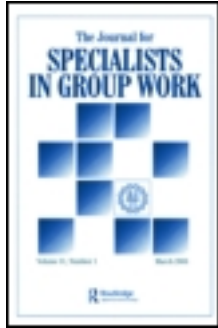


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# Sand Tray Group Counseling With Adolescents

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*Sand tray group counseling with adolescents is an activity-based intervention designed to help participants address specific intrapersonal concerns, learn important skills of socialization, and develop a caring community. The main focus of the group is building small worlds with miniature figures in individual trays of sand and having an opportunity to share the worlds they have created. Seven separate time-limited groups were conducted in an alternative school setting during the 2001-2002 school year. The rationale for such a group, a description of the process, and illustrative case examples are presented.*

**Keywords:** sand tray; adolescents; group counseling; play therapy

Sand tray group counseling is an activity-based intervention in which group members build small worlds with miniature figures in individual trays of sand and share about their worlds as they are willing. This group approach is designed to help participants address specific intrapersonal concerns, learn important skills of socialization, and develop a caring community. This activity provides the context and often the content for rich group work to occur.

The use of sand tray counseling groups with adolescents is based on four important premises. First, counseling groups are a powerful means of support and positive change (Yalom, 1995). Because adolescents are developmentally geared toward peers and driven by a need to belong, they are likely to learn with and from each other if they are provided with the right conditions for such growth (Myrick, 1999; Schickedanz,

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Schickedanz, Forsyth, & Forsyth, 1998). Second, people who are struggling (particularly younger people) may benefit from a modality that is not completely dependent on verbalization, that is, some experiences may be better accessed through activity such as play, art, or some other form of metaphoric communication (Kottman, Strother, & Deniger, 1987). This premise has influenced adolescent therapeutic work in the form of adventure-based counseling. Third, children and adolescents have the capacity for self-direction and growth, and they are capable of learning to rely on their own inner resources so that they are better prepared for future challenges (Landreth, 1994). In addition, developmental theory and the importance of symbolic, metaphorical communication are integral to the sand tray approach.

Especially among children and adolescents who have not been successful in a regular school environment, sand tray group counseling may provide the opportunity they need to redirect their behavior and improve their functioning. There is increasing attention to the linkage between oppositional defiant/conduct-disordered/delinquent behavior and experiences of childhood trauma (perhaps multiple traumas). Certainly among children who have experienced trauma, there is a need for others to accept their experiences in a nonthreatening, nonjudgmental environment (Gil, 1996). Sand tray group counseling provides an atmosphere in which others are able to learn about the student's world. The opportunity for students to build a caring community in this way can be a powerful means of change.

Sand tray refers to the therapeutic technique of using miniatures to create a picture or sand world in a box of sand. In 1929, Margaret Lowenfeld pioneered this approach in her work with children in a psychology clinic and called it the "world technique." Lowenfeld believed that the approach could be applied by therapists of differing theoretical orientations. Dora Kalff (who studied with Jung and, at Jung's urging, with Lowenfeld) termed her Jungian approach to sand tray work "sandplay." Her approach has dominated the area of sand tray work for many years and has been applied to adults and children. However, there are many practitioners from a variety of theoretical orientations who utilize the sand tray approach with clients of all ages to access the symbolic representations and communication that is available when sand worlds are created in a therapeutic setting (Mitchell & Friedman, 1994).

The basic approach to conducting a sand tray session is to ask the client to select from a large collection of miniature figures to create a sand picture, or sand world, in the sand tray. There are usually two trays, one with dry and one with wet sand, so that the client may choose the modality that fits for them that session. The therapist role during the sand tray session varies depending on theoretical orientation. Some thera-

pists may remain somewhat quiet during the building whereas others may provide commentary about what they see in the sand world as it is being built. Questions and interpretation may or may not be utilized as well depending on the clinician's approach. Lowenfeld believed it was helpful to maintain verbal contact regarding the sand world being created but felt it was important to withhold interpretation about the deeper meaning of the world until that meaning very clearly emerged (Mitchell & Friedman, 1994).

## DESCRIPTION

### Getting Started

There are several elements of sand tray group counseling that make preparation for the groups especially important. In addition to the regular tasks of a group leader organizing a group, a sand tray group requires that the leader obtain the appropriate space and special materials needed. In terms of space, a room large enough to hold four to six students, a table or tables, four to six sand trays, and a cabinet or shelves for the miniatures are required. It is important that the group members face each other and sit close enough to hear each other and get a glimpse of the sand worlds. It is also important that each member has his or her own space in which to work on his or her sand world.

The gathering of needed materials may be the most daunting aspect of this work for group leaders new to sand tray groups. First, the size of the sand trays is thought to be important. Typical recommendations are for rectangular dimensions of approximately 20 inches high, 30 inches wide, and 3 inches deep (Allan & Berry, 1987). The builder should be able to take in the entire tray without moving his or her head and have good reach to all corners of the tray. Although there are a variety of expensive trays available through specialty providers, the transparent Rubbermaid containers with a blue tint are suggested as an acceptable and affordable alternative. These types of containers are available at stores that sell household goods. About one bag of sand is needed per two trays and can be purchased at home improvement, garden, or toy stores. The type of sand that works well for sand tray work is usually labeled "play sand" (Kestly, 2000).

A rich collection of miniatures is crucial to the success of sand tray group counseling. An ample selection of miniatures is especially important for group work, given that there are several members building sand worlds simultaneously (De Domenico, 1999). The typical categories suggested for a miniature collection include realistic and fantasy people;

domestic and wild animals; trees, bushes, and other plant life; buildings including family dwellings; fences, bridges, and gates; transportation vehicles; items that connote spirituality; and representations of alcohol, cigarettes, and money. Of course, people of diverse race, ethnicity, and culture should be represented. With adolescents, it is also helpful to include other leisure, sport, and hobby items, such as miniature basketballs, skateboards, radios, and items that symbolize academic endeavors. Special attention should be paid to the particular interests of one's population, and efforts should be made to include items that might be appealing. Items appropriate for sand tray collections are available at craft and hobby stores, discount and dollar stores, pet stores, and import stores. There are also providers available through the Internet who specialize in sand tray and other play therapy materials (Kestly, 2000).

Of course, like any group, students should be informed of the purpose and guidelines of the group, and the limits of confidentiality, and parental consent should be obtained if it is standard protocol. Before the first session, students should be provided the opportunity to ask any questions and see the sand tray counseling room, if possible.

### **Structure of Sessions**

Although the first session is somewhat different than the rest in that introductions are made and group guidelines are reviewed with everyone present, the routine of sand tray group counseling is established in the first session and continues consistently throughout the life of the group. The basic components of a sand tray group include building time, photographing time, and sharing time. During the building phase, students are provided with the opportunity to build their own sand worlds, drawing from the collection of miniatures available to them. Although the students may go to the shelves as many times as they like during the building phase, some limits about how many students can go up at one time to get items at the shelves and how many items they select each trip are necessary to prevent chaos and allow equal access by all members. It works well to allow two members at a time go to the shelves who can each bring away six items per trip to add to their trays. It is also helpful to provide a small basket for each student so that the student can transport his or her items easily to his or her tray. It is helpful to provide a 5-minute warning before the building phase comes to a close so that students may make changes or put last minute touches on their worlds. The photographing phase is simply the time when the leader takes pictures (digital, Polaroid, or regular camera) of each member's tray. Picture taking is important for two reasons. First, it documents the sand worlds of the group members so that the leader may better note themes, changes,

and progress in members' work. Second, it is also helpful for students to be able to review the progression of their sand worlds. If possible, students enjoy having copies of at least a few of their sand worlds. If picture taking is not possible, it is recommended that leaders briefly sketch each tray after the session is over to remember what students built (Kestly, 2000).

During the sharing phase, students are each given the opportunity to tell a story or just describe their sand worlds. Students always have the right to pass. During sharing time, it is important for the leader to model empathic listening. It is also helpful to structure feedback (especially early in the life of the group). For example, after a student shares about his or her sand world, the leader might ask others to do a round completing the sentence: "One thing that really stood out to me about your sand world is . . ." Obviously, it is really important for members to feel accepted and encouraged while they are sharing so the leader needs to watch for subtle put-downs, unwanted questions, and unsolicited interpretations about the members' sand worlds. If students are reluctant to share about their sand worlds, they always have the right to pass. It may be helpful to ask quiet members for one word or phrase to describe their worlds if they are willing. The amount of time allowed for each phase of group can vary based on the total amount of time one has available for a session. In a 1-hour session, for example, it is recommended that about 25 minutes be dedicated to the building phase, 5 minutes for taking pictures, and 30 minutes for the sharing and processing phase. Cleanup of the sand trays should not occur until after the session is over and is the responsibility of the leaders.

### **The Language of Sand Tray**

Although much of the literature on sand tray or sandplay therapy is based on a Jungian theoretical orientation, practitioners who take other theoretical approaches have also found the sand tray modality to be helpful (Mitchell & Friedman, 1994). In general, practitioners of various orientations who engage in this modality do so because the process of using miniatures to build sand worlds is seen as helpful due to the opportunity to engage in symbolic or metaphorical communication. The primary practitioners involved in the sand tray groups described work from an Adlerian theoretical perspective, are experienced group leaders, and have extensive training in play therapy. Thus, the skills utilized to facilitate the sand tray groups were drawn from this background. Master's level coleaders assisted the primary practitioners in leading groups. These coleaders were two school counseling interns conducting a yearlong supervised internship at this alternative school and two

social workers who worked as life skills teachers at the school. When they co-led, they were paired with the primary practitioners. To provide a consistent intervention to each group that was led, 5 hours of preintervention training was provided in which the history of sand tray, the basic skills of play and sand tray work, and Adlerian concepts were presented. Ongoing supervision was provided to the leaders when groups were underway. The following skills were the focus of training and supervision throughout the process:

*Tracking.* Tracking is simply making a statement that summarizes what a student is saying or doing. The purpose of tracking is to connect, to let the student know that the leader is paying attention and that what the student is doing is important (Landreth, 1994). The group leaders involved in the alternative school project found that tracking was important but that it was better to track less frequently than one would with younger children.

*Empathizing.* Empathizing is the art of feeling what another is feeling and communicating that understanding. It is especially important with adolescents to make guesses about what they might be feeling because they may not be willing or able to put words to their emotions. It is also important to gauge the intensity level of the feeling word used when empathizing because adolescents—especially in front of other adolescents—may not accept an intense feeling word even if it is accurate. For example, if the student is describing some aspect of his or her sand world that the leader clearly sees as very upsetting, the leader might say, “That seems like it would hurt” rather than “That would be devastating.” Especially early in the life of a group, this less intense comment may be more appropriate until students feel more trust and comfort.

*Encouragement.* Encouragement involves looking for students’ strengths, abilities, and resourcefulness and noticing these as a way to build students’ confidence and competence. Encouragement is an Adlerian concept that focuses on the process instead of the product and on effort more than outcome so that a person does not have to be accomplished at something to receive recognition (Dinkmeyer, Dinkmeyer, & Sperry, 1987). It is especially important for students who have not historically performed well in school (academically, socially, or behaviorally) to be encouraged for their efforts. In the sand tray group setting, students are encouraged for knowing the rules, making decisions, and working hard, among other things. Examples of encouraging statements include: “You figured that out,” “You decided to do it that way,”

“You know just want you want to do; you have a plan,” and “You aren’t sure how to make that work, but you are trying a lot of different ways.”

*Limit setting.* There is a specific limit-setting process in play therapy that includes several steps: (a) reflecting the student’s desire or feeling, (b) stating the limit in a way that avoids making a command, and (c) giving alternatives (Landreth, 1994). If the behavior continues, the student is then offered a logical consequence in an “If . . . then,” format. For example, in sand tray group counseling, a typical limit might be, “You really like pushing that sand onto the floor, but the sand is not for going on the floor. You can push the sand around in the tray, but the sand is not for going on the floor.” The logical consequence would be “If you choose to push the sand onto the floor, you choose not to make a sand world today.” Often, not all steps need to be used to change a student’s behavior; it is common for students to redirect their own behavior after just the first two steps. It is really important that limits are stated in a calm, nonconfrontational manner. The language of choice (“If you choose . . .”) and lack of commands (“The sand is for . . .” rather than “Don’t push the sand out of the tray”) is awkward to master at first but crucial to the success of the intervention.

*Connecting/linking.* This vital group leadership skill of finding and pointing out similarities among group members—helping members feel connected to others in the group—is really important in sand tray group counseling. The leader must look for ways to link members based on their general comments, behavior in the group, and based on what is happening in their sand world. For example, “I notice several of you have included ways to stay safe or be protected in your sand worlds.”

### **Sand Tray Counseling Groups at the Alternative School**

There are some specific details of the sand tray counseling groups at the alternative school that are important to share. All students at this alternative school for middle and high school students in a local district were there because they had lost the opportunity to attend their regular (home) school. Reasons for dismissal varied but were usually on issues of drug possession, fighting, or a series of smaller rule infractions. Students’ length of stay at the alternative school varied from at least a few months to as much as a year or more and differed depending on the seriousness of their infraction and their behavior as students at the alternative school. The county district is located in the suburbs of a large Southeastern city. The student population was disproportionately male;



females made up approximately 10% to 15% of the student body, which varied due to the rotating population throughout the school year. There were a larger number of minority students—mainly African American and Mexican—than would be expected based on the population of the county. The student body was approximately 50% Caucasian, 30% African American, and 20% Hispanic. These ratios held true for the sand tray groups as well. No information about socioeconomic status was gathered, but generally students appeared to be from families of low to lower middle socioeconomic status.

All of the approximate 200 students attending the alternative school at the time the groups were initiated were offered the opportunity to participate in a sand tray group via a parental permission slip and some brief information about the nature of the project. Students were selected for groups based on their return of parent permission and their agreement to participate. They were divided into groups based on whether they were in middle or high school and separated by gender, when possible. Some groups were made up of girls and boys simply because the number of boys at this alternative school was so much greater than the number of girls that there were not always enough girls at a given level to form a separate group. When possible, same gender groups are recommended for adolescents (Myrick, 1999). The flirting and showing off that often occur when adolescent boys and girls are together can be a distraction to the group work and may inhibit the openness and honest disclosure for which group leaders strive to achieve growth. It is our experience that same-sex distractive behavior of this type is not generally displayed. Forty-six students were initially eligible for the groups, but this number declined over the course of the semester-long intervention as students departed for positive (i.e., return to home school) and negative reasons (i.e., running away, youth detention). Twenty students were gone by midsemester.

Students were each provided with their own tray that remained their tray each week. However, the sand tray room also contained two extra trays that contained wet sand instead of dry. Students were offered the choice of using the wet sand. Typically no more than two students at a time were interested in wet sand. Fair ways to take turns week by week were offered if there were more requests for wet sand than number of trays available. The wet sand provides a very different medium for building, and it is recommended that this option be made available (De Domenico, 1999). The groups in the alternative school each met once a week and lasted 8 weeks, with some variability in terms of actual number of sessions due to absences and other conflicts in the school setting (i.e., testing, field trips).

## CASE STUDIES

### **Maria**

Maria is a 13-year-old Mexican American middle school student who was placed at the alternative school for the remainder of her 7th-grade year. Although Maria never shared the reason she was removed from her home school, she revealed a great deal about herself and her culture through her sand worlds.

*Session 1.* Maria entered the group with a quiet enthusiasm. The bright look in her eyes and her soft smile conveyed her excitement as she diligently built her world. Maria's first sand tray depicted a world that fulfilled her needs for food, protection, money, transportation, and leisure. Maria chose an angel to represent herself and placed two guardian angels on either side of her. She stated that there were "cows walking around so I can eat . . . a basketball so I can play . . . a car for transporting things to Mexico . . . a radio to listen to music." She also shared that the soldier was there to protect her.

*Session 2.* Maria's second sand world was quite different from the first. In this world, she portrayed a war scene between Afghanistan and the United States. She placed "Bin Laden and his wives and children" facing the Statue of Liberty. Soldiers, helicopters, and snakes surrounded Bin Laden and his family. One soldier (that represented Maria) was positioned in front of the others. During the building phase, Maria placed a figurine dressed in a cap and gown in the corner of the tray. The figure represented her "graduating and going to college." However, she removed it before sharing with the group. Although Maria communicated to the group that her world was about the war in Afghanistan, it appeared to have meaning on multiple levels. The inclusion and positioning of the soldier symbolizing her in the world seemed to indicate that she may not only have been exploring feelings of uncertainty, fear, and conflict about the ongoing war but also experiencing similar feelings about a personal battle of some kind as well.

*Session 3.* Maria chose the wet sand tray for her third world. She expressed that she had thought about what she was going to build before coming to group and knew exactly what she wanted to do. She created an underwater sea world. She placed a baby and a mermaid in the middle of the tray surrounded by sea animals. Two other babies were lying on the sea floor along with a house, a pirate drinking alcohol, an alligator, a life preserver, and some sea plants. Buried in the sand were a treasure

chest, a skeleton bride and groom, and a helicopter. Maria introduced fantasy into this world as she shared that this is how she imagines the bottom of the ocean. Maria described the ocean as being “dangerous, but a happy place, too” that suggested she may have been experiencing a struggle in her life between something that brings her happiness, but at the same time may be risky or possess elements of danger.

*Session 4.* During this group session, Maria built “my home in Mexico.” She shared that she was not born in Mexico, but much of her family lives there. She took special care to pick items that looked like the actual objects she was trying to represent. She built a farm scene that included a house, a car, farm animals, a dog, a cat, and a basketball goal. The figure she used to represent herself was standing holding her baby sister watching her cousin ride a horse. She expressed that they were close and she missed him. Maria’s affect shifted from cheerful to sad as she talked about her world to the group leader, stating that she did not get to go to Mexico over Christmas with her father and sister because she was placed at the alternative school. This world seemed to represent some of the issues pertaining to Maria’s process of acculturation and the difficulty of being away from her extended family.

*Session 5.* During the fifth session, Maria’s sand work seemed more intense as evidenced by the number and types of miniatures she chose. She focused her work in the corners of the tray and used many of the items she had chosen in previous sessions, including several from the war and Mexico worlds. In the center of the tray she placed a tank and three army men. Maria did not share about this world; however, it seemed as if she was bringing aspects of all of her worlds into one world laden with conflict.

*Session 6.* Maria built an island during Session 6. Palm trees were scattered about the island. Two babies sat under a palm tree near a seal, and another baby facing the opposite direction sat under a different palm tree. A man buried in sand up to his neck drinking from an alcohol bottle separated the babies. The only other items in the tray were a life preserver and a butterfly. This world seemed to embody a sense of helplessness: the only adult on the island was intoxicated and stuck in the sand, leaving the babies in an extremely vulnerable position.

*Session 7.* This was Maria’s last group session because she was absent the day of the final group. The world she created this week included all of her friends from the alternative school. She carefully chose the miniatures to represent her friends according to their personality characteris-

tics. She shared what was special about each person. She expressed that her group of friends all stuck together because there were not many Hispanic students at the school. Maria and another Hispanic group member shared with the group how it felt to be in the minority at school. When Maria was later asked about her experience in the group, she stated that this world had the most meaning to her. This world seemed particularly important because it demonstrated that Maria had found a social network at school in which she could find belonging and acceptance. In addition, it showed that she felt safe enough in the group to verbalize her feelings about her cultural differences.

*Summary.* Maria seemed to gain from participating in the group. The sand tray was a medium in which she could express her thoughts and feelings about family, friends, school, and world events. Through building and sharing her sand worlds, she explored and shared aspects of her life and her culture with the group.

### **J. C.**

J. C. is an African American 14-year-old male student who attended the alternative school since the beginning of the year. When the group began, J. C. had spent part of the year in the alternative to the alternative school (housed on the same campus) that is designed as a placement with increased structure for students struggling in the alternative school. J. C. had returned to the regular alternative school and was expecting to return to his home school in the fall. However, by the second group, J. C. had been put back in the alternative to the alternative program, and by the end of the year he had not earned the right to return to regular school.

*Session 1.* During the first few sessions, J. C. literally ran to get items from the shelves. He grabbed as many items as allowed, always counting them, and then rushed back to get more. Even though J. C. really wanted many items, he picked only six at a time. The coleaders gave J. C. encouragement for remembering the rules. J. C. built quickly and added as much as possible to his sand world even as building time ended. The leaders set a limit by stating, "J. C., you would really like to keep building your sand world, but building time is up for today."

*Session 2.* Again, J. C. rushed to fill up his tray with many items. In sharing his tray with the group, J. C. said his sand world was "really wealthy people's property." He included cars, a boat, helicopter, jet, basketball hoop and ball, beach house, and a regular home with an Ameri-

can flag and a welcome mat that he made using the name of his neighborhood. He said there were two groups of bad guys trying to get on the property with hired guards to fight them off. He also placed two angels in the tray as protection for the property. The family included one son that was smart and had just graduated from college, one daughter that was a "partier," Uncle Fred who had come to ask for money, and a wizard figure that represented the rich grandfather. The source of the family's wealth was that they had won the lottery. At the end of building time, J. C. added two ghosts and a house to create a ghost town.

*Session 3.* J. C. was less physically active in this session, choosing to spend more time playing in the sand and less time getting items to put in his tray. Halfway through the building time, J. C. added as many stones to his tray as he could. He called the stones diamonds and said they were to attract women. He said his two favorite things were diamonds and women. During the building time, the group discussed anger and fighting. J. C. remarked that he mostly fought at home because there were no consequences for fighting at home, and there were only consequences at school sometimes. J. C. said he did not know any other ways of handling anger and that fighting was the "man's way." The coleaders encouraged further group discussion on this topic and facilitated generating ideas for managing anger and ways to avoid fighting.

*Session 4.* J. C. built two sand worlds in this session. He used the wet tray for the first world and the dry sand tray for the second. J. C. had a slower pace for both trays and decided on what he wanted to build before getting items. Tray 1 was a graduation scene on the beach in Hawaii. He made a circle of people and said they were family members of the boy graduating. Family included a mom, dad, sister, aunt, uncle, the boy's baby and the baby's mom. He then put bodyguards in the tray for protection. Tray 2 was a birthday cake for the boy in the sand world. The gifts included a basketball hoop and ball, a skateboard, a car, and a dog.

*Session 5.* J. C.'s pace was calm and focused on what he wanted to create in his sand tray. He decided to use the wet sand tray and build a sand castle similar to one another group member had built the previous week. During the building time, J. C. discussed how he had ended up at the alternative school for fighting. He also talked about his mom trying to get him into another school district the previous year to avoid having to come to the alternative school. A group member asked about his mom, and he replied that he had not seen his mom in a couple weeks. J. C. kept building his sand castle in the sand and did not get any items for his tray until the announcement that there were 5 more minutes left to build. He

calmly went to the shelves and retrieved stones. In sharing his tray, J. C. decided his sand castle had turned into a volcano with diamonds and treasure around it. He said that although the volcano had never erupted before, it could erupt, and that is why no one had ever attempted to get the treasure.

*Summary.* There were several themes of family members, people needing protection, a boy graduating from school, and the use of the stones as diamonds. J. C. did not indicate what these themes meant to him in his life. However, he did discuss his family in several group sessions, and his family was clearly important to him. J. C. was concerned about having to return to the alternative school in the fall, which may be related to the boy graduating in his sand tray world. In addition, the volcano in his last sand tray seems to be about his anger. He may be the treasure that no one has been able to retrieve due to the possibility of the volcano, or his anger, erupting. J. C. appeared to become more comfortable with the group process as the group sessions progressed. He seemed less anxious and more capable of making a plan before building his sand tray world. J. C. learned from others in the group as was indicated by his conversations during group and by the fact that he remembered the sand castle a group member had made the previous week and decided to replicate it. J. C. participated actively in each group and repeated several times that he enjoyed group.

### THE LIFE OF THE SAND TRAY GROUP

Although each of the seven groups was unique based on the individuals making up the group and the dynamics that developed as the group took on a life of its own, there are some generalities that can be shared about how the groups progressed. First, these groups clearly provided students with an opportunity to experience each other in a different way. Students at this alternative school were often concerned with being seen as tough and acted as if nothing could hurt them. It seemed like the opportunity to return to a rather childish activity or “playing in the sand” enabled many of them to set aside the facades they presented during the rest of their school day. In other words, sand tray groups might have allowed members to let their guards down and be more themselves and more vulnerable. Another interesting dynamic in the groups was that members were really cooperative about taking turns going up to the cabinets to select miniatures. One group member described later how he and the other boys discussed in class who wanted which items and how they were going to ensure equity and fairness in who got the particularly

popular items each week. This behavior was quite a change from their normally competitive, aggressive interactions.

Groups definitely varied in terms of the amount and content of talking while they were building and during sharing time. During the building phase, some groups talked about issues important to them, such as peers, coping with school, how they got to the alternative school, and family events. Others talked on a more superficial level about topics such as what they did during the weekend or what was going on in class or home but focused on talking about others rather than themselves. Some groups were very quiet during the building phase, appearing to find it helpful to concentrate on the internal process of creating a sand world. During the sharing phase, many groups and members were very supportive of other members sharing about their sand worlds. They created the caring community for which the group leaders aspired and gave each other the opportunity to verbalize his or her worlds in a safe environment. When this atmosphere existed, the whole group learned from the process. For example, if a student shared about how he or she used drugs to feel better but was struggling to quit, some group members might have identified their own past or current drug use, whereas others might have said little but listened empathically. For example, in one group, a member identified a figure in his tray (the old witch with a poison apple in hand from Snow White) as the drug dealer in his neighborhood. A few other members in his group were able to join in the discussion, sharing about their own drug use, even though they were not yet viewing their drug use as a problem. Although not every group created this caring community of sharing every week, there were also beneficial groups in which even brief verbalizations about their sand worlds seemed like important progress for these students.

## CONCLUSION

Although conducting sand tray group counseling requires significant preparation at start-up (gathering sand tray materials, etc.), it is worthy of consideration for group leaders who work with adolescents. Although treatment modalities dependent on verbalization have been found to be helpful (Gladding, 1995), it is clear from the developmental literature that not all adolescents can be reached when practitioners rely on abstract reasoning and sophisticated verbal skills to assist these youngsters (Gil, 1996; Schickedanz et al., 1998). The opportunity to create concrete representations of the issues that are pressing for students by using the sand tray approach is unique to this metaphorical approach.

Other developmental issues such as adolescents' striving for independence, occasional high level of activity, and interest in "fitting in" may make sand tray a particularly helpful intervention. Group members are provided with abundant opportunities to make choices, beginning with what they want to create in their sand worlds. These choices enable them to assert their independence. The opportunity to get out of their seats to collect needed miniatures, as well as the chance to move their miniatures and sand around as they desire, provide some accommodation for those adolescents who possess energy levels that might make it difficult to sit still in a traditional verbally based group. Because adolescents are often fearful of appearing too different from their peers, it is helpful that the sand tray process allows common themes to emerge naturally, so that members realize they are not the only ones dealing with, for example, difficult home lives. At the same time, because members have control over what is shared about their sand worlds, they are not pressured to disclose about a personal issue they are not ready to share. However, they still have the opportunity to view it as it is represented in their sand world, that is, they can work on the issue without verbalizing about it. Some students in the groups at the alternative school seemed to work on the same issue for several sessions before eventually verbalizing the meaning of the sand world to the rest of the group.

Many adolescents come to treatment resistant to the help practitioners offer. Sand tray group counseling is one way of circumventing initial resistance and getting to work in a way that provides engaging activity for the group. An observation from the group leaders who were involved in the sand tray groups at the alternative school was that students were much more well-behaved than expected, given the school setting in which they had been placed. It is possible that the students became so engrossed in what they were doing in their sand trays that they had less need or desire to act out. The atmosphere established by using the language of sand tray may have also been a factor in maintaining relative calm and comfort in the group.

Students involved in the groups frequently stated that they would have preferred that the groups last longer than 8 weeks. A common suggestion was to have the groups last all 18 weeks of the semester in the future. This suggestion seemed appropriate to the leaders based on the amount of time it took to establish trust in the groups. One informal way to measure trust was to observe how many students shared and what they shared during the sharing phase of each session. Overall, the group members became more disclosive over time, but some groups continued to have very quiet members (who chose to say very little about their worlds or to pass) when groups ended. It is reasonable to assume that



students who attend alternative school might need longer to establish trust with leaders whom they did not know until groups began, and with each other. Although there were no formal measures of the traumatic experiences and other difficulties these students had faced, it was clear from those who did share that they had experienced few trust-building experiences in their lives.

One essential ethical consideration for group workers who are conducting a sand tray group is competence. Leading this type of group requires knowledge and skills in several areas including group work, working with adolescents, play therapy, and sand tray therapy. At a minimum, reading, workshop attendance, and consultation should be pursued to competently lead such a group. If a group leader is comfortable with these various areas, it is suggested that the leader start with a small group of three or four so that comfort may be gained without the inherent distraction of managing behavior in a larger group. Of course, the types of members will influence behavior issues as well. If group leaders are new to sand tray and play therapy, it is suggested that they start using sand tray with an individual first.

### **Future Directions**

Although research exists that supports the efficacy of play therapy approaches in general (Ray, Bratton, Rhine, & Jones, 2001), sand tray therapy specifically has not been the subject of as much empirical study. However, existing research is positive (Mitchell & Friedman, 1994). There is a need for research in the area of sand tray group counseling, and this empirical examination is important in determining the ultimate effectiveness of this novel approach. Although this article focused on sand tray group counseling in an alternative school setting, the same approach could be readily applied to regular schools, agency, private practice, other outpatient settings, and hospital day treatment and inpatient programs. Some potentially interesting populations might include clients with eating disorders, substance abuse, and sexual offenses. Although sand tray, especially Jungian sandplay, is a modality long used with adult clients, empirical support for the effectiveness of adult sand tray group work has not been established either. Mitchell and Friedman (1994) stated, "Further research and understanding of group applications of Sandplay may represent one of the many 'growing edges' of the field" (p. 117). The first author is in the process of working collaboratively in a counselor education program to try the sand tray group counseling approach as an alternative to the traditional personal growth groups offered in the department. There are many possibilities,

but research is needed to support the efficacy of sand tray group counseling.

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