

# SANDTRAY SUITE

## MODULE 4: TEENS IN THE TRAY—WHAT TO EXPECT

When we are working with teenagers in the tray, oftentimes it's really easy to expect them to build a tray much like one an adult would, but when that doesn't happen, we can often kind of be left feeling confused and wondering, "OK, that's not what I expected." Because this part of their brain, that prefrontal cortex, is not fully on line until they're about 25, in some ways they are still very concretely oriented, especially when they have to do a tray involving emotions, or they have to talk about emotions. And, again, it varies from teenager to teenager, but I wanted to give you guys kind of a heads up in what to expect when you put one of your teenagers in the tray.

One of the things that I like to do is to use sandtray with my teenagers because they often love to feel heard and to really feel understood. Because of course, as we know, one of the big things they often feel really misunderstood. So, if I give them a medium to really help them express this, it helps the therapeutic relationship. So, when I am giving them either a non-directive or a directive sandtray, oftentimes this is something kind of like what I will get. So, what it will be like is most of it will be pretty concrete meaning that, say I had a teenager that came in and she said, "OK. this is my grandmother. This is my sister who is about to have a baby. Here's my mom. She likes to sing in the choir. We go to church a lot. Here's me and I have a dog." Then, what you'll see is, is you'll see one, maybe two, abstract themes starting to come out. So they'll say, "And this, I kind of put this in here because my life sometimes feels like it goes around and around and it never really goes anywhere. And I really try to reach out to people and love other people, but it feels like I never get anything back." And, so these are more abstract themes then you know, "This is my mom. This is my dad." And, so you again, can see this, kind of polarity coming out in the tray. So, when you see that, you want to take note of that and then go, "OK. This is the section that you really want to focus on." So, you say, "OK. I notice that you said that you feel like life goes around and around and never really goes anywhere.

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Tell me more about that.” That is something that is super important to say and to use with teenagers. Tell me more about that, and to ask about that abstract thing because that’s what they’re struggling with and what they’re really worrying about is this growing edge, and it often gets represented in an abstract miniature. When I say abstract miniature, it could be like an empty rocking chair, like I said, a heart, something that doesn’t mean exactly what it is, like, “This is my pregnant sister.” That is very concrete.

So, again, just to be aware that this is what you get and you can really try to focus on some of these abstract miniatures. And you can even take these miniatures and go, “OK. I want us to make a tray.” And it could be in the same tray or it can be a different tray, or whatever, just about these miniatures. “So, let’s make a tray. Help me understand. Show me what it’s like when it feels like your life is just around and around and never goes anywhere.” And really kind of dig down and explore some of that because that’s really what’s wanting therapy. So again, to have an understanding of what you may see with teenagers and to really help them develop emotionally and to work the best way possible in the sandtray.