

A Case Study of the Efficacy of Group Sandplay Therapy in Improving Parent-Child Relationships

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Abstract: Group sandplay therapy is a useful instrument for healing family rifts. This article is a case study where the group sandplay therapy method was used to address the client's conflicts with his family members. The therapy outcomes show that group sandplay therapy is efficacious in enhancing communication and interaction between family members, improving interpersonal relationships within a family, particularly the parent-child relationship, and alleviating parent-child tensions as barriers to effective home education.

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SANDPLAY THERAPY (SPT) is a method of psychotherapy in which the client is free to choose toys from a toy rack and uses a special tray filled with fine-grained sand to build a representation of their inner world in the presence of the therapist (Zhang, 2006). The efficacy of SPT in correcting psychological and behavioral abnormalities in children has been well acknowledged (Wu, 2022). Individual SPT and group SPT are the two forms of SPT. In group SPT (also referred to as restrictive group SPT), a group of people (often four to eight people) share a sand tray and a set of toys and perform the play according to prescribed rules (Wei, 2020). Group sandplay can exert therapeutic effects on both the group and individuals by affecting the interpersonal relationships between group members as well as the notions, emotions, and behavior of individuals within the group. Its therapeutic effectiveness has been validated by research (Zhang, 2006). Family SPT is a special application area of Group SPT (Xu & Zhang, 2007). This article is a case study of the efficacy of group SPT for a family with an eight-year-old boy who was experiencing school entry anxiety and being plagued by abnormal parent-child relationships. The family received six consecutive sessions of SPT, and the differences in their emotions, behaviors, and parent-child relationships before and after therapy were evaluated.

Background Information on the Case

Demographic Information of the Client

B, the client, was an eight-year-old boy of Zhuang nationality and a first grader at a primary school. He shared a home with his parents and a four-year-old younger sister, S. B's parents were both ordinary full-time office workers. In the past six months, B's mother, M, has been on frequent business trips. The economic status of the family (L) was at the average level in China. There was no history of major physical and mental illnesses or personality disorders in the family.

Behavioral Problems of the Client

B exhibited certain separation anxiety symptoms when he started his primary school attendance. His abnormalities include lingering in bed in the morning, refusing to go to school using paid transit service but insisting his father (F) drive him to school, repeating "I don't want to go to school" as his most frequent topic, showing extreme aversion to school attendance, being unable to listen attentively at class, and particularly having difficulties with his Chinese language lessons, ranking the last in the first few unit quizzes. B's parents were deeply worried about his performance and signed him up for the after-school tutoring class, which resulted in his spending two extra hours at

school. B was extremely unhappy about this arrangement, but his parents forced him to carry on with the tutoring class. After coming back home, B had to review his lessons under the supervision of M. B dallied on purpose and could not finish the task until 11 p.m. on most school days. Delaying and replying defiantly were B's frequent reactions to his parents' requirements.

Pre-Therapy Psychological Evaluation

The Psychological State of the Client

The client, B, was physically healthy with intellectual, emotional, and behavioral development levels consistent with his age. His low spirits and anxiety were triggered by his primary school attendance, but this is not yet a generalized issue. His social functioning remained basically normal. B's behavioral deviations were rooted in his current problematic relationship with his parents. The parent-child relationship is the most influential factor for a child's development in the home setting, posing direct impacts on the development of their social and psychological competence.

Evaluation of Parent-Child Relationships in Family L

A Negative Parent-Child Relationship

From the interviews with the family members, it was found that the parents often ignore, disregard, or distrust their children's words. This was particularly evidenced by the interaction between B and his parents: The father ignored B's request for not attending school or after-school tutoring altogether as if he had never heard of it, with the belief that B would adapt naturally to school after a certain period of time; the mother, on the other hand, insisted that B should study harder, disregarding his emotional needs and failing to provide emotional support in a timely manner.

Frequent Parent-Child Conflicts

There could be three or four parent-child conflicts every day in Family L. The parents' irresponsible behaviors towards their children included intimidation, being overly harsh, corporal punishment, and verbal abuse, among others. B felt awful about his life: "It is not fun attending the school. Neither the teachers nor classmates are nice. My parents are even worse. You have to get to school early in the morning and come home late in the afternoon with a lot of homework. My parents are very cruel to me, often yelling at me and sometimes even beating me." At the same time, the parents complained that

B dallied on purpose while doing homework or stopped to play games before finishing it off, which really drove them mad.

Poor Parent-Child Communication

Despite their natural love for the kids, the parents often treated them in a harsh or coercive manner and disciplined them through dictation or prohibition. In B's eyes, his dad was always busy, working overtime on weekends, and never caring about his schoolwork. On the contrary, his mom was deeply concerned about his school performance but never satisfied with his test grades, especially those of Chinese; he was not allowed to spend time playing after the primary school enrolment. On the other hand, the parents thought that B had poor learning habits, resulting in low learning efficiency. He could not finish his day until 12 p.m. every night but had to wake up at 6:30 a.m. in the morning to go to school on time. Inadequate sleep was detrimental to his growth and study. They could not help but resort to dictation or coercion when reasoning with him did not work.

The Intervention Process

Given B's emotional and behavioral issues and the less-ideal parent-child relationship in B's family, the therapist chose to administer group SPT to Family L. The therapy scheme included six sessions for six weeks (one session scheduled for each week). During the SPT time, B continued to attend school but did not receive any other therapy.

The First Session

The Therapy Process

This was Family L's first access to SPT. The therapist allowed them time to play with the sand and perceive its touch. The family showed tremendous interest in sandplay, particularly the two kids, who could not wait to play with the sand tray. The therapist gave them a few minutes of group SPT orientation, including the roles of the therapy, its purposes and objectives, and the rules for its execution. The order of turns in conducting sandplay was determined by lot-drawing, which turned out to be in the sequence of B-M-S-F and was agreed upon by all of them.

To start with, B spaced out 10 balls along the edges of the sand tray. After that, M placed four coconut trees on the right side of the sand tray, S put six marine animals (starfish, squids, and whales) in the upper portion of the tray, and F laid a motorcycle next to the whales. Five more rounds of manipulation in the same sequence (B-M-S-F) followed. In this first trial of

sandplay, they all had a lot to express with the toys, especially the kids, who wanted to handle as many toys as possible in each round. When the session terminated, the kids felt like playing more but had to give up because the tray was full. The family agreed to dub this sand tray picture “A Wonderful World” after discussion.

The Therapist’s Observation

During the therapy, each family member paid little attention to other ones, and there was no effective parent-child interaction; everybody concentrated on filling the sand tray with their own favorite toys. There were overt conflicts between them, particularly between B and his sister, S. For instance, when S laid out a handful of marine animals on the beach, B did not like the arrangement because he thought they could not survive without staying in the water. However, S refused to compromise on her idea, and B stuck to his belief that aggressive land animals like dinosaurs were better options.

The Second Session

The Therapy Process

Because of the disruption caused by the holiday season in early October, the second session did not take place until nine days later. The therapist reiterated the rules for the therapy, and the sequence was redefined as B-S-F-M after the second lot-drawing. In the first round of operation, a lawn was placed in the upper right corner of the tray by B, a colosseum in the left of its middle portion by S, and a Kungfu panda next to the colosseum by F, followed by a small lake dug by M in the center of the upper portion of the tray. At the request of the kids, the number of rounds was increased to eight for this session. In the discussion period after completing the miniature work, family members shared their intentions for the choice of toys and their perceptions of the choice of other members. This time, all family members agreed to name it “A Shared Community.”

The Therapist’s Observation

In the second session, all participants selected quite a few toys different from those used in the first session. The attention paid to each other remained little. Nevertheless, no obvious conflicts occurred during the sandplay. A few simple parent-child interactions occurred with one between B and M (B placed a small rainbow in the lake dug by M), one between S and M (S put two boats in the lake), one between F and S (F placed a Kungfu panda next to the colosseum set by S), two between B and F (B set up the national flag in front of

the Tiananmen Square erected by F and put a smaller rainbow in the middle of the larger one added by F), and one between B and S (B grilled the fish on S's stove).

The Third Session

The Therapy Process

All participants had come to a satisfactory understanding of the therapy's procedures by the third session. The third session of sandplay ran in the order of B-S-F-M.

Discussion and Observation

There were serious conflicts between participants in this session. The crocodiles, seals, bears, and other beasts of prey in the sand tray posed a serious threat to S's sphere. S was desperate to protect her area by enclosing it to the right of the sand tray. B attempted to communicate with S and placed three bridges behind the fences. However, S reinforced her defense by deploying more mountains, fences, and the bird-nest-like stadium. M tried to get connected to B's world by planting pine trees and lotus flowers there. The therapist asked B, "Does the crocodile prey on humans?" "Yes" "Then why did you put so many beasts of prey there?" "For fights." "Did you win?" "No." "Are there any alternative solutions to conflicts apart from fighting?" At this point, B was brought into deep contemplation. In addition, the sand tray picture also showed some traces of conflict between B and F: B's Ultraman approached F's soldier, attempting to kill him.

In the fourth round of sandplay, something more dramatic happened. S took the cat away from the shell where it had stayed with the mermaid and placed it inside the bird nest-like stadium, which aroused strong opposition from B. Yet S had no intention of giving in. The therapist did not intervene immediately but waited and observed the parents' reactions. It turned out that the father had no idea what to do while the mother was trying to calm down the boy. The mother, then, asked the father to bring the girl back to the sand tray and coaxed her into completing the play. Finally, with the therapist's consent, the cat was placed in the bird-nest-like stadium. The therapist asked S, "Why did you want to move the cat?" "Because it's my favorite." "Isn't it safer for it to stay with the mermaid?" "No, it's not safe there. The cat should stay in the bird nest-like stadium." "Okay, let all of us protect it. Do you feel like carrying on with the play?" "Sure." During the negotiation process, the father and mother became aware of the parent-child communication issue that existed in their home education. In the end, the family reached an agreement to name this sand tray picture "War and Peace."

The Fourth Session

The Therapy Process

The fourth session was played out in nine rounds in the sequence of M-S-B-F.

Discussion and Observation

In the conversation about their sand tray picture, B expressed his dissatisfaction with the layout and removed the helicopter from the top of the office building, but later put it back. This indicated that B wanted to break free from F's control but recognized the limitations of his own power. F wanted to pull the small house out of the sand, but S stopped him, warning, "Don't touch my house!" This was a signal of S's strong awareness of boundaries. M and F interacted affectionately, working together to build a home in the upper left corner of the tray, which was full of joyful and warm atmospheres. No significant confrontations arose between the family members in this session. Neither did they occur in the following sessions. This time, the miniature work in the sand tray was named "Free from Worries."

The Fifth Session

The Therapy Process

Due to M's business trip to Thailand, the fifth session was postponed until three weeks later. The therapist repeated briefly the instructions, and Family L conducted the operation in the sequence of B-S-F-M based on the results of the "rock-paper-scissors" game. They created a harmonious image and dubbed it "A Beautiful Memory."

The Therapist's Observation

This session was a fun experience for the family. M's last trip to Thailand, where the Buddhist tradition is prevalent and elephants and tigers are common, gave the sandplay an exotic touch. The sand tray layout showed no signs of confrontation. Instead, parent-child interactions significantly increased. B laid F's high-speed train on the railway track; B's jet was placed next to F's passenger plane; M planted trees in front of B's buildings, such as the police office; S was in a good mood and initiated quite a few conversations with F and M. There was no conflict between B and S, either. S put M's strawberry on her table. B built a home with four family members,

among which the parents stayed together, but the older brother and his younger sister kept a certain distance between them, concentrating on what they liked to do without any mutual interference.

The Sixth Session

The Therapy Process

The last session was one week behind the schedule because of the kids' school weekend activities. It was played out in the order of B-S-F-M.

Discussion and Observation

All participants were in high spirits and felt pleased with the last miniature work. They gave positive comments to each other's contributions to the work and saw every toy as integral and representative of their real intentions. The honing of relationships in the previous five sessions resulted in more tacit interaction between the family members and increased their attention to each other's needs. The sand tray model showcased preliminary integration, marked by common goals and signs of joint efforts. The last sand tray image was named "A Spiritual Paradise."

The Efficacy of the Intervention

Participants' Self-Evaluation

F, the father, reported that after the six sessions of therapy, B's perception of school attendance changed. B no longer talked about his unwillingness to go to school but was still resistant to the after-school tutoring. He was able to get up on time for morning calls and would not cry after leaving home. He could now listen rationally to F. M, the mother, said that B's defiant behavior had substantially lessened. B could now better understand his parents' expectations of him. Despite his occasional delays, he could follow his parents' instructions according to their timely prompts. Meanwhile, F and M were now less focused on B's academic results but more on his personal thoughts and needs, giving him more understanding and spiritual comfort. Yelling and screaming gave way to decent conversations in their home. B, the client, reported that he was not afraid of school attendance any more now that teachers' lectures had become comprehensible and his parents' attitudes towards him had changed.

The Therapist's Evaluation

The follow-up interviews confirmed that the intervention had reached its expected objectives. First off, parent-child conflicts have been substantially reduced in Family L. The parents could regulate their emotions better than before, keeping their temper with the kids when the latter misbehaved. They could listen calmly to B's explanation for his dislike of attending school and help him with his homework when necessary. The frequency of the parents yelling at B has considerably decreased. As a result, the parent-child tensions in Family L have significantly eased. The parents could now rationally communicate with B about his day-to-day school experiences and the progression of his schoolwork, as well as possible challenges that might necessitate their help. B could now confide in his parents his concerns about the current transitional period and feel free to talk through with them his perceptions of teachers, classmates, and after-school services. Most importantly, group SPT successfully helped B to release his anxiety caused by the school transition and to get psychologically ready for full engagement in the new educational setting.

Others' Evaluation

According to B's class teacher, B, after the therapy, stopped asking her repeatedly when he would be dismissed and go home, as he had done before. He was now attentive in class and willing to help teachers and the class with all sorts of chores. His average academic level remained around B+.

Conclusion and Reflections

The therapeutic outcomes of Family L demonstrate that group SPT has significant positive effects on improving parent-child relationships in a family. The case in discussion also shows that the family needs to go through four stages in group SPT to reach mutual understanding and harmony between family members.

Stage One: Self-Concentration

In the first two sessions of SPT, there were few associations between discrete scenes in the sand tray, and the arrangement of toys was in a disorganized state. The dynamics in the sand tray were inconsistent in direction, and the picture showed a lack of cohesion and shared motivation among its creators. The reason was that there was little interaction among the family members; each of them was self-centered, concentrating on their own feelings and thoughts.

Stage Two: Paying Attention to One Another

Following the initial sandplay experiences, explicit conflicts emerged between S and B, mainly due to their stubbornness and zero-compromise mentality, resulting in both being dissatisfied with the final work. The conflicts between the parents and children, particularly between B and F, were also manifested in the sand tray image. The therapist intervened and skillfully mediated conflicts to moderate parent-child and inter-sibling relationships.

Stage Three: Communication and Mutual Understanding

With increased confrontations and conversations in sandplay, the family members had more effective communication by candidly representing their thoughts and feelings, as well as their expectations of each other. Although there remained disputes due to disagreements between participants, they were all minor. Reconciliation could be reached through communication with patience and reasonable guidance from the parents.

Stage Four: Adjustment and Integration

After the processes of self-concentration, paying attention to others, communication, and mutual understanding, the family members deepened their comprehension of each other and learned to think from different perspectives. A more tacit relationship was developed, enabling them to create a sand tray miniature work with enhanced integrity, increased associations, and an explicit, uniform theme.

To sum up, group SPT assists the client in establishing connections with their family, consciously and unconsciously, in relaxed, safe, and resistance-relief atmospheres (Wei, 2020). It is also effective in encouraging self-exploration and self-conception in family members. Thus, group SPT has the potential to help foster healthy family relationships by promoting positive communication and other healthy interaction patterns between parents and children, supporting participants in taking on normal roles in the family, and highlighting the importance of harmonious development of the mental health of individuals as family members.

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