

## **DREAM DEFENDERS: GROUP SANDTRAY WORK WITH CHILDREN OF HIV-INFECTED PARENTS\***

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For several years the authors offered a group called “Dream Defenders” to well children whose parent(s) had HIV/AIDS. The children ranged in age from 5 to 14 years old, and had suffered varying degrees of discrimination and trauma based on the parent’s medical status. The children were not referred to this group due to behavior problems, but solely on the HIV status of their parent. Generally the children were seen on a weekly basis and did individual sandtrays. Initially we tried directed sandtrays along with spontaneous ones. Very quickly we realized the directed sandtrays were not as helpful to the children, although they did help us understand their experiences more quickly. Eventually the children became more able to share their experiences verbally as well.

Common experiences included pervasive and penetrating terror and grief at the impending loss of a parent and the many losses leading up to it. A deep despair and sense of aloneness was also present as were experiences of deprivation as many of the ill parents could no longer work and/or were less emotionally available to the children. In the children who came most regularly, we observed a shift in the focus of their experiences over time. Their perspective increased from primary attention to their personal and social struggles to include the emergence of the spiritual realm from which they drew strength. The children expressed these experiences in a profound manner, all the while struggling to go to school, do homework and somehow maintain enough hope in their lives to continue. Some were also actively involved in planning for their futures without their parent(s).

Even after films like “And the Band Played On” and “Philadelphia,” people with HIV/AIDS have remained ostracized in our society. As difficult as it may be for adults to freely discuss this subject, it is absolutely taboo for the children of an HIV/AIDS-infected person. One landlord overheard the kids talking about their mom’s HIV and quickly evicted the family. One fourth grader told her “best friend” in total confidence that her mom had AIDS, and felt relieved afterwards. The next week, however, her friend became angry with her and told the whole school. The harassment of this girl became so severe so quickly that she had to be moved to a school across town. Children with parents who have HIV/AIDS learn quickly that sharing their experiences can be dangerous. They are also aware that life is difficult for their ill parents and do not want to be a further burden to them. Therefore they tend not to share their problems with their parents in order to protect them.

We are choosing to share these two sandtrays that illustrate the deeply moving nature of this work.



### **Gaia, The Spirit of the Earth**

*All the bad guys are lined up. The Mohawk guy is the creator of the HIV virus and is the source of all pollution on earth. The good guys are trying to get to Hope Island where all the gems and treasures are. The bad guys are trying to infect the treasures. The triangle house is the entrance or portal to Hope Island. The city is the neutral zone between the good guys and the bad guys. If Hope Island dies, Gaia dies.*



### **The "I Wish" World**

*I wish I could get married and live in a big castle*

*I wish I could have five cars (key).*  
*I wish I could be rich (coins).*  
*I wish I could eat all I want any time I want (food).*  
*I wish I could watch Bart Simpson and the Lion King.*  
*I wish I could get gas free.*  
*I wish I could play basketball good.*  
*I wish I could graduate from college.*  
*I wish to walk down the street by myself and be safe. (The teeth are a part of stopping violence in the community).*  
*The HIV boat is coming to my mom.*  
*The HIV is looking ugly.*  
*The HIV is happy when somebody dies (coffin and the cross).*  
*The HIV is getting its award for getting people sick (the skeleton graduate).*

We encountered several problems in providing this type of group. One was being with and holding these intense, painful experiences while providing a safe environment. Also it was difficult to hold the pent-up energy of these children, who could only let down their burden for a brief time in this group. Our ratio was one therapist to three children, yet each child needed individual treatment. Since this service was provided primarily on a volunteer basis, a group was the only way to accommodate the number of children referred. The administrative and financial problems were constant.

Clearly, well children with parents who are ill with HIV/AIDS have a great need to explore their life experiences in a free and protected place such as that offered in an appropriate sandtray setting. They are often unable to feel free in the family setting and are frequently not safe to express themselves in their social arena due to societal taboos.

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