



The Story of Childhood Sexual Trauma in Sandtray: A Relational-Cultural Theory Approach

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The intervention of sandtray for children with traumatic experiences can be beneficial in creating a safe therapeutic relationship and for helping clients connect to their authentic inner world when counselors work with child sexual trauma survivors. This article applied principles of sandtray within a relational-cultural theory framework. A case example using sandtray with a 15-year-old girl was presented to exemplify the clinical integration of relational cultural theory and sandtray.

Keywords: childhood sexual trauma, sandtray, relational-cultural theory, creativity in counseling

A number of studies from across the world have shown that childhood sexual trauma may severely impact the life of a child by hindering their psychological and cognitive development (Gewirtz-Meydan & Godbout, 2023; Hailes et al., 2019; Sanjeevi et al., 2018; Vang et al., 2018). Narrang et al. (2019) examined the effectiveness of diverse therapeutic interventions with child sexual survivors. Counseling interventions with children that allow for creative and non-directive exploration of traumatic events, feelings, and thoughts have shown that they serve child-clients as safeguards. Interventions using sandtray are valuable therapeutic approaches when working with child sexual trauma survivors (Cunningham et al., 2021; Harper, 1991; McLeod, 2018). In this article, we describe a therapeutic modality of sandtray that explores an individual's inner world as a childhood sexual trauma survivor within the relational cultural framework.

Childhood sexual abuse is an unforgettable and adverse traumatic event. Those who survive these experiences face perceived stigma, betrayal, and powerlessness (Kress et al., 2018), which cause distorted self-concept, interpersonal difficulties, self-harm (Gladstone et al., 2004; Whiffen & MacIntosh, 2005), or traumatic sexuality symptoms (Gewirtz-Meydan & Godbout, 2023). Relational cultural theory (RCT) can be a useful therapeutic framework for counselors who work with clients with childhood sexual trauma. Banks (2006), who integrated RCT and neuroscience, first argued that a sexual violation by someone who is known and trusted in one's childhood can be destructive and have a severe impact on their relationships. Particularly, the intensity of the traumatic childhood memory and the destruction of their relationship can interfere with recovery and healing (Banks,

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2006). Birrell and Freyd (2006) referred to this as "relational betrayal and trauma" and described it as a "violation of human bonds" (p. 49).

Application of Relational-Cultural Theory

Childhood Sexual Trauma and Relational-Cultural Theory

RCT posits that human beings desire connection with others throughout their lifespan and that their psychological growth is grounded in relational connections and growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2017). Growth-fostering relationships can be developed and maintained when people experience a sense of safety and well-being (Jordan, 2017). In the RCT therapy process, one of the important goals is to identify and enhance the experience of growth-fostering relationships for clients (Banks, 2006). According to RCT, five essential attributes are characterized in growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2017; Miller, 1976), and RCT theorists called them the "five good things," which include "a sense of zest; a better understanding of self, other, and the relationship (clarity); a sense of worth; an enhanced capacity to act or be productivity; and an increased desire for more connection" (Jordan, 2017, p. 25).

RCT highlights that individuals desire connection with others, and the need for connection is the core motivation in individuals' lives. In therapeutic relationships, counselors should understand the potential relational difficulties and complexities of children who have experienced childhood sexual trauma. It is essential that the counselor works to build trust in the process and have an appreciation and respect for their clients' self-protective behaviors (Kress et al., 2018). To establish and maintain growth-fostering relationships with clients, counselors must understand the role of connection and disconnection in individuals' lives and the therapeutic space.

Childhood sexual trauma can result in a fear that arises when an individual desires to connect with important people in their life. This fear can stem from misunderstandings and conflicts that arise from such connections. As a result, the person's need for connection may be seen as unacceptable or dangerous, leading them to adopt behaviors that serve as a means of self-protection. Over time, these behaviors can lead to patterns of disconnection in relationships. When authentic expressions are discouraged, ignored, or deemed dangerous, children with trauma may conclude that disconnection is safer than connection (Jordan, 2017). RCT recognizes that disconnections are a normal part of healthy relationships and that those with a history of relational violations are especially vulnerable to feelings of powerlessness and empathic failures. Miller and Stiver (1997) emphasized that counselors need to honor their clients' strategies of disconnection. Understanding how clients' strategies of disconnection are designed to maintain a sense of safety is key to transformation in the therapeutic process (Banks, 2006).



RCT offers a guide by which individuals can explore their relational patterns to become increasingly authentic and better negotiate relational movement through connections and disconnections (Jordan, 2017). Counselors can foster clients' relational explorations by remaining "open, vulnerable, and authentic as possible so that what has been fragmented and silenced can be allowed to return and to speak its truth" (Birrell & Freyd, 2006, p. 57). Through this process, clients can develop an understanding of how their early traumatic experiences have shaped their relational competencies, capacities for connection, and tolerance for vulnerable feelings. Through the therapeutic process, clients can begin to more fully create and participate in growth-fostering relationships, which is the goal of relational cultural therapy (Banks, 2006).

The Use of Sandtray and Childhood Sexual Trauma

The earliest use of sandtray as a therapeutic intervention was by British pediatrician Margaret Lowenfeld (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022). Lowenfeld facilitated creating scenes in the trays of sand, dry or wet, using small figures of people, animals, houses, fences, etc., to allow an exploration of the child's world. Lowenfeld first used the term "world" in her case notes. In the 1920s, she coined the phrase "world technique," which refers to what we now know as the "the sandtray" (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022; Lowenfeld, 1993; Nelson, 2011). Lowenfeld sought to create a holistic approach to understanding the thoughts and inner world of the child (Nelson, 2011). In time, sandtray work with children was expanded upon and popularized by Dora Kalff, a Swiss Jungian analyst who studied Lowenfeld's work (Grayson & Fraser, 2022). To date, many mental health professionals posit that sandtray work can be used to help clients create a visual representation of their experiences regardless of one's theoretical framework (e.g., Adlerian, Jungian, Gestalt, reality therapy, solution-focused in variety settings such as individual, group, family, school, hospital, and correctional settings) (Castellana & Donfrancesco, 2005; Eberts & Homeyer, 2015; Parker & Cade, 2018; Sori & Robey, 2013). Sandtray work was initially utilized with children and adolescents but is increasingly being used in counseling with adults (Castellana & Donfrancesco, 2005).

Sandtray work has been recognized as an effective therapeutic modality for people who have experienced traumatic events such as military combat trauma (Popejoy et al., 2021), earthquake trauma (Wang & You, 2022), refugee trauma (Dobretsova & Wiese, 2019; Kronick et al., 2018), and abuse-related trauma (Lyles & Homeyer, 2015). In a longitudinal study, Tornero and Capella (2017) examined the use of sandtray therapy with seven children with sexual abuse trauma between the ages of 7 and 10 years old. Children who were exposed to sexual trauma often experience difficulties vocalizing their wounded parts, often deny painful feelings, and feel stuck. Tornero and Capella found that sandtray therapy, using non-verbal methods of expression, can be an important therapeutic tool, especially when working with children who have been sexually abused.



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Exposure to any type of trauma during childhood may result in brain injury, particularly in sensitive regions such as the hippocampus, amygdala, and prefrontal cortex (Cassiers et al., 2018). Therefore, in counseling children who have been sexually abused, the therapeutic environment and process should be modified to their present rhythm and developmental conditions (Tornero & Capella, 2017). A safe and trusting therapeutic environment is essential to allow children to explore their anxious, painful, complicated, or unacceptable experiences that could be challenging to vocalize (Liang et al., 2021).

In the sandtray process, counselors provide a variety of miniatures to assist children in sharing a nonverbal story or experience, ensuring their own safety in the therapeutic process (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022). Children are invited to select miniatures, place them in a sandtray, and create a world to share their stories. The world of the sandtray often reflects the wounded self at the beginning of therapy, but the healing self becomes visible over time. The visual movement from woundedness to healing is the most powerful moment of the therapeutic process in sandtray work.

Case Illustration

To illustrate the sandtray therapeutic process within the RCT framework, we present a case example. The counselor in the case illustration is the first author. The counselor refrained from active verbalization or interpretations during the sandtray sessions. Instead, the counselor focused on creating a safe and creative environment to help the client more fully connect with authentic feelings and experiences. All identifying information has been changed to ensure the client's privacy. Consent was obtained from the client and parent to publish this case presentation. All identifying information has been changed, and the pictures of the sandtray were recreated to ensure client confidentiality.

Background Information

Runa (pseudonym) was a 15-year-old Hispanic female who was sexually abused by her stepfather between the ages of 10 and 15 years. Runa did not reveal the sexual abuse until she was a sophomore in high school (age 15). Runa was brought to counseling by her mother, with whom the counselor met alone for the initial intake. Runa first spoke to her aunt about being sexually abused by her stepfather, who then informed her mother. The mother reported to have been unaware of any abuse and immediately made a report to Child Protective Services (CPS). The mother divorced Runa's stepfather after the CPS investigation, and at the time of the first session, Runa was living with her younger sister, mother, and grandmother. Runa's mother described her as a positive, nice, and responsible daughter. Runa's mother sees her as a cheerful,



amiable, reliable daughter who frequently shares positive emotions with her family. Her mother even affectionately calls her a 'yes girl.'

Consequently, she was unaware of the abuse her daughter had suffered. Despite confiding in her aunt and a CPS investigator about the incident, Runa chose not to discuss it with her mother and refrained from expressing any negative emotions at home. The present study

examines twelve consecutive sandtray therapy sessions that allowed Runa to explore and express her emotions, wishes, and blended memories. Before these sessions, Runa had undergone several individual counseling sessions but had not discussed sexual abuse with her previous counselor. Sandtray therapy was used to help Runa process her past experiences and emotions in a safe environment.

Figure 1



Sessions One to Four: Uncertainty and Safety

At the beginning of the first session, Runa repeatedly drew two circles with both index fingers on the sand, smiling. Runa avoided identifying her feelings about her sexual abuse and believed it did not affect her current life. She stated that living away from her stepfather has improved her situation. Runa shared her daily school routine, including her class schedules and extracurricular activities. She initially denied any difficulties but later expressed a desire to explore her feelings regarding past trauma. Runa seemed to feel pressured to talk about her emotions

related to her past sexual abuse. The counselor reassured her that it was her decision and she did not need to share anything if she was not ready. During the first therapy session, after approximately 25 minutes, Runa created a beach in the sandtray (Figure 1). She described the beach as a safe place where people could relax without fear of anything bad happening. However,



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she also mentioned that people were hesitant to jump into the sea because they were unsure of what might be inside. This uncertainty was not due to fear but rather a lack of knowledge about what lay beneath the surface. Runa tiled her sandtray *"to create a peaceful beach."*

All of the figures were facing away from Runa. When the counselor asked Runa about the direction, she explained that she intentionally placed the figures to face in the opposite direction. She also mentioned that she had arranged them in a position where the counselor could see them well. The counselor suggested that Runa switch seats to look at the figures from the opposite direction, but she expressed feeling uncomfortable seeing them straight on and added, "It's weird. I don't know if they are relaxing or not. I don't like making eye contact with people. They look peaceful, though. Or maybe not. I'm not really sure." The counselor was pleased that Runa had successfully created her first sand tray. However, Runa did not express any feelings of uncertainty during the session, and the counselor decided not to ask her about it. The counselor believed that Runa needed more time to establish a sense of safety and trust in the therapeutic relationship.

In the second session, Runa opened up about the disturbing experiences she had with her stepfather. She described how his presence made her feel constantly on edge, as if she were in imminent danger. Runa expressed the fear and confusion that plagued her as she struggled to comprehend the motives behind his actions. She explained that it was her responsibility to keep her sister safe and protected and that she believed keeping quiet about the abuse was the best way to keep her family together. In the third session, Runa created a sandtray with only a few pebbles and rocks. She repeatedly divided the sand up and down, right and left, and started talking about her mother. Runa's mother worked tirelessly to care for the family, making Runa feel sorry for her. She expressed that she didn't want her mother to feel hurt and thus didn't want to add any additional burden to her mother's already heavy workload. Runa thought she had never depended on anyone, not even her mother. She avoided eye contact with the counselor and kept smiling while talking about her mother.

In the fourth session, Runa created a neighborhood with various person figures, including police officers. Runa expressed that everyone in the neighborhood seemed to be happy and safe because of the presence of police officers. The theme of safety was prominent throughout the session, focusing on the state of being healthy, content, and comfortable. At the start of her counseling sessions, the therapist observed that Runa was easily distracted by sounds originating from outside the room. Even small noises seemed to disrupt her concentration and distract her attention from the task. Runa revealed that she had always felt insecure in her own room, especially when living with her stepfather. She was constantly anxious about him entering her personal space, and the sound of his footsteps would trigger her fear. Despite her fear, Runa remained close to him to protect her younger sister. After the CPS report, Runa was relieved and could focus on her work without worrying about safety.

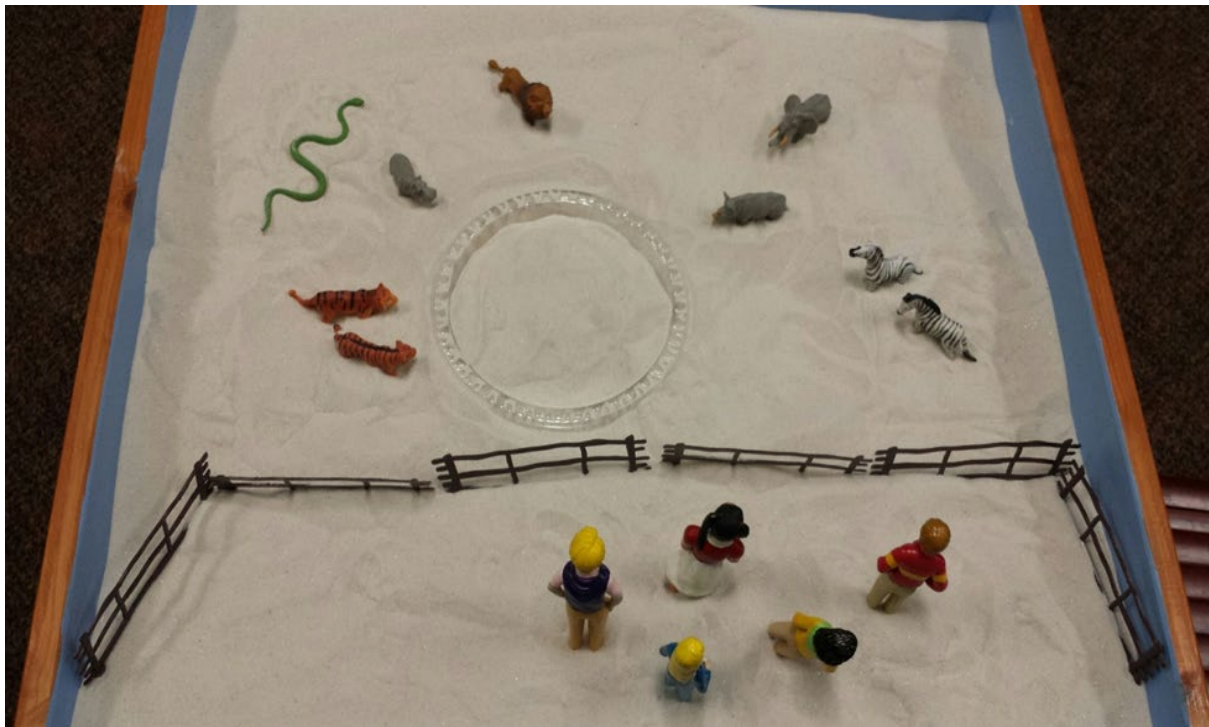


Sessions Five to Eight: Safety and Freedom

During the fifth session, Runa touched the sand and fidgeted with it before creating a zoo (Figure 2). Runa carefully placed the fences first. Once the fences were in place, she arranged the animals and people in each designated location. Runa explained that all the animals coexisted without any conflicts or fights, and people often visited the zoo to learn how animals can live together peacefully. According to Runa, the animals in her zoo were all gentle, and even the predators never attacked other animals or humans. However, she still wanted to build a fence around the zoo to ensure people's safety in case of unforeseen circumstances. Runa explained that humans and animals couldn't share the same territory because they needed their own space. Runa used her sandtray to explore the meaning of disconnection and connection. She used

Figure 2

Counselor



Client



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disconnection to create a sense of safety, while connection increased her tension to feel more secure. Runa and the counselor discussed the complexity of connection with her sandtray and how connecting is not always harmonious or comfortable. She observed the miniature figures in the sandtray from multiple angles and named her sandtray "Freedom." She said, "They seem almost at peace, but they look like they want freedom." Runa explained that she dislikes aggressive people since they cause distress to others and cannot resolve conflicts.

From the sixth session, Runa began talking about the stepfather's abusive and controlling behaviors in some detail. She described her stepfather as "very strict" and stated he often hit her and her sister as a punishment. She disclosed how her mother knew about how he hit her and her sister and described how she never intervened on their behalf. She explained that her family relied on him financially. Since he never acted aggressively toward her mother, it was easy to rationalize his behavior as that of a typical dominant father figure who worked hard for the family. Since Runa did not want to break up her family, she chose not to tell anyone about the sexual abuse. Runa protected her sister by always making sure she was never left alone at home with her stepfather. She believed she was successful in that her sister was reportedly never sexually abused by him.

In the seventh and eighth sessions, Runa opened up about her complex emotions as she struggled to reconcile her sense of freedom with a growing sense of unease. Because Runa was a victim of sexual abuse and the only witness, she decided to attend a court meeting for the witness statement. After meeting with several people who supported her legal process, Runa believed that she was ready to stand up, but she noticed that she was very nervous about speaking in court. In the seventh session, Runa drew several circles on the smooth surface of the sand. She repeated the action slowly and said, "I'm very nervous, but it's not scary." As she delved deep into her emotions regarding nervousness, Runa came to the realization that she no longer feared her stepfather. With the court hearing approaching, she was filled with hope and optimism. She eagerly anticipated the day when she would finally feel safe and secure, free from the shackles of fear.

Runa gathered sand in the middle of the sand tray and placed a female figure on the top of the sand. The counselor suggested that Runa look at the figure from different angles. She looked at the figure silently for a while, then said, "She's here, and I'm here too. I want to feel free." During the eighth session, Runa created a sandtray that she named "community." In her sandtray, she depicted a bustling community with a large number of people and cars. Notably, she included a security car in the scene, representing protection for her neighbors.

Sessions Nine to Twelve: Freedom and Empowerment

Runa's involvement in school activities increased, and her academic performance improved after the court proceedings began. In the ninth session, Runa created a fish tank in the



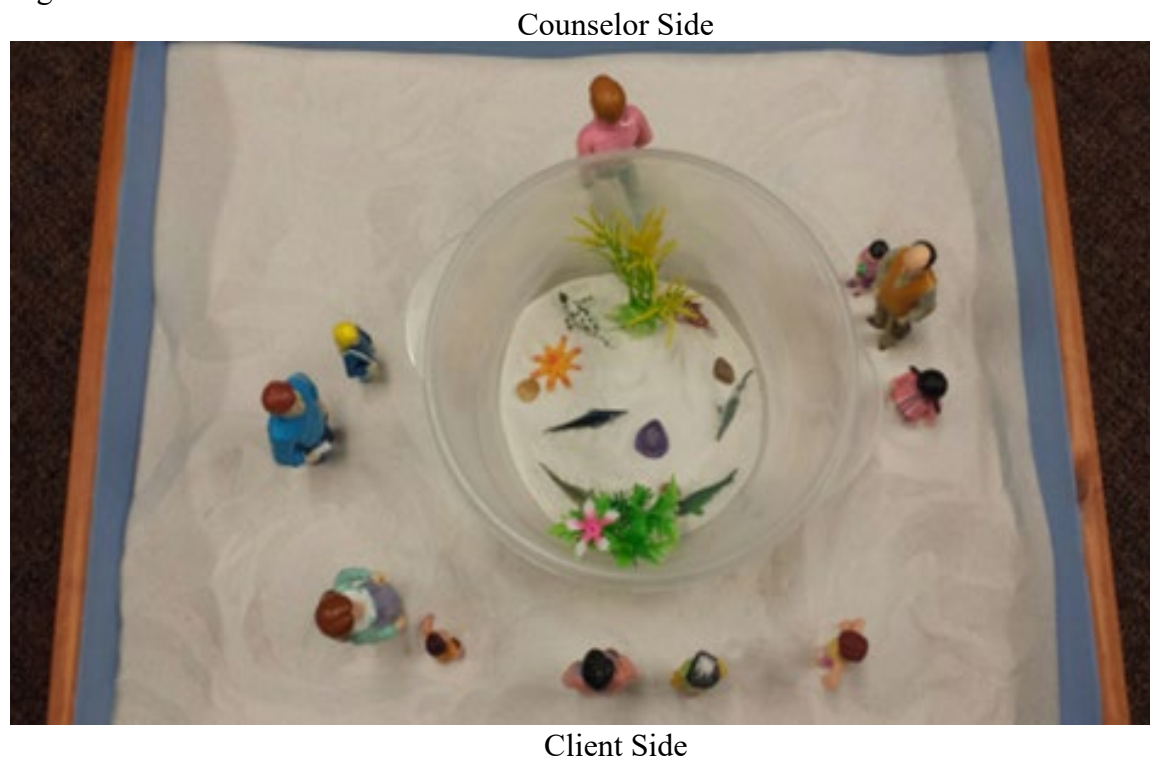
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sandtray and described how the fish seemed to be craving more space and freedom (Figure 3). She shared her desire to make a bigger tank for the fish but gave up, stating that "the big space might be useless because they can't get out of it anyway." After looking at the sandtray for a while, Runa started talking about her personality and behaviors. She expressed feeling disappointed in herself for being passive and added, "Even if people did know what I think or feel, nothing would change."

During her tenth therapy session, Runa made significant progress. She was able to connect with her emotions on a deeper level. Runa placed a figure representing herself at the center of a sandtray. She added several marbles, books, and foods next to her figure and described them as things that support her daily life. The marbles represented the fun times she had with her friends, the books symbolized her love for learning and reading, and the food represented the comfort and nourishment she receives from a good meal. She seemed completely absorbed in herself and disregarded others who she previously cared about during the session. After the tenth session, the counselor had a consultation with Runa's mother. During the conversation, Runa's mother mentioned that her daughter had been speaking loudly and

Figure 3





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irritatedly towards her sister and her mother at home, which was unusual. However, she also noted that Runa looked a lot brighter these days.

In the eleventh session, Runa made a sandtray that featured animals and people playing together. What was different this time was that Runa did not use a fence to separate the two groups. Instead, she allowed them to play together in the same space. When asked about this, Runa explained that they needed more room to move around and play freely. She mentioned that a sandtray is a secure space and that they trust each other, so an extra fence is unnecessary. Runa was encouraged to delve into her sense of zest and worth in her sandtray therapy session, which are crucial concepts in a relational cultural counseling approach. She had noticed some positive changes in her body. In particular, she expressed that she no longer experiences the uncomfortable sensations of tension and stiffness in her shoulders that she used to feel. During the twelfth session, Runa placed several big and small stones in the sand and called them "power." She explained that power doesn't always have to be big and stated, "I want big power sometimes, but in most cases, small power is enough." Runa placed a clear stone on the sand and moved it near people. She referred to the stone as an invisible power and explained that even though people cannot see the power from her or themselves, it doesn't matter because they can feel it. Runa believes that we all possess our own unique power.

Discussion

Disconnection and the Central Relational Paradox

RCT is based on the quality of connections and the impact of disconnections in a client's life. The individual's past relationships shape positive or negative expectations of future relationships. RCT refers to these expectations as "relational images" (Jordan, 2017). When locked into negative relational images, individuals miss opportunities for growth-fostering relationships. Traumatic experiences from childhood can also lead to chronic disconnections, especially when violations were perpetrated by caregivers, parents, grandparents, relatives, or teachers who were supposed to take care of them and protect them. The experiences of relational disconnection usually contain "disappointment, a sense of being misunderstood, and sometimes a sense of danger, violation or impasses" (Jordan, 2017, p. 103).

During the initial therapy session, Runa avoided forming any emotional connection with the sandtray figures. Runa's survival instincts compelled her to protect herself by keeping an emotional and physical distance from others, numbing her feelings, and pushing people away. This resulted in her isolating herself from others. This theme came up repeatedly during her therapy sessions. Runa also expressed a strong desire for connection. In her sandtrays, she depicted her longing to get along with others, although she created barriers such as fences or distances to ensure her safety. According to the RCT, humans have a natural desire for connection



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but often experience anxiety, fear, or terror in their relationships, which leads them to develop disconnection strategies (Miller & Stiver, 1997). This paradox is known as the central relational paradox and is particularly common among survivors of interpersonal violence, especially women. This phenomenon has been observed among females in foster care (Samuels & Pryce, 2008), mothers in low-income (Burton et al., 2009), and those in residential care (Carvalho et al., 2023). Therefore, the counselor encouraged Runa to explore her experiences of connection and disconnection and the patterns of the central relational paradox in her past and current relationships. Runa had experienced relational violations in the past, which has made her wary of trusting others. Runa's previous experiences of relational violation had made her skeptical of trusting others, resulting in tension in her current relationships. She admitted to struggling between being open about her emotions and shutting down. The sandtray therapy enabled Runa to represent her emotional trauma and understand her relational movement between connection and disconnection.

In RCT therapy, it is important to explore the client's capacity to engage in conflict (Jordan, 2017). The counselor explored whether Runa could express her needs and views to others under potentially conflicted situations and assessed her methods to keep herself safe – her strategies of disconnection in RCT (Jordan, 2017). Our body is scanned for safety to protect us from physical and emotional pain, and the body often learns to disconnect from emotions when they are experienced as potentially dangerous (Bank, 2006). Runa also developed the disconnect instinct to protect herself from emotional trauma. The counselor explored and honored Runa's strategies of disconnection and fostered her development of self-empathy so that she could develop increased capacities for authenticity (Kress et al., 2018; Miller & Stiver, 1997). Runa's sense of safety and well-being became the main theme in the early sandtray therapy sessions. Sandtray therapy's nonverbal nature and the figures contained within the sandtrays made the client feel comfortable and secure, and she was able to revisit painful conscious or unconscious memories within sessions.

The Five Good Things

RCT counselors work on connections and disconnections and teach strategies for transforming disconnection to foster a positive sense of well-being, along with a sense of worth and matter. Experiencing one's impact on another is one of the core tenets of growth-fostering relationships, resulting in a sense of mutuality and mutual empowerment (Jordan, 2017). Runa was encouraged to engage with her sandtray creations in a way that felt safe to her. Through this, she could deal with her strategies of disconnection while feeling supported in the therapeutic relationship and environment. This allowed her to develop a sense of relational empowerment before applying it in other relationships and situations.



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The sandtray sessions enabled Runa to express herself safely and visually through an imaginary world using a variety of figures. After establishing safety, Runa gained a sense of zest, increased sense of worth, clarified herself and others in relationships, increased her capacity to act, and desired more connection, which are the five good characteristics of connections one experiences in a growth-fostering relationship. Unlike what Runa showed for the first several sessions, she could actively explore all the figures in the sandtray as counseling progressed. Runa gained enough power to renegotiate unavoidable disconnections, and the experiences enhanced her feelings of well-being and clarity in relationships.

Sandtray therapy helped both the counselor and client explore and understand the five good things that are part of the healing process. The use of sandtray aided the ability of the counselor and client to reflect upon and discuss the underlying meaning behind Runa's creation. Runa's evolving sandtray representations demonstrated her transformation from chronic disconnection from her stepfather and family to be more able to represent herself and her needs to others. Being more fully authentic in her life and relationships will foster Runa's capacity to create and participate in growth-fostering relationships.

Authenticity and Empowerment

In working with clients from an RCT perspective, the counselor should work towards authenticity in the therapeutic relationship. Jordan (2017) described authenticity as the "capacity to bring one's real experience, feelings, and thoughts into a relationship, with sensitivity and awareness to the possible impact on others of one's actions" (p. 101). RCT counselors emphasize that authentic responses to clients do not mean inappropriate self-disclosure and should be differentiated from honesty (Lenz, 2016). Instead, counselors should be "a mutual partner" who empowers the client "by demystifying the counseling process by sharing their thoughts with clients in an authentic way" (Trepal, 2010, p. 496).

Survivors of childhood trauma, like Runa, have experienced violations of their physical and emotional boundaries and may get confused about what constitutes a healthy relationship. Oftentimes, clients with childhood trauma end therapeutic relationships out of frustration, as was the case with Runa and her previous therapist. Therefore, the relational authenticity expressed between the counselor and the client serves as the therapeutic foundation, which should be built with patience, sensitivity, and an appreciation for contextual factors and complexities. Mutual authenticity unfolded in the counseling relationship with Runa through patience and relational curiosity. The counselor carefully honored how Runa's present and past strategies of disconnection served to protect her sister, her family, and herself. Over time, she was able to find her authentic voice and a sense of true empowerment.



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Conclusion

This article has offered a practical example of how to apply the basic concepts of RCT in the sandtray therapy process for clients with traumatic experiences. We described how sandtray and the RCT approach can help clients become more self-aware and empowered by working through their vulnerabilities. Sandtray therapy was a useful way to help the client deal with trauma and anxiety by providing a safe space to process, understand, and work through her experiences of abuse. The observations and arrangements of various miniatures in a sand tray and their symbolic or metaphoric meanings illuminated RCT's core tenets. In particular, implementing the sandtray proved to be a beneficial approach to integrating the vital concept of the five good things in RCT counseling. The visual creation and repeated trials in the sandtray demonstrated significant benefits for the client. Using the sandtray, the counselor provided a safe and creative space for the client to visually represent her thoughts and emotions. This process, in turn, allowed the client to develop a deeper understanding of her inner world, leading to the identification of her strengths and resources. The sandtray can be used as a powerful therapeutic tool in RCT counseling, potentially facilitating the transformation of the client's complexity of connection into growth-fostering relationships. Although research on utilizing RCT with survivors of childhood sexual abuse is limited, it demonstrates significant promise with existing strategies, such as honoring clients' strategies for disconnections, which is consistent with trauma-informed approaches. Future research studies on the clinical application of sandtray techniques within the RCT framework would contribute to a better understanding of how mental health professionals could best work with survivors of child sexual abuse.

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