

Using Therapeutic *Moving Stories* in the Sandtray

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Children love sand. Children love stories. Children love play. The *Moving Stories* play therapy method uses a child's natural enthusiasm for sand, story and play by telling therapeutic stories in the sandtray and inviting them to play with the story or other creative materials afterward. It is an intermodal expressive arts tool that may be used by clinicians from a wide range of theoretical orientations and at any stage of therapy. The *Moving Stories* play therapy method is an engaging way to present a healing therapeutic message or needed skill to a child while providing the child with a way to personalize and deepen their response to this message through their play or other creative response. For traumatized children, the approach provides a safe metaphorical distance. It also models symbolic expression and imaginary play for children who need support in this area—for example those on the autistic spectrum. For children that are intimidated to tell a story or who have difficulty expressing themselves verbally, the *Moving Stories* play therapy method provides a playful and non-intimidating symbolic language in which to express themselves. The *Moving Stories* play therapy method makes skill-building and problem solving more effective, playful and engaging by communicating healing messages or coping skills within a metaphor. Finally, the *Moving Stories* play therapy method effectively combines the benefits of both directive and non-directive approaches to play therapy.

Wonder Room—A Library of Three Dimensional Stories

In the *Moving Stories* play therapy method, the playroom is referred to as a “Wonder Room” because of the feeling of wonder a child feels when they enter the room. “Wonder” also captures the process of the *Moving Stories* play therapy method—a child is invited to reflect upon and wonder about the therapeutic stories told in the theater of a sandtray through their own creative play.

What distinguishes a Wonder Room from other playrooms is the three-dimensional library of therapeutic stories organized in kits on shelves. By its structure, the Wonder Room invites use and re-use of therapeutic stories in the play therapy session. The characters for the therapeutic stories are placed together in a decorated box with an identifying symbol on top. Another distinction of a Wonder Room are the multiple sandtrays with many colors of sand that may be used as the “stage” for the therapeutic story. In addition, there are salt shakers of water and colored sands that can be used for “special effects” in a story. For instance white sand might be used for snow or water for rain. A Wonder Room includes the typical wide range of objects on shelves found in sandtray rooms and toys encouraging a variety of expressive play possibilities including items that encourage artistic expression, music, movement, nurturing, or mastery play.

The *Moving Stories* Play Therapy Method

In many ways, development of the *Moving Stories* play therapy method was influenced by Godly Play (Berryman, 2005). Godly Play is a Montessori inspired approach to teaching Sunday school. In the Godly Play approach, Bible stories are told using objects or pictures that are displayed in a well-organized playroom that houses the stories in baskets or containers on shelves. After telling the story, children enter a period of reflection through “wondering” questions. There are no “right” or “wrong” answers. They are then invited to play with the stories on the shelves or other expressive medium as a way to deepen and individually process the meaning of the story. The environment of the playroom is structured to encourage individualized reflection and exploration through play with the story materials.

The *Moving Stories* play therapy method uses a similar approach, only within the context of therapy and with the skills of a therapist to select/write therapeutic stories and process and document the stories and play. The approach may be used with individual children, families, groups or within the classroom. There are eight steps to consider in a flexible and child-responsive way. The steps might be approached along a non-directive to directive continuum depending upon the goals of therapy, the context, and a therapist’s theoretical orientation. Most importantly the steps are informed by the response of the child or group in the moment to the story. Following is a brief summary of the sequence of steps to consider in the *Moving Stories* play therapy method (Carroll Duffy, 2011).

- 1) *Selection/writing a therapeutic story*: A story may be selected or written specifically for a child in advance with a particular therapeutic goal in mind, or a child may ask for a story during their session. When selecting a story, the therapist takes into account the developmental age of the child, therapeutic need, the stage of therapy and the metaphorical message or skill that may benefit the child. Nancy Davis’s therapeutic stories (Davis, 1990 and Davis, 1996) are particularly adaptable to the *Moving Stories* play therapy method. Therapeutic stories specifically written for the method that include ideas for each of the steps are available through the e-library at: bytheseaseminars.com.
- 2) *Presentation of a story in the sandtray*: After selecting a story kit from the shelf and wondering with anticipation about its contents and plot, the child helps to set-up the story in the sandtray. This open and responsive approach increases interest and involvement in the story. The therapist focuses on the sandtray as the story is told, and pauses at the end of the story before inviting a response. The pause provides a moment for the story to “sink-in” before engaging the child. A [video clip](#) of Lauren Simpson telling her story, “Claude Flies an Airplane” (Simpson, 2011) demonstrates how *Moving Stories* may be told (bytheseaseminars.com).
- 3) *Reflection upon the story*: After telling the story, ask the child “wondering questions” to help them reflect and deepen their experience with the story. These are generally open ended questions with no right or wrong response that begin with the phrase, “I wonder...” Questions used by Jerome Berryman in Godly Play (Berryman, 2005) are good questions to begin with. For example, the therapist might ask, “I wonder where

you are in the story?” or “I wonder what you liked about the story?” or “I wonder what you did not like?” A technique demonstrated in Godly Play training is effective for responding to the child’s response to the “wondering” questions. After the child responds, the storyteller reflects back their response verbally and moves their hand over the area of the tray/story that the child talks about. The therapist might skip this step in individual sessions when the child is so eager to play that the reflection time disrupts the flow of their response. This formal reflection time is most effective in groups.

- 4) *Creative response to the story:* In individual sessions, the child is simply invited to play after hearing the story. The organized structure of the playroom with multiple expressive modalities naturally invites a creative response. Children most often choose to continue their own story in the sandtray. A group might receive a specific prompt such as, “Use the play and art materials to show what happens next in the story.” Group members then choose an expressive media (e.g. sandtray, art materials, writing). Permitting children to work together can be effective in helping them with social skills and relationship development.
- 5) *Sharing the creative response to the story:* In an individual session, this step is informed by a therapist’s theoretical orientation. Generally, questions are limited and the therapist empathically joins the child in the way that they seem to need. For example, the child might want the therapist to quietly attend, or perhaps they will ask the therapist to be a character in their own story. Sometimes a child asks the therapist to write their story down as they play. For the therapist coming from a more directive orientation, questions might be asked from a playful context by other “characters” from the sandtray shelf or Wonder Room. This can sometimes deepen the play and the therapist’s understanding of the meaning of the story for the child.

Within a group or classroom context, invite the children to share their creations during the “creative response” time. This step permits practice in giving and receiving positive feedback. Having established group/classroom rules or practice giving feedback is important at this juncture.

- 6) *Documenting the story for the therapist and the child:* The form of documentation may vary depending upon whether the stories are used with an individual client, family, group or classroom and depending upon the purpose for documenting. A range of documentation forms are provided in the e-book “*Moving Stories: A Playful Therapeutic Storytelling Approach for the Sandtray*” (Carroll Duffy, 2011).

For individual clients, the child’s story response is reflected back to them verbally and this summary is put in writing (typically after the session). The child takes a picture of their story and this is placed with the summary. The picture and a summary of the story can be kept in a binder for the client.

- 7) *Homework assignment:* For therapists coming from more directive play therapy approaches, homework assignments may be assigned. For example, after hearing a

story about a character learning how to breathe to calm down, a child or group might be given an assignment to practice deep breathing once a day using bubbles.

- 8) *Symbolic gift or picture representing the story*: Part of the content of a story kit includes a gift that commonly goes with it. For example, in a story that teaches about deep breathing, bubbles may be a gift that goes with the story. For individual clients, a personalized meaningful symbol may emerge as part of the session and given to the child. A “gift” might also be as simple as a picture of their sandtray story. These can be printed business card size and kept together in a business card contact sheet that the child takes with them. These simple “gifts” are intended to be symbolic reminders of the meaning of the story for that child.

Case Example—“Swimming Eagle”

Below is a case example to illustrate the use of the *Moving Stories* play therapy method with an individual child. In order to provide anonymity, the description is based upon a synthesis of cases using the story “Swimming Eagle” (Carroll Duffy, 2009). This story was inspired by an actual event reported in the *Quoddy Tides* about a group that rescued an eagle from the cold ocean waters of the Passamaquoddy Bay off the coast of Maine.

Michael, a 12-year-old child with a history of abuse and neglect and multiple foster home placements was brought to therapy by his foster parents due to his defiance and increased aggression after a move. Michael very much enjoyed *Moving Stories* and spotted a new story (“Swimming Eagle”) on the shelf which addressed the theme of accepting help and staying safe. Since these themes were relevant to Michael, the story was told with this emphasis in mind. The Eagle was described as a male (like Michael).

Michael was invited to help set-up the sandtray for the story. He made water in the sandtray by moving the sand to reveal a blue sandtray bottom. He placed a tree with an eagle’s nest in the corner of the tray. He put the giant salmon in the “water” and a woman in a boat along the side of the “shore.” Finally, he was ready to hear the story.

The following story was “acted-out” in the sandtray. Eagle left his nest to catch a salmon. The tide and the salmon made it difficult for him to lift out of the water and he was pulled further and further out to sea. Still, Eagle would not let go of the salmon. A woman saw Eagle and tried to rescue him, but he would not take the stick or buoy that she offered. Finally, the woman covered Eagle’s head with a sheet. This calmed Eagle and he was able to let go of the Salmon. Eagle went into the woman’s boat and she brought him back to the safety and comfort of his nest.

Michael was engrossed in this story and was immediately eager to play with it—making it his own. Moving with the momentum of his desire to play, he was not taken through the formal “wondering questions” step, but was simply told that it was his turn to play. In Michael’s story response, he changed the ending so that Eagle kept the salmon. He brought the salmon into Eagle’s nest and then went to the sandtray shelves and placed many homes all around Eagle’s tree. Michael’s actions were observed closely and attentive reflections made as he played so that he knew his story was heard and that it

was important. When he appeared finished, his story was summarized. After filling in missed details, with a great deal of pride he took a picture of the sandtray. This picture was used along with a summary of his story to make a story page that was kept in a binder. Michael was not given a homework assignment, but he was given a feather in which to remember the story.

The next session, Michael returned with the feather in an Easter egg. He placed the feather in the sandtray and then selected the “Swimming Eagle” kit along with several other familiar kits. Then he added items from the sandtray shelves and continued his play. Michael’s play response to “Swimming Eagle” became a story in a “chapter book” that he continued for several sessions.

Conclusion

The *Moving Stories* play therapy method is a dynamic and flexible approach that may be adapted for a wide range of theoretical orientations. The approach engages children in the therapeutic process through the power of metaphor, symbols and play. The *Moving Stories* play therapy method utilizes insights gleaned from the Godly Play and Montessori Method. The stories are thoughtfully placed in a well-organized Wonder Room that by its structure encourages creative expression and play with the three dimensional therapeutic stories. As a new integration of familiar play therapy tools, the *Moving Stories* play therapy method is evolving with each child and with each healing story told in the sandtray. Therapists will find the best results when they have a solid foundation of training in the use of therapeutic stories (bibliotherapy), sandtray therapy and play therapy.

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Resources for Further Study

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Biography:

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