

**Integrating Sand Tray and Solution Focused Brief Counseling
as a Model for Working with Middle School Students**

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Abstract

School counselors are master jugglers and must assume a variety of roles and tasks in order to be successful. Despite common misconceptions, Play Therapy is not for exclusive use with younger children. In fact, adolescents can also benefit from its unique properties. One integrated technique that could prove to be especially helpful with middle school students is Sand Tray used in conjunction with Solution Focused Brief Counseling (SFBC). Sand Tray and SFBC could help validate the feelings of students while also helping students set and achieve short-term goals, regardless if they are academic, social, or emotional.

Keywords: Sand tray, solution focused brief counseling, middle school students, counseling interventions

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Model for Working with Middle School Students**

The therapeutic relationship is vital to the effectiveness of the counseling process. School counselors can find building a solid relationship with students difficult given tremendous

demands on counselors' time, role conflict, and multiple responsibilities. Nevertheless, school counselors are master jugglers and must assume a variety of roles and tasks in order to be successful. Finding time to nurture the relationships between counselor and student can be a daunting task in this type of environment. In order to maintain their positions, school counselors must be innovative and dynamic in their approach to the establishment of this relationship.

The introduction of Play Therapy techniques into an academic setting can help the counselor establish trusting relationships and build rapport with the students (Rasmussen & Cunningham, 1995). Traditional "talk therapy" methods can be useful in communicating with students about the nature of their issues, but play therapy allows for a less invasive, creative way for the student to express him/herself and his/her anxieties to the counselor. Play acts as a medium for metaphorical expression equally as powerful as verbal expression (Chesley et al., 2008). The use of metaphors in the school counseling setting helps students make sense of distressing internal and external events occurring in daily life. Play therapy techniques allow students to process these experiences using a familiar means (Landreth, 2002; Rasmussen & Cunningham, 1995).

Despite common misconceptions, Play Therapy is not for exclusive use with younger children. In fact, adolescents can also benefit from its unique properties. Older students can process monumental or difficult life experiences using symbolic play (Chelsey et al., 2008). One specific play technique that could prove to be especially helpful with the adolescent population is Sand Tray. Sand Tray is a symbolic method of self-expression in which the client represents himself and the world around him using a base of sand and miniature figurines. Although Sangganjanavanich and Magnuson (2011) point out that Sand Tray is not a

replacement for a solid counselor-student relationship, it can be an excellent supplement because the technique can enhance and deepen student disclosure.

The metaphors that manifest during Sand Tray can give valuable insight into the student's perspectives, thereby promoting deeper counselor empathy and an enhanced counseling relationship. Counselors can use student-created metaphors and identify potential counseling opportunities (Sangganjanavanich & Magnuson, 2011). Sand Tray gives the user the power to control their "sand environment" which can be freeing for students who have little control over their life circumstances. This technique also allows students to depict persons and events in their lives without actually having to disclose too much information to the counselor. Sand Tray methods are also diverse enough for use with students of any age and allow for the expression of cultural and societal differences (Sangganjanavanich & Magnuson, 2011).

Sand Tray techniques can be both directive and non-directive. Traditionally, Sand Tray sessions have been non-directive in nature, allowing the student to take direction and control over the session. Non-directive Sand Tray promotes the growth of the counseling relationship. The approach can also help the student build self-esteem and trust. However, when Sand Tray is directive, associated techniques help the student dynamically engage in the process of goal-setting (Nims, 2007).

Both aspects of Sand Tray are important in a school counseling setting. In an ideal situation, the school counselor could designate enough time for non-directive Sand Tray with individual students. Even with time constraints, an entirely directive approach reduces opportunities for the student and counselor to build a strong working alliance. An integrated strategy that blends directive and non-directive techniques can enhance the counselor-student bond and direct the student toward concrete, realistic goals (Rasmussen & Cunningham, 1995).

Within the realm of school counseling, the ability to integrate various counseling methods is indispensable. The counselor wants to be as effective as possible, but large lists of assigned students and other duties can counteract the efforts of even the most determined helper (Sklare, 2005). School counselors may benefit from combining an additional counseling element with talk and Sand Tray techniques.

Solution Focused Brief Counseling

Solution-Focused Brief Counseling (also referred to as Solution-Focused Brief Therapy) is a short term, goal-oriented therapeutic technique designed to help students achieve objectives agreed upon by both the student and counselor (Nims, 2007; Sklare, 2005). This groundbreaking method focuses on solutions rather than problems. SFBC emphasizes future goals instead of past events (Iveson, 2002).

Sohby and Cavallaro (2010) pointed out that SFBC uses a variety of open questions to stimulate creative problem-solving in the student; SFBC allows the student to become an active part of his/her counseling and goal-setting. The SFBC process is positive, inspiring students to take responsibility for the resolution of their own problems, and celebrating previously accomplished victories in the student's life and setting concrete goals for future achievement (Sklare, 2005; Sobhy & Cavallaro, 2010). Through the use of SFBC, the student can embrace the possibility of change. A technique referred to as the "Miracle Question" is particularly effective in changing a student's negative pattern of thinking. The counselor asks the student to imagine the problem no longer exists by assuming a miraculous event has occurred and removed the problem from his/her life (Iveson, 2002; Sklare, 2005). The student must describe what his/her life would be like without the problem, thus creating alternative actions and thoughts that can diminish the presence of the issue at hand.

SFBC and Sand Tray

Taylor (2009) showed that Sand Tray and SFBC can be combined to provide deep and encouraging counseling sessions. Both Sand Tray and SFBC help the client to become “masters of their own worlds,” while the counselor remains a goal-directed observer and collaborator (Taylor, 2009). When used in conjunction with SFBC, Sand Tray could help validate the feelings of students while also helping students set and achieve short-term goals, regardless if they are academic, social, or emotional.

Sand Tray could be particularly effective in the exploration of the “Miracle Question” because it stimulates deeper thinking and allows the counselor to work within the metaphor created by the student. Brief, powerful sessions such as these would be suited for the school counseling environment and also allow the counselor to make the best impact he/she can on as many students as he/she can. SFBC works well with middle school aged students when creative and expressive techniques are incorporated (Nims, 2007).

However, not all students would be suited for Sand Tray and SFBC integrated therapy. Sklare (2005) points out students experiencing trauma may not want to seek a solution right away. Likewise, the use of symbolic representation in Sand Tray therapy could also be damaging to a traumatized student. A Solution Focused approach assumes students are healthy enough to solve their own problems, and this may not always be the case (Sobhy & Cavallaro, 2010). In any clinical situation, it is best for the counselor to refer the student to another professional within the community.

It is up to the counselor to use his/her best judgment in determining good candidates for Sand Tray and SFBC. Sangganjanavanich and Magnuson (2011) did not recommend the use of Sand Tray with clients who were resistant to the counseling process, or clients dealing with

severe emotional or mental challenges. In the school counseling setting, forcing a student to engage when she is highly resistant to Sand Tray therapy could damage the therapeutic relationship and stall progress.

Despite those few exceptions, Sand Tray and SFBC would still be effective methods in the school counseling setting, especially among middle school students. Middle school aged students experience many complex emotional and physical changes. Adolescence is an influential time in the student's life where he/she is transitioning between childhood and adulthood. There are astonishing amounts of issues middle school students face, which require some sort of therapeutic outlet in order to cope and transition effectively. In fact, research suggests that middle school students deal with problems related to body image, bullying, and perceived adult authority.

Both middle school girls and boys deal with body image issues and self-esteem. Petrie et al. (2010) showed that adolescent girls place great emphasis on social body comparisons and were likely to use exercise to manage their appearances, which could lead to body image issues and disordered eating. Likewise, boys are more susceptible to peer-pressures that urge them to build muscle mass and maintain strength (Petrie et al., 2010). The use of Sand Tray therapy (over talk therapy) could be a better outlet for students dealing with negative body image because it allows them to creatively and symbolically express this struggle, and how their lives would differ if body image was not a factor.

Many middle school students also struggle with issues of bullying. Aggression and victimization are common throughout adolescence and can result in maladjustment for both the aggressor and victim (Card & Hodges, 2009). There can be a large degree of fear and notions of "tattle-telling" among adolescents. This can make it difficult for a school counselor to make any

progress with a bullied student. However, Sand Tray could provide an outlet of expression for the student without making him/her feel guilty, and could lead to deeper conversations and goal setting in the future.

Middle school students also deal with their own perceptions of adult and peer authority. As adolescents mature, a conflict between parental, peer, and personal authority emerges. Middle school students are more likely to seek approval and validation from their friends, while accepting their parents as legitimate authorities decline. During the early adolescent years, legitimacy beliefs deteriorate and give way to more independent experiences (Kuhn & Laird, 2011). This can create a divide in trust between the student and middle school counselor. Sand Tray is less threatening and it does not require the student to deeply disclose to the counselor right away. Sand tray could help the counselor and student break the ice and create a stable relationship in a shorter amount of time.

Conclusions

Due to the emotional and social conflicts that arise during the early adolescent years, middle school counselors must bring a variety of counseling methods to the table in order to be as effective and appealing as possible. Using a variety of creative and play techniques with middle school students can benefit both students and counselors. Combining the use of Sand Tray and SFBC could be most useful in the middle school setting. The integration of these techniques helps students to feel safe and free to express what they are feeling inside.

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