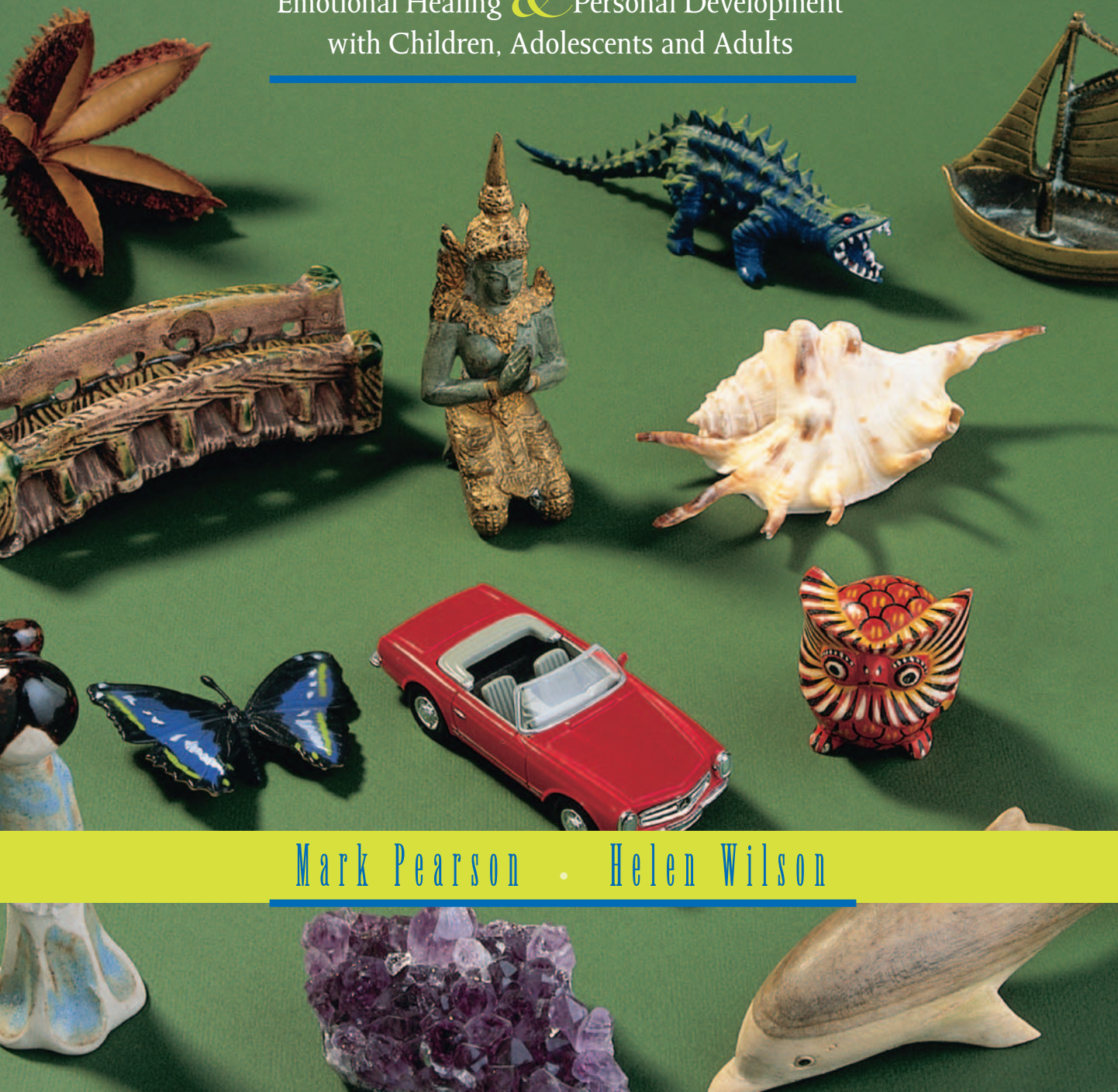


SANDPLAY & SYMBOL work

Emotional Healing & Personal Development
with Children, Adolescents and Adults



Mark Pearson · Helen Wilson

Chapter 1

The development of sandplay

A basic postulate of Sandplay Therapy is that deep in the unconscious there is an autonomous tendency, given the proper conditions, for the psyche to heal itself. This work heals wounds that have blocked normal development. It is a prime facilitator of the individuation process.

ESTELLE WEINRIB, *Images of the Self*, SIGO, 1983

Sandplay can contribute to satisfying the soul's longing to know and reveal itself. This process of revelation cuts through our sense of being trapped in a superficial world. This linking between inner and outer can bring meaning into the way we live our daily lives as well as supporting us in shedding the inherited emotional loading.

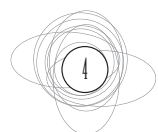
Sandplay allows us to drop into a mythic realm of our psyche. Most clients find the process deeply satisfying as it creates clear links between their personal life, the mythic or symbolic realm of the unconscious and an intrinsic spirituality. Creating the symbolic structures in the sand adds the dimension of depth to the process of self-discovery and healing. Problems can be seen in a larger context.

The use of symbols allows the unconscious and conscious mind to project multiple meanings. As we work with the symbols our issues, feelings, longings, fears and hopes can emerge, take tangible form and become clear to us. The symbols, laden with our meanings, can then be moved about, forming new relationships, new connections. While allowing issues to emerge for clarity and release, the connection between our inner and outer worlds helps us recognise direction in our lives and become more complete.

This bond between inner and outer, and between client and facilitator, is often felt as a sacred space; the usual ego certainty and control is gradually suspended. The symbol work acts as an intermediary, opening the way for a sharing of complex ideas and personal issues between client and counsellor.

How does sandplay work?

Acceptance of the concept that the psyche has a self-activated in-built, corrective, healing drive and organising principle (inner healer) means that we are able to regard the contents of the psyche as needing to be released or containing dynamic tensions that are seeking expression. With children, this need is manifested in acting-out behaviour. Unpleasant or negative experiences in the psyche that need to be released or healed might include blocked feelings,



unresolved conflicts, specific and non-specific dissatisfactions, negative beliefs, attitudes and scripts about self, defensive attitudes towards the world, agitation, frustration, disappointment, anger, sadness, hurt, disconnection, armouring, unfulfilled needs. Much of this unresolved material is contained in the 'shadow', Jung's word for the part of the unconscious to which material that cannot be accommodated or integrated by the ego is relegated.

Along with these so-called negative aspects, there are positive qualities, skills and talents that have similarly not been developed or expressed. For our progression to psychological health, it is essential that these positive energies find expression.

It is clear then that clients come to the sandtray or the symbol shelves with their own unique blend of therapeutic needs. When they begin to touch the sand or inspect the figurines a recognition and resonance begins, unconscious at first, and is felt as either a positive or negative attraction to a symbol or sand formation. Next comes some satisfaction with either the sand shaping or the gathering of a collection of figurines – which may at this stage seem to have no connection or relevance to each other. In the free sandplay process clients are encouraged to avoid planning their symbol selections or sand formations.

The play element of sandplay is important. The freedom to create anything they wish enables clients to drop any defences. For the facilitator this means not having to work or plan a strategy to overcome defences. Sandplay provides visible form for what is already inside the client. This enables the client, with support from the facilitator, to observe, explore, comment, re-constitute and heal destructive and sabotaging tendencies.

In the quiet concentration that follows the first steps of shaping the sand, a story or picture emerges as the figurines are arranged. As the client surveys the scene, associations between the symbols begin to appear. Meanings may become clearer at this stage, or the story may seem to the client to be entirely imaginary. Children usually create a story or movie-script type play, whereas adults normally create a static scene rather than act out a dramatic sequence of events in a single sandtray. Sometimes there can be more immediate feedback from the picture or story, in the form of insight, enhancing cognitive understanding of self and of the issues expressed in the sandtray.

The free sandplay method provides the client with a protected context in which unconscious resolution can take place more freely than in verbal articulation and exchanges. It is a space where there is safety for the relaxation of automatic filtering of inner material and where the client grows more comfortable in trusting that the fantasy, pictures and stories created will bring relief.

Forming the sand supports a shift in awareness from cognitive and verbal to kinesthetic involvement. This allows relaxation of defence mechanisms and frees set ways of thinking. The kinesthetic focus on the sensation of the sand and the movement of the hands also opens new ways of communicating and knowing the self. This supports the emergence of emotional issues,



blocked feelings and whatever else may be waiting for resolution in the unconscious.

Frequently a process of transformation begins to take place. There is a move from a negative mood to a more positive state. Blocked energy is freed and the client appears more alive and more communicative. The freedom to create, without judgement, enhances self-esteem and is in itself very satisfying. More often with adult clients this process of transformation involves a clearer cognitive understanding of self, often accompanied by spontaneous problem-solving.

The sand construction and the arrangement of figurines in the tray express and reflect a strength for the client from which they may have been disconnected. By making concrete or visible any conflict or tension the client is then able to reconstruct the situation and gain insight and a clearer understanding. This provides the motivation to continue. It eventually develops self-trust, inner resources and creative problem solving and enhances intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, intuition and intellectual clarity. Bradway and McCoard (1997) state that there is a suspension of judgement during the sandplay and during the process the facilitator 'accepts the uniqueness of individuals and their ways of coping and dealing with their wounds, their problems, their pathology'.

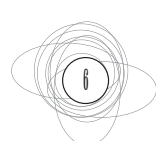
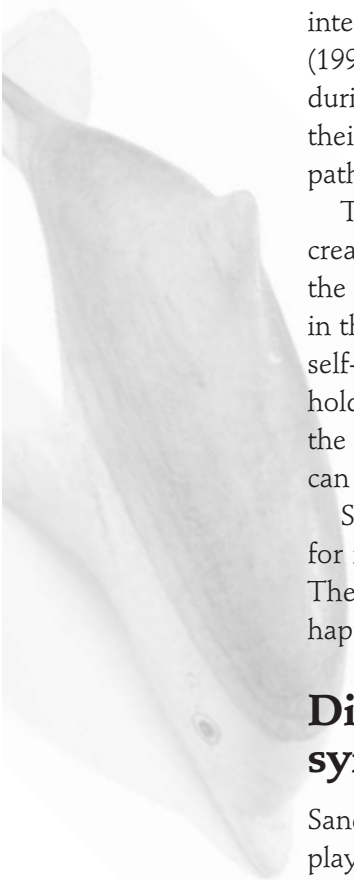
The process enhances self-esteem as the client is actively involved in creating the picture. It reinforces a positive sense of self because the client is the creator of their own healing process. The power is with them – or within them – rather than being with or in the counsellor. Sandplay activates the self-healing tendencies and so it is the client's experience of the process which holds the potential for healing, rather than any therapeutic interpretation of the sand picture. Any insights or gains made come from within the client and can be clearly recognised by the client as their own internal power.

Sandplay aids metacognition – thinking about thinking. It acts as an aid for reflection, helping clients to think about their own cognitive processes. The use of symbols and sand gives form to the client's perception of what is happening in their life.

Differences between sandplay and symbol work

Sandplay is an undirected process that utilises the therapeutic benefits of free play. Apart from the opening instructions and interaction in the second stage of sharing the story or picture, sandplay is not directed by the facilitator. It is designed to allow the unconscious to emerge at its own speed and according to its own readiness. Sandplay allows non-verbal integration, which may or may not be fully understood by the client. Feelings and understanding about the creation in the sandtray do not depend on verbal articulation.

Symbol work is directed. It has a specific thematic focus. The aim is to encourage a client to explore and then discuss a specific situation or their



feelings about it. Symbol work enables the facilitator to gain information and rapport to assist in moving the counselling process forward.

Working with symbols gives the client an opportunity to draw upon a universal vocabulary, access to a language that can express their truth without the need for immediate conscious understanding. Symbols reflect back the material and images held in the psyche. Their three-dimensional, tangible qualities support a deepening of the counselling process. Through this deeper dimension the client, supported by the structure of a symbol work exercise, can begin the process of transforming a difficult situation. Both adults and children exhibit an ability to understand the meanings of symbols.

Symbol work allows a counsellor to guide a client in the creation of pictures and stories that represent their most troubling issues. It allows the gathering of detailed information that can be helpful in suggesting ongoing management strategies both for the client and for carers.

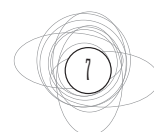
In confronting the reality of the limits in the amount of counselling a client may be able to access, we have developed many ways of using symbols that can more directly and simply provide doorways to address important issues.

The question is often put: 'If sandplay is so effective why use symbol work exercises?'. Symbol work is an extension of sandplay that allows a focus on a specific problem or issue. Few counsellors have the opportunity to offer regular ongoing sessions, sometimes due to budget limitations, sometimes due to client preferences. Many agencies which supply a counselling service are limited in the number of sessions they can offer and so naturally have a problem-solving focus. The symbol work exercises certainly can support clear identification of problems as part of assessment, a first step in seeking solutions.

Many adult clients come to counselling with a belief that they should already know or be ready to explain what is wrong, even if they don't know what to do about it. For them the 'blank page' approach of sandplay can sometimes feel overwhelming. Signell (in Bradway et al., 1990) found that some males found it difficult to 'play in the sand' and felt a need to focus on solutions. Signell writes, however, that sandplay and the use of symbols are important because they offer 'a rare opportunity for loosening up and experiencing free-flowing of feelings, imagination and life force that comes with the interplay of conscious and unconscious'. There are many clients who can gain trust in the undirected sandplay process via a structured symbol work exercise.

Choosing a symbol from thousands of figurines, spread across several shelves, may be a daunting task for a distressed client. A gradual introduction to the value of working with symbols through a simple structured exercise may give such a client enough experience to gain confidence and develop internal trust in the process. Relating to the counsellor, telling their life story with the aid of a few symbols supports outer trust.

Many adults have moved far away from connection with the world of imaginative play and creative expression. Play and creativity are ingredients





Sandplay and symbol work are therapeutic tools for self-discovery and emotional healing. By arranging small objects in a sandtray, children, adolescents and adults can unlock the subconscious and reveal unspoken dilemmas. For many people, it is a powerful form of self-expression and an important step towards personal healing.

Sandplay & Symbol Work guides therapists, counsellors and psychologists in this breakthrough technique. Therapists Mark Pearson and Helen Wilson present step-by-step exercises for practitioners to assist clients' symbol work.

Also presented are:

- the history of sandplay and symbol work techniques, and their links to Jungian psychology;
- methods to adapt the techniques to clients of all age groups and different settings;
- case histories from the authors' own field work, including full-colour photos of sandplay sessions; and
- research literature on a variety of sandplay applications.

Sandplay & Symbol Work is an invaluable guide for counsellors wishing to explore this innovative technique and support others effectively in exploring their inner world.

About the Authors:

Mark Pearson and Helen Wilson have a combined experience of training counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists in the use of sandplay therapy and symbol work of over 25 years. Mark is the author of *Emotional Release for Children* (ACER Press, 1995), *Emotional Healing & Self-esteem* (ACER Press, 1998) and several books outlining emotional release counselling with adults.

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