

SANDTRAY SUITE

MODULE 4: HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF “PLAY” IN THE SANDTRAY WITH LITTLES

Many times, when someone is new to working in the sand with children, or new to play therapy in general, they may wonder, “OK, so when is the real therapy going to start? When is it going to be more than just playing?” Well, the thing is, is playing is the therapy. This is the way that children process their feelings.

So, say you have a five-year-old boy who is making sounds crashing two cars together over and over. Part of you is going to be like, “What am I even doing? They are just crashing cars together.” But, what we know about how the brain works, again, children of all ages, but especially those who don’t have verbal skills yet to talk about their feelings, their brain is doing that because it’s going toward that growing edge. And, as long as you are there holding the space and having that free and protected space for their nervous system to feel safe so it can do the hard work, it may just look like they are crashing those things together over and over. But what you know is that there are amazing things that are really happening.

A story that one of my friends told me several years ago, we were going through the play therapy certification program together, and she was one of the only play therapists or one who had been trained in play therapy in the clinic where she was working. So, oftentimes, as you guys probably know, once you get trained in this, other people are like, “Oh, you know what to do with these littles. Send them to So-and-So. Send them to Amy. She can get it figured out.” So this is what happened to my friend. She had gotten a little boy who was 7 and who had worked with several other therapists and they just couldn’t figure out how to work with him. So, during the first session they were doing some of the exploratory phase that often happens with littles. And he was in the sandtray room. And she

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said, “I really didn’t think much about it. He was just putting things in the sand, crashing things together. We weren’t even really talking about anything deep. She said, “So, again, I really wasn’t alerted to anything when he was leaving the sandtray session.” But it was just a few minutes later her phone rang and it was the foster mother of this little boy. And again, he was in foster care because he had difficulties at home, particularly with his dad, some abuse neglect stuff that had went on. And this foster mom said, “What did you do during this session?” She said, “I don’t know. Why?” And she could hear her little client in the background kicking the back of the van seat going, “I don’t want to talk about my dad anymore! I don’t want to talk about my dad!” And my friend, who is the therapist said, “Well, we never mentioned, he never mentioned his dad. We never talked about his dad. But because he was playing in the sand, and he was working through that stuff in such a way, it was as if he had actually used those verbal words. So, again, we never just want to assume that we know nothing is really happening because two clients are just smashing the cars together. So, again, this is why it’s important that we stay with the client. We provide that neuroception of safety, and really track and summarize, because you’ll never know when you’re actually able to get feedback from a client to know, “Oh my gosh. This stuff is really working.” But oftentimes what will happen, what will more often happen is, the parent will come in and go, “You know? He is just doing so much better. I don’t know what you guys are doing back there with that sand stuff, but he’s doing a lot better.” And, again, how do you know sandtray works? How do you know any therapy works? When the client gets better. So, again, just because they’re not able to tell you in words and process it, doesn’t mean that it’s not working.