

CLINICAL EDITOR: This article provides a clinical illustration of sandtray as a powerful therapeutic instrument with unlimited possibilities for healing in both individual and family therapy. Additionally, a case is made regarding the significance of witnessing and joining the client such that the healing process is mutually created.

Creating Calm Places in the Sand

Relationally Based Play Therapy

By Heather Maritano LCSW, RPT-S



I first met Samuel when he was four years old. He had been referred to me to address concerns related to his unwillingness to eat a range of foods. Samuel, now in 5th grade, returned to my office last year. His issue now was excessive anxiety. He couldn't sleep at night, was fearful of the things that would emerge from the heating vents on the ceiling and afraid that he would fail 4th grade despite being a solid 'B' student. He still has constricted eating habits and recently felt victorious when he tried hot chocolate at a friend's house. Having made slight progress on treatment goals, we were just preparing for termination when tragedy struck.

Mid-June 2007, Samuel's father collapsed in the kitchen. Samuel found him and had already called 911 before getting his mother from her weekly escape as she soaked in the basement hot tub. Samuel's father declared legally dead was miraculously revived after 22 minutes. A few months passed but he did not really return to normal and in the fall he was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer and given less than 18 months to live.

This crisis has magnified the problems in the family structure; an already vulnerable system was now at risk of imploding. Samuel's mother confessed she had been investigating divorce prior to the father's collapse. She felt both guilty and trapped in an untenable situation. Samuel's dad, who had always been aggressive and undermining of his wife, became increasingly and unbearably cruel while receiving steroids and related treatments. The emotional issues associated with terminal illness exacerbated. He was unable to work and unable to be left alone. Samuel became a target of his father's anger. To cope,

Samuel taped pictures of his father on a dart board and punching bag and unleashed his anger. He was later overwhelmed with guilt. His little sister refused to talk about her feelings and was found wandering about in obscure places. Samuel's mom's anxiety resulted in a panic attack on Christmas Eve and subsequent trek to the emergency room. Conflict arose between Samuel's paternal grandparents

and his mother with regard to treatment and prognosis issues. Support for and among family members rapidly deteriorated.

Samuel stated in session that, other than living in the same space, there was nothing that made them a family. He claimed acid rain has fallen on them and eroded their foundation. In a later session, Samuel said that it was not just one person who was dying; it was the entire family. Samuel's mother lamented her children's current childhood and struggled to create positive family memories by encouraging family activities and excursions.

Samuel has changed during this crisis. Previously his talk was of his fears and more recently he talks of the black cloud that hangs over the entire family. He has developed into a perpetual motion machine. He walks in circles around the room while talking. At times he silently stands before the sandtray, an item to which he has given very little attention in all the time I have known him. I offer to him the option of creating a world and together we move the sandtray to a lower table at his request.

He sits on the floor and begins stroking the sand, completely ignoring the wall of miniatures behind him. I am curious as to what will emerge and sit in silence, waiting. Many minutes pass as he continues to explore the sand with his hands, pouring it over his forearms and moving his fingers gently through it. So much time passes; in my head I hear one of my supervisees' concerns, "but I'm not doing anything". For a moment I wonder if I am doing enough. Should I be saying more? Yet in the self check, I realize I don't feel anxious. Rather a sense of deep calm fills me and after about 20 minutes in silence, I quietly state, "This feels calm and I don't imagine you have much calm in your life." He emphatically responds, "There isn't calm anywhere in my life." And then we continue to share the quiet space while he slowly moves the sand.

As I watch him, I have a memory of being at the Indianapolis Children's Museum watching my toddler daughter play for hours in the water table. I am reminded of how painful it was to experience the impatience of the parents with their children who wanted to linger in that one spot rather than frantically discover all there was to discover in the museum. With humility, I remember my own waxing and waning interest in allowing her to stay until she determined she was ready to move on.

As our time comes to a close, I once again offer, "As I've been watching you, I am reminded of how much children enjoy playing in the water table at the Children's Museum." He wistfully responds, "Oh yes, I love that. I've wanted to go; we haven't been there in so long." I ask if we should share that wish with his mother and he agrees we should. He gets up and I



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follow him to the waiting room where we meet his mother and ask if a trip to the Children's Museum might be possible. She indicates that it could be possible and thus ends the session.

In this session very few words were exchanged and there was no intentionally applied theory or intervention, yet my sense was that something profound occurred. I reflected on the significance regarding an hour of calm as compared to addressing directly the turbulence in Samuel's life. In moments of doubt I wondered if it was only meaningful for me, was I justifying a "dud" session by elevating it to a higher experience. Then I remember that it was Samuel who entered the session differently; it was Samuel who sought what he needed. Thankfully, I had the good sense to get out of the way and let his process unfurl.

A few weeks later Samuel once again worked in the sand, this time with his mother and sister. His father was invited but declined to attend. At my invitation they set out to create a

world in the sand and to negotiate the ways to share the space. Samuel selected a yellow brick path, a bridge, a silver gazebo, a jade Buddha statue, a totem pole and a crystal disc. He lined them up so that there was a straight line over the bridge to the path leading past the other items on the way to the gazebo. His portion of the world was contained and orderly along the right third of the sandtray. He stated to his mother and sister, "In my area, I'm creating a sanctuary with an ancient feel, like it has always been there."

What came next was astounding. Samuel's sister selected a huge ogre – 6 inches contrasted with the 2-3 inch miniatures. She stated, "This is the thing that is terrorizing the world." Samuel looked at her in distress and replied, "No, you can't put that in here. I don't want that in here." Samuel's mother and I both responded in some way about negotiating the needs of everyone. His mom suggested perhaps the ogre could sit outside the box. Nicole placed the ogre hovering up and over the back of the cottage that her mother had placed in center of the back wall of the tray facing what she called "the village".

Samuel silently got up and selected a length of picket fence, which he placed in a line to separate his third of the tray from the rest of the world. Then his sister silently removed the ogre and all the other items she had previously placed and began to create an entirely new scene. After she removed the ogre, Samuel took out the fence and placed it back on the shelf without saying a word. Samuel's mother looked at me in a way that conveyed, "I get that something significant is occurring". She understood her daughter was finally expressing her feelings

about what was occurring in their family and her son was showing her what he needed to cope. And she accepted the opportunity to be present to both her children in a way she rarely experienced, but for which she has longed. A new connection became possible for them all, this connection addressed Samuel's concern about their family foundation eroding.

These two sessions did not, could not, change the turmoil in Samuel's life. In fact, the distress continues to grow and even the trip to the Children's Museum hasn't happened due to the obstacles associated with taking or not taking Samuel's father. What I have to provide often seems insufficient to the challenges presented. Many are the times I wish I was a fairy godmother instead of a therapist!

Yet, our best work comes not from fixing but from bearing witness and joining our clients where they need to be met. In the sessions described, Samuel was able to create for himself what he most needs, a place of calm. It seems he is also expressing a deep sense of his spiritual self in his choice of sandtray items and in his comments about creating a sanctuary that has always been there. It is my belief the ability to imagine and symbolically make manifest what one needs is evidence that healing is already occurring. The therapist's job then is to stay present to what is revealed and not get distracted by wanting to provide more than what is being requested. We are then able to reflect back to the client and expand on what is. In this way of working, client and therapist mutually shape and are shaped by the healing process. Conjointly, we create calm.

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