

## WORLDS OF THE ABUSED\*

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At the Winter 1999 Meeting, Doug Pryor and Roxanne Rae showed slides of the sand trays of clients, ranging in age from two and one-half years to adult, who had been physically, sexually, and/or emotionally abused. They shared the builders' stories of their worlds, their observations, some factual history and their pathways to healing using the sand tray. Doug and Roxanne focused on the way builders were able to express their abuse experience, their feelings about the abuse, and their feelings about the abuser.

The presenters cautioned that the appearance of a pattern similar to those being shown does not necessarily indicate that abuse has occurred. Therefore, the presence of these patterns in the sand tray alone should not be used to come to a diagnostic conclusion. Instead the focus was on how each builder's personal experience emerged and was shared with the observing therapist.

The patterns noted and discussed during the presentation included literal containment of the abuser or scary feelings, hiding places and safe places, and healing rituals. What also emerged was a sense of self-empowerment as the builder experienced not only identity as a victim but as a survivor.

One of the themes highlighted showed the physical containment of an abuser or an abuse experience, using cages, bins, fences and other boundary making items. In all of the cases presented the experience of containment functioned as a means for the builder to manage the fearfulness of the experience. The depiction of the containment of the abusive experience seemed to go hand in hand with reported improvement within their social/emotional functioning in their home and/or school life.

The first example was a four-year-old girl who had been sexually abused by multiple people and beaten by her parents. First she did her sand tray and three girls, "three sisters" on one side and the "ugly scary guy" on the other. She used items from a small first aid kit in the sand near the "ugly scary guy". She buried him, then caged him. Before she left the session, she put the "ugly scary guy" in the cage outside her world. However, that did not make her feel comfortable enough. We discussed what might help. She needed a top on the cage (in this case a Kleenex box), and then it was okay for her to leave the playroom in comfort.



"The Cage Outside the World"

The second example showed how a nine-year-old boy learned to contain his molesting uncle, who is under the overturned basket. The soldiers on and around the "prison" are "the good guys making sure he doesn't get away or get help from his friends." The friends are the opposing army in this picture. During the joint experience phase, he became clear about the need

to contain the “bad guy”. He recognized his need to remain vigilant about the containment and to continue protecting himself.



“Basket As Prison”

The experience of creating hiding places and safe places was seen frequently. This seemingly young play pattern was observed in all age groups of the broad age range presented. Some trays demonstrated a safe hiding place in the presence of threat. Others were creations of a completely safe place where no threat could enter. The differences in these two were not apparent by observation alone. They were verbally described by the builders during the Sandtray-Worldplay joint experiencing phase of processing.

The next example contains elements both of a hiding place and a safe place. The little rabbit in the hollow log is a seven-year-old girl who had been molested by her stepfather for one and a half years. She showed how and where she hid in the back yard of her house so her abusing stepfather could not find her. The other rabbit outside the log was the therapist, identified as “a nice man who helps me not to have to hide”. The forest across the bridge was her safe place to go “when I feel good and am OK”. During the verbal joint experiencing phase, she was very clear about the difference between the hiding place and the safe place.



“The Hiding Place and The Safe Place”

Several slides presented demonstrated a theme of healing. These included creations of home, nurturing gardens, a coming together of family members in a harmonious fashion and a candle-lit memorial for a deceased sibling. The appearance of the healing theme can occur anytime in the therapy. It is not related to the end of therapy nor is it an indication of the end of

treatment. The appearance of a healing theme indicates that some aspect of healing is emerging and shows that healing is possible.

The next tray is by a seven-year-old girl who had been removed from her parents' home after the death of her sibling in a bathtub. The tray was created several years after the event. She placed the bathtub in the tray and then used all the available candles. The water was put into the tub before the candles were lit. This world was carefully created in a reverent silence. When reviewing the world together, the builder shared that she was remembering her deceased sibling.



“Candle-lit Memorial”

Finally, the pattern of a shift from victim to survivor generally showed the builders overcoming their past traumatic experiences. This pattern was the only one that emerged at a specific time in the therapeutic process; most often it was at or near the end of therapy. Builders experienced and claimed internal control and became masters of their worlds. They shared a sense of triumph, power, and survival. They were prepared to live their lives without ongoing therapy.

An example of this was easily seen in the sand tray of a thirteen-year-old boy who spontaneously built this sand tray in the last fifteen minutes of his last session. The boy decided that “I have to do one more tray!” He moved the sand back and forth, to and fro, for several minutes making a rough landscape. During this process he said, “this is all the problems and stuff I had to find out about and do something with”. He then took the obelisk and placed it upside down in the center of the tray and placed the X-man who was always used for himself, on top. He then stood back from the tray and raised his hands and arms above his head and said “Yes, I can conquer the world!” This really expressed the triumph he had achieved in his two year odyssey.



“Yes, I can Conquer the World.”

To summarize, Doug and Roxanne shared their slides of sand trays of clients from a broad age range. They discussed patterns that they have observed in their work with physically and sexually, and/or emotionally abused people. They highlighted patterns of the healing journey that emerged in the sand tray. These were similar regardless of the age of the builder. They found that most of these patterns do not occur at any particular point in the overall treatment process. They discouraged the use of these patterns as diagnostic indicators that abuse has occurred. Instead, these patterns have an integral part in the healing journey, similar regardless of the age of the builder.

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