



Stimulating creative play in children with autism through sandplay

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ABSTRACT

A school-based action-research intervention with children with autism spectrum disorders investigated whether sandplay could be used as a medium to stimulate creative and symbolic play. Twenty-five elementary school children in four separate special education classes within the regular school system participated in sandplay workshops once a week for 10 sessions. The intervention aimed to stimulate communication, social interaction, and symbolic play through the use of rhythm- and movement-based rituals and sandplay. Over the 10-week program, children demonstrated through sandplay increased verbal expression, engaged and sustained social interaction, and increased symbolic, spontaneous, and novel play. The study suggests that creativity-based interventions provide a complementary approach to behavior/social skills-based intervention models prevalent in schools working with children with autism spectrum disorders.

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Introduction

The current practice of education of children with autism and pervasive development disorders (PDD), or more generally autism spectrum disorders (ASD), in Canada and more widely in North America, has largely focused on integrating children into the mainstream education system, whether in special education classes in a regular school setting or individual children integrated into regular class settings (Brock, Jimerson, & Hansen, 2006; Bryson, Rogers, & Fombonne, 2003; Hess, Heflin, Morrier, & Michelle, 2008). School-based education approaches for children with ASD demonstrate a propensity towards highly structured behavior-based interventions, which have proven effective in addressing the core deficits in communication, social interaction, and restricted repertoire of behaviors, activities and interests (Brock et al., 2006; National Research Council, 2001). Although structured learning is essential for this population to learn functional skills, proponents of developmental approaches contend that behavioral approaches are limited in encouraging natural interpersonal interactions and spontaneous symbolic play (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006, 2007). As spontaneous, flexible, imaginative, and social qualities of play are typically underdeveloped with children with ASD (Wing & Gould, 1979; Wolfberg, 1996), interventions that can promote this quality of play could be beneficial to children with ASD.

The gains for children with ASD in developing their ability to play is multifold as it is suggested that play provides a medium through which children develop cognitive and emotional skills, flexible thought, and experimentation with roles, as well as the opportunity to interact with others and to express themselves (Wolfberg, 1996). Structuring and enhancing play with children with ASD gives them a sense of mastery, as well as increasing their pleasure and their motivation to play, which is a justifiable aim in itself (Boucher, 1999; Wolfberg, 1996). There is a growing body of applied research (Jarrold, Boucher, & Smith, 1996; Jarrold, 2003; Libby, Powel, Messer, & Jordan, 1998; Sherratt & Donald, 2004; Sherratt, 1999, 2002; Wieder & Greenspan, 2003; Wolfberg & Schuler, 2006; Wolfberg, 1996) dedicated to understanding the obstacles that children with ASD face in initiating and producing spontaneous and imaginative play, devising means to support and enhance it, and ultimately to help children with autism partake in their peers' culture where play is of such central importance.

Sandplay, the central tool of this program, as a creative medium is particularly adaptive to many different populations and settings. Inspired by Margaret Lowenfeld's World Technique, Dora Kalff, a Jungian therapist, developed Sandplay in the 1940s as a non-verbal therapeutic modality to work with children (Kalff, 1980/2003). "Within the 'free and protected' space provided by the therapist, a child or adult creates a concrete manifestation of his or her inner imaginal world using sand, water, and miniatures objects. Thus, sandplay illuminates the client's internal symbolic world and provides a place for its expression within a safe container, the sand tray" (Friedman & Mitchell, 2008, p. 1).

Many adaptations have since been created (Mitchell & Friedman, 1994) including sandtray therapy that has been adapted to group

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situations and allows each participant the opportunity to create their own world while in the presence of others, with the possibility of sharing their experience with the group (De Domenico, 1999). De Domenico (1999) reports that sandtray therapy in a group context helped improve self-esteem, decrease isolation and withdrawal or extreme introversion, and increase curiosity and self-reflection. Sandplay has been used with children in individual therapy (Mitchell & Friedman, 1994; Van Dyk & Wiedis, 2001), and as a way to work therapeutically and preventively in school populations (De Domenico, 1999; Kestly, 2001; (as sandplay “without therapy”) Lan, 2008; Pabon, 2001), and with school-aged immigrant and refugee children to promote adaptation through creative expression (Lacroix et al., 2007; Rousseau, Lacroix, Singh, Gauthier, & Benoit, 2005). This type of creative group sandplay activity within a class in a school setting is a means to promote imaginative play and symbolic expression as well as facilitating communication. The focus is more educational and developmental than therapeutic; however, therapeutic effects may be apparent during the creative activity. Literature on sandplay populations with ASD is sparse (Tanguay, d'Aminico, Dolce, & Snow, 2004) and therefore needs further investigation to explore its potential as a tool to work with children with ASD.

Children with ASD are often grouped in the same classroom despite displaying a wide range of social and cognitive abilities. Sandplay employed as a creative group sandplay activity presents the potential to stimulate play at multiple developmental levels from tactile exploration to early and more complex social play, from functional play to symbolic representation, and pretend play. Also sandplay does not completely depend on verbal expression, but does promote communication and shared meaning through the storylines developed in the play. In all these respects, sandplay has the potential to be adapted and incorporated into existing educational practices with children with ASD.

As ASD populations demonstrate diverse learning needs, school policies in education advocate for personalized programming (Bryson et al., 2003), which will often incorporate a variety of treatments such as behavioral, developmental, and occasionally creative-based interventions within a structured educational framework (Hess et al., 2008). It has been noted that interventions are often modified and altered in the actual school setting (Stahmer, Collings, & Palinkas, 2005), suggesting that although an intervention has been proven effective in a controlled research setting, teachers need to find ways to incorporate the myriad intervention practices to the *actual* education settings when working with children with ASD. Action research provides an avenue to collaborate with educators, adapting the intervention as it is being studied (Stringer, 2007), in order to see how creative interventions can be integrated with and complement existing practices in the actual setting that address the core deficits of children with ASD. This preliminary study describes an action-research approach to investigate and ask the following questions:

1. How does sandplay adapted as a semi-structured creative intervention support the developmental skills of children with ASD in the areas of communication, socialization, and symbolic elaboration?
2. How do children with ASD with different levels of impairment respond to the sandplay intervention?

Description and rationale of intervention

Each session took place during a 60 min class period and consisted of an opening ritual, a sandplay period, a storytelling

exchange, and a closing ritual. The intervention was designed in such a way that it provided a structured routine, while also providing the framework for spontaneous and child-directed play and expression.

Opening ritual

Opening and closing rituals provide children with the consistency of a predictable beginning and clear ending that is reassuring and delimits the intervention from the regular school routine (Martin, 2001). The opening ritual was a brief 5–10 min activity that welcomed the children into the creative space using physical, verbal, and imaginary play as warm-ups to the sandplay activity. Ribbon sticks and egg shakers, encouraging gross and fine motor movement and rhythm, were used in brief activities involving mirroring, the naming of personal tastes and feelings, play acting, and collective storytelling. The opening rituals were designed to enhance affect and encourage sharing so that children could express and interject their ideas and create gestures that we could all imitate. Some examples included imagining being different animals, eating different favorite foods, reliving the Montreal Canadiens' hockey win, or taking a camping trip together. Each ritual was modified to the developmental level and verbal capacity of each group of children.

Sandplay

The main activity of sandplay was adapted as creative group activity to address the play needs of children with ASD. Whereas Sandplay encourages a passive, containing role for the therapist (Lowenfeld, 1979), we practiced a semi-structured child-centered approach, employing techniques like narrating the child's play, mirroring, and offering figurines to draw out the play, while remaining sensitive to the child's reactions (see Knoblauch, 2001). This type of relational approach to play is based on principles of the *Floortime* model (Greenspan & Wieder, 2006), that encourage observing, following the child's lead, opening and closing circles of communication, so that children can elaborate on their self-initiated gestures in order to expand on their ideas and imagination. The aim of using a relational approach in this intervention was to help support the development of imaginative play.

Although the sandplay intervention was adapted for the school context, the main identifiers of sandplay were utilized. A sandtray, according to Kalf's dimensions (1980/2003), was provided for each participant as well as bins grouping different figurines and objects that the children would share. In sandplay, one can choose from a vast array of miniature human and animal figures (both realistic and fantastic), trees, transportation, housing, and food, as well as miscellaneous objects such as marbles and feathers that provide color, textures and material for original constructions, to create scenes in a sand tray (Kalf, 1980/2003). The inside of the sand tray is painted blue, so it can easily represent the sky or a body of water. Kalf (1980/2003) insists on trays of a very specific size, corresponding to the child's central field of vision and facilitating safe immersion in play. The frame is also purported to have a limit-setting function (Carey, 1990) and acts as a regulating, protective factor (Kalf, 1980/2003). The sand provides a soothing medium that stimulates the sense of touch, smell, and sight and is often associated with playing in the park or on beaches (Lacroix, 2002; Steinhart, 1998). Small quantities of water were offered as an additional tactile dimension to the sand quality and played a role in attracting and sustaining children's attention. The different tactile qualities of the sand and the diversity of figurines and objects stimulated imaginative play, which eventually moved to the process to storytelling.

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