

2010

Creating a Better World for our Child

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Theresa Fraser contributed the chapter “Creating a Better World for our Child” in the book *Creative Family Therapy Techniques : Play, Art, and expressive Therapies to Engage Children in Family Sessions*

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SOURCE Citation

Fraser, Theresa, "Creating a Better World for our Child" (2010). *Faculty Books*. Book 2.
http://source.sheridancollege.ca/fahcs_comm_book/2



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Creating a Better World for Our Child

Source: Theresa Fraser

Goals

- Establish a safe and open therapeutic environment
- Encourage parents to identify common values, hopes, and goals
- Identify how parents can support their child and each other in working toward specific family goals
- Set goals to be addressed in treatment

Materials

- Sandtray half-filled with sand
- Variety of miniature objects or figurines representing different categories such as people (various ages, races, abilities, and occupations), animals (pets, farm, and wild), vehicles, plants, and things from nature (rocks, shells), furniture/household objects, buildings, fantasy figures
- Paper
- Pen (one for each parent)
- Camera

Description

Note: Three sessions are required for the completion of this activity, and it is intended for parents and one child.

Session One (Session with the Child)

The child is invited to build a world in the sandtray. The six phases are consistent with the Sandtray-Worldplay Method developed by De Domenico (1995):

1. Introduction to the medium

The therapist shows the builder the tray, sand, water, and miniature objects and invites him/her to use these to create whatever he/she would like in the sandtray.

2. Free and spontaneous playing/building

When the playing begins, the therapist does not initiate interaction either verbally or nonverbally. All play throughout this phase is viewed as being interconnected.

3. Builder experiencing phase

The builder finishes at which time he/she may say "I am done." The therapist encourages the builder to look at the world and invites him/her to make any changes desired. If the builder speaks, the therapist (witness)

mirrors what is stated to support the experience rather than initiate any builder–witness interaction. This supports De Domenico’s (1995) thesis that “the world confronts the maker.”

4. Client–therapist joint experiencing phase

The therapist (witness) asks the builder to take her /him into the builder’s world. The therapist sits on the same side as the builder to view the world from his/her perspective. The therapist can ask questions such as “Who in this world knows everyone else?” “Where in this world do the animals feel safe?” The questions should be focused on increasing the builder’s experience of his/her world.

5. Reflecting phase

When the builder and the therapist “come out” of the world, the therapist asks the builder what the title of this world would be if it were a story, or what the message of the world might be for the builder or for all who see it. De Domenico (1995) writes, “Work is done around discovering practical ways of applying the world’s teachings to the daily life of the client.”

6. Photographing phase

The builder is invited to photograph his/her world.

At the end of the session, ask the child if the picture of his/her world can be shared with the parents when they come for their therapy session. The world is photographed and, if possible, left to stand until the parent session occurs. If it is decided that the world will not stay in place, the therapist dismantles it after the builder has left and after the therapist has had the opportunity to reflect on the world and the client’s experience of it.

Session Two (Session with the Parents)

During this session, the parents are shown the world (or the photograph of the world) built by their child and each parent is invited to choose two items from the child’s world to place into the empty sandtray. They are then invited to add additional objects or figures and to work together to build the kind of world they would want for their child. More specifically, they are asked to build a world that reflects the ideal family for their child, the sorts of relationships (family, extended family, friends, etc.) they want their child to have, the activities they want their child to participate in, the community supports they believe would be helpful for their child, and so on. The parents are asked to build without talking to the therapist or to each other.

The therapist stays in the room and observes. When both parents feel that they are finished, they are each invited to share what was built and what they experienced

while building it. Both are encouraged to listen to each other without interrupting or asking questions.

When both have taken the other parent and therapist on a tour, the therapist may reflect or wonder about specific areas of the world. This provides everyone with the opportunity to get to know this world more closely. This portion of the session is known as the client–therapist joint experiencing phase.

During the reflecting phase, the therapist invites the parents to reflect on what common themes or variant themes emerged. The therapist can comment on these themes. It may be appropriate at this point to discuss how images from the child’s world were included in the parent’s joint world.

To facilitate further exploration and discussion, ask the following questions:

1. Describe the ideal family you envision for your child.
2. Describe the parent–child and sibling relationships, interactions, and dynamics that exist in this ideal world.
3. Discuss the relationships outside of your immediate family that you want for your child, for example, extended family, friends, community supports.
4. What activities would you like your child to participate in and why?
5. What elements do you share or agree on in your vision of an ideal world for your child?
6. What changes need to happen in order to create this better world for your child?
7. What can each of you do to create a better world for your child?
8. How can therapy help you create this better world?

Both parents are then asked to write a joint letter to their child identifying what their hopes and dreams are for the world that they want their child to grow up in. They are invited to take photographs of their joint world using a camera or a cell phone to add to these letters.

Prepare the parents for the following session in which they will share the letter with their child.

Session Three (Session with the Parents and the Child)

Have the parents read their letter to the child. Discuss the letter and the child’s reactions to the letter. Then identify goals for future treatment sessions.

Discussion

This activity can be very powerful for the family. Asking the parents to study the child’s sandtray helps them to explore the issues that the child is experiencing from a more objective vantage point.

This activity can help parents to think about the hopes and dreams they have for their child and the role they each will take in order to optimize the creation of that world. Additionally, it helps them identify necessary supports and interventions collaboratively.

The creation of the letter honors their parenting roles and the aspirations that each of them holds for their child.

Reference

De Domenico, G.S. (1995). *Sandtray-worldplay: A comprehensive guide to the use of sandtray in psychotherapeutic and transformational settings*. Oakland, CA: Vision Quest Images.

About The Author

Theresa Fraser, MA, CYW, CPT, works with children, youth, and families. She is a founding Clinician/Manager of Clinical Services at a Children's Mental Health Agency. In 2009 she published the book *Billy Had to Move* to help children deal with the foster care experience. She has provided workshops internationally to foster care providers about the challenges of daily service provision for children who have experienced trauma and attachment disruptions. She is a part-time instructor at Humber and Mohawk Colleges. She is a Certified Play Therapist and the President of the Canadian Association for Child and Play Therapy.

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