

# Land of No Rules

Source: Theresa Fraser

## Goals

- Assess dynamics and interactions within the family, particularly rules, roles, and hierarchy
- Establish and enforce appropriate rules within the family
- Encourage parents to increase their understanding of their children's worldviews
- Increase family members' ability to communicate their needs

## Materials

- Every Family Is a Kingdom Questionnaire (included)
- Paper
- Pencils
- Markers
- Camera

## Additional Materials for the Sandtray Version

- Sandtray half-filled with sand
- Variety of miniature objects or figurines representing different categories such as people (various ages, races, abilities, and occupations), animals (pets, farm, and wild), vehicles, plants and things from nature (rocks and shells), furniture/household objects, buildings and fantasy figures. Make sure there is a King and Queen figurine.

## Description

Note: This activity requires at least two sessions.

Complete the Every Family Is a Kingdom Questionnaire with the family. If the sandtray version is being used, the family can respond to the questions verbally, as well as illustrate their responses by creating a picture in the sand using the miniatures provided.

In the following session, divide the family into two dyads. (The children should be teamed up with the parent whose relationship can benefit from one-to-one time. The dyad portion of the activity also ensures that quiet children have the opportunity to express their feelings and views. If there is only one parent, then have the whole family work together rather than dividing the family.)

The family is asked to imagine a Land of No Rules. Each dyad is instructed to draw a picture together (or create a scene in the sandtray) that illustrates their Land of No Rules. Each dyad can decide how, what, when, and where the Land of No Rules operates. This picture can be a positive description of how the Land of No

Rules is viewed or it can be a negative description. This is up to each small group of family members. Next, each dyad creates a story about their Land of No Rules. The parent in each dyad is asked to write down the story that is created. This is especially important for dyads where children have difficulty honoring the authority of their parents. (The therapist needs to be clear about this small group leadership role when explaining the directions.) Then the dyads come together to share their pictures and stories.

If the small groups do not bring up the negative possibilities of what happens in places where there are no rules, the therapist can ask questions such as:

1. What is it like in this Land of No Rules?
2. How safe do the children and adults feel if everyone around them does whatever they want?
3. What happens when nobody is in charge?
4. What problems arise when there are no rules?
5. How do parents feel when they may not know where their children are or what they are doing?

A discussion should follow about what the general rules need to be so that all the citizens in this land benefit equally. The family can create a new story or end their former stories with this new unifying information.

The final part of this session is when the family identifies the rules that are appropriate in their home. One of the parents can list these rules on a sheet of paper.

The family is then invited to create a new drawing (or picture in the sand) illustrating The Land of Important Rules. That is, this drawing illustrates the rules that need to be in place at home for the safety and well-being of all family members and describes who sets and enforces them, the consequences when rules are broken, and so on.

Take a photograph of the mural or the sandtray for the family (as well as for the clinical record).

## **Discussion**

This activity is appropriate with a family who is struggling with rules and roles. It is also helpful for a family for whom one of the treatment goals is to support a healthy parent-child relationship, particularly when there may be ongoing conflict between the parent/child dyad.

Through storytelling and drawing (or sandtray), family members gain a better understanding of each other's views of the family, the rules and need for structure,

and individual feelings of safety. Often, these approaches provide a way to externalize this discussion in a way that provides more clarity to the entire family about individual family members' views and experiences. As Harvey (2008) contends, "A basic assumption is that families have the creative ability to address their conflicts in a naturalistic manner and that they can and do use play in their ongoing day-to-day life to both problem solve and resolve their basic emotional conflicts."

When using the sandtray as a method of expression, De Domenico (1995) suggests that one method a therapist can use is to "assign a topic, an experience or an interaction to be worked on during the session."

The dyad portion of the activity can enhance the parent-child relationship. Additionally, the dyad experience provides a venue for the quiet child to voice his/her ideas that are then repeated when the activity is presented to the larger group. Problem-solving and communication among family members is also enhanced through this activity. Combs and Freedman (1998) write, "We interact with family members one at a time, inviting the others present to serve as an audience," which, they argue, "makes family relationships more visible" by helping members "hear instead of defend." That said, "family functioning cannot be fully understood by simply understanding each of the individual family members or subgroups" (Miller et al., 2000). Hence, it is important that the whole family comes together to create the alternative Land of Important Rules as an ending to this experience.

## References

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- Miller, I., Ryan, C., Keitner, G., Bishop, D., & Epstein, N. (2000). The McMaster approach to families: Theory, assessment, treatment and research. *Journal of Family Therapy, 22*(2), 168. Retrieved June 7, 2010 from Academic Search Premier database.

## About The Author

Theresa Fraser, MA, CYW, CPT, works with children, youth, and families. She is a founding Clinician/Manager of Clinical Services at a Children's Mental Health

Agency. In 2009 she published the book *Billy Had to Move* to help children deal with the foster care experience. She has provided workshops internationally to foster care providers about the challenges of daily service provision for children who have experienced trauma and attachment disruptions. She is a part-time instructor at Humber and Mohawk Colleges. She is a Certified Play Therapist and the President of the Canadian Association for Child and Play Therapy.

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# Every Family Is a Kingdom

## Questionnaire

**Each family is like a Kingdom. Answer the following questions about the Kingdom in which you currently live.**

1. Who are the citizens of this Kingdom?
2. Who are the King and/or Queen of this Kingdom? (This individual usually makes the final decisions about matters of importance. How do you know that this individual is the King or the Queen?)
3. What are the laws of the land? How does this Kingdom maintain the laws of the land? Are all citizens expected to follow the same laws?
4. What are the consequences or punishments imposed when citizens break the law? Are consequences or punishments forgotten once given? Do consequences or punishments match the crimes of the citizens or are they too easy or too harsh?
5. How do the King / Queen share news with the citizens? How do citizens share information with the King / Queen? If citizens are upset in the Kingdom, do the King / Queen know? Is it easy or difficult to talk to the King / Queen? Are citizens comfortable telling the King / Queen how they feel? How do the King / Queen usually react?
6. What do citizens do for fun in this Kingdom?
7. Who helps to make sure that all the citizens have shelter, food, clothes, ways to play, and so on? Is there always enough food for all citizens? What happens in the Kingdom if some citizens do not want to share food with other citizens?
8. Are there any dangers in this Kingdom? If so, what are the dangers? Are the citizens protected from this danger and, if yes, how are they protected – do they protect themselves or are there others who are in charge of protecting the citizens?
9. How do citizens contribute to making this Kingdom a happy and safe place to live? Who shares their gifts willingly with other citizens? Who helps to keep the peace? Is there a troublemaker in the Kingdom? Is there a joker in the Kingdom? What other roles do citizens take on?
10. What three words best describe this Kingdom?