <https://www.isst-society.com/history>, accessed november 22, 2020.