

## THERAPLAY® IN HAITI

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(written by Sandra Webb)

There are so many disasters around the world. I had often thought that I would like an opportunity to help the families and children in these traumatized situations but had never had the opportunity. In October 2010, I was invited to go to Haiti with Mission of T.E.A.R.S. This Toronto based agency does humanitarian work in many countries around the world ([www.missionoftears.ca](http://www.missionoftears.ca)). We arrived in Haiti two days after cholera broke out and left two days before the hurricane arrived to devastate Haiti once again. A colleague and friend, Brian Nichols and I were invited to look at the feasibility of setting up therapeutic programs for girls who had been sexually abused in the tent camps. It was a short trip of only a week that was packed full of new experiences and heartbreaking stories. The plan was for us to return every three months. We saw this was an exploratory trip. It felt great to know that we would be setting up our plans on this trip and would be able to adjust, expand and develop the programs on future trips.

Diane and Gordon Lewis (director) and Mission of Tears support two projects in Haiti. Our work was primarily with H.I.S. Home for Children ([www.hishomeforchildren.com](http://www.hishomeforchildren.com)), a Crèche for children. The Crèche, run by house parents Chris and Hal Nungster, is home to 80 children. H.I.S. Home was asked by Social Services to begin a separate home for girls who had been sexually abused. There were 9 girls in the home when we were there. There will be 25 girls eventually. H.I.S. Home and the staff of the girl's home wanted some direction about how to help these girls with the trauma and abuse.

I had travelled to Russia on three occasions in 1989, 2002 and 2009. All of these trips were with Mission of T.E.A.R.S. This agency works with adoption. The first two trips we met with judges, prosecutors, educators and orphanage personnel about adoption. In October 2009, Donna Cuthbertson, Hannah Sun-Reid, Brian Nichols and I (we are all Certified Play Therapists and Hannah and I are Certified Theraplay® Therapists) taught and did workshops about play therapy, attachment based therapy and adoption at a conference called Attachment Disorder and Therapeutic work with Children at the Raoul University in St Petersburg, Russia. I traveled to China in September 2010 with Donna Cuthbertson and Hannah Sun-Reid and visited orphanages there.

This opportunity in Haiti was the first time I was able to actually work with children in a therapeutic manner. It was very exciting to be invited. There were 9 girls aged 11 to 16 in the girl's home. None of them spoke English. All of them had been traumatized. All but two of them did not have contact with any family. Two of them had been slave children. One 15 year old girl was pregnant. All but two of these girls had been sexually abused in the tent camps after the earthquake on January 10, 2010.

Brian and I had no idea what to expect on this trip. We didn't know how traumatized the girls would be; how receptive the girls would be to our presence; whether the girls would be willing or able to talk about their abuse; whether the staff would be open to our help; what the conditions would be

where we would be working and we had no idea what to expect in Haiti. We didn't know what we could expect to accomplish.

We discussed and made tentative plans for the week. Brian Nichols and I are both in private practice. We put together our expertise and chose activities that would help us gauge what the girls were capable of doing and what types of programs might be helpful in dealing with the trauma. We were aware that these girls would have other types of trauma besides the sexual abuse. The plan was that we would set up therapeutic programs. We would instruct the staff on the programs and the staff of the girl's home would carry on with the programs when we weren't there. Brian and I were to return to Haiti every three months to liaise with the staff, look at the programs and adjust the programs. We planned a combination of activities in Theraplay®, Play Therapy, Art Therapy and Sandtray-Worldplay. We took along a great deal of art supplies and a Sandtray-Worldplay set up of sand, a sandtray and images.

The staff at the girl's home included a housemother, a male night watchman/guard and a day woman. All of the staff lived in the tent camps. The housemother's family lived in the tent camps. Their stories included losing a child during the earthquake, losing their homes, a mother-in-law losing a leg and one of the woman being buried in the kitchen for a day. I mention the history of the staff because not only were the girls in the home traumatized but so were the staff.

We did not have as much time at the girl's home as we had planned or hoped for. Regular life events were going on. The daily needs the staff were required to take care of often came before or instead of our plans. One day the international medical team were late arriving at the Creche so we were late leaving to go to the girl's home. We all went to church on Sunday so we didn't go to the girl's home that day. There was a seminar planned one afternoon with Social Services and another school project funded by Mission of Tears called Coram Deo ([www.haiticoramdeo.blogspot.com](http://www.haiticoramdeo.blogspot.com)). There were a couple of teenage girls who lived at the Creche that the houseparents wanted Brian and I to meet with. These two girls were having some specific problems that the staff wanted us to assess.

In the end, we had less time than we had been planned at the girl's home. On top of the time constraints and timetable difficulties, we needed a translator for everything. This added to the complexity of our work. There were two young men who could translate for us. They were very good at translating and knew the girls but they had multiple roles. One day one of our translators had to leave to pick up blood for a transfusion that a baby required. Another day, our translator was late because they had to get groceries before the stores closed for a holiday.

On this trip to Haiti, we were working at assessment and group cohesion:

1. Getting to know the girls.
2. Assessing their ability to connect, participate and be present.
3. Assessing the extent of their trauma.
4. Assessing the intellectual and psychological abilities of the girls.
5. Assessing the ability of the girls to talk about their trauma.
6. Assessing the ability of the girls to participate in a group or individual therapy.

7. Assessing the self esteem and confidence level of the girls.
8. Assessing the ability of the girls to trust in others.
9. Deciding what type of programs would be appropriate and helpful.
10. Gauging the ability of the staff to support the programs.

We planned to meet with the staff on their own, with the staff and girls as a group and then to meet with the girls individually, in pairs or small groups. Initially, we chose a number of activities (Theraplay®, Art and Sociometry) that would help the girls relax, have fun and get to know us. In our individual sessions, Brian planned to use art activities. I planned to use Sandtray-Worldplay and Theraplay®.

This was the initial list of possibilities for Theraplay®. We weren't able to use all of them.

1. Special hello /Special goodbye/ Special handshakes
2. Bean bag off the head
3. Cotton ball games
4. Mirror imaging
5. Name with gestures
6. Say the person's name and throw the ball to that person
7. Balloon between two bodies
8. Drawing around hands, feet or bodies
9. Eye signals
10. Hand stacking
11. Sticky nose
12. Lotion /powder prints
13. Balloon games
14. Elephant kiss
15. Butterfly kiss

The Special Hellos and Goodbyes were great. The girls laughed and we all connected. They enjoyed sharing their own special creations. The group activities with names were helpful to us in getting to know the girls. The girls enjoyed making up gestures with their names. These activities helped the girls develop as a group. They had fun with them. These activities helped the girls with their anxiety. The bean bag and cotton ball games allowed us to be playful together and connect. The lotion and powdering allowed me to do some nurturing with the girls. The girls all loved the elephant and butterfly kisses. There was a lot of laughter and delight with them. The activities also provided some structure so that the girls understood that there was an organization to our activities. The girls liked the challenges in the activities. They enjoyed showing me what they could do and really liked when I followed or imitated them.

What we found out during our time in Haiti.

1. The girls were willing to be a part of a group.

2. The girls were cooperative. They welcomed us each day and were keen to see what we had planned.
3. They interacted well and comfortably with each other.
4. The staff was interested in what we were doing and willing to participate.
5. The staff was good with the girls. The girls were comfortable with the staff.
6. Theraplay® and group activities helped integrate the girls and their caretakers.
7. Theraplay® crossed the boundaries that language created.
8. Theraplay® created laughter and cohesiveness.
9. Theraplay® gave us a unique way of communicating and developing a relationship with the girls.
10. Some of the girls didn't even know the date of their birth.
11. Some of the girls were unable to write their names and one in particular was quite developmentally challenged.
12. Most of the girls had a very narrow belief about creativity and spontaneity. They were awkward with being silly at times.
13. The language barrier added extra challenges (not unexpected but difficult).
14. Some activities do not require translations and are fabulous in these situations.
15. Through Sandtray-Worldplay activities and a People in My World activity I was able to help the girls tell their stories.
16. There wasn't time to do all that we had planned.
17. There wasn't time to see all of the girls individually.

At the end of the week, Brian and I discussed our observations of the girls and the staff with Chris and Hal Nungster and Gordon and Diane Lewis. We concluded that the girls are safe and well cared for in this home. Our goal was to set up therapeutic programs and return to support the staff in implementing the programs. We decided that the staff didn't have the experience or resources to follow through with the programs between our visits. We concluded that at this point, Haitian energy is focused on providing the basic necessities of food, shelter and safety.

I was honored to go to Haiti. It was exciting to be able to use some of the skills that I have gathered over the years in a constructive role in a traumatized country. I was thrilled to feel that I had something to contribute to the children of Haiti. It is undecided at the moment whether we will return to Haiti. I hope so. One of the things that I discovered was that we can retraumatize children when we ask them to tell their stories over and over without any follow up. We introduce them to the possibility of finding some relief to the trauma, some connection to people who want to help and then we leave. We open the wounds and then we disappear. We understand that children in our culture become less likely to attach and create healthy relationships when they are traumatized and when they move a lot. If we go to countries that have experienced abuse, trauma and loss as therapists we have to be clear about our role and our intentions. We have to be respectful of the people we are there to treat. If I return to Haiti I would adjust my therapeutic plan according to the time allotted and the plans to return in the future. I would use Sandtray-Worldplay again but probably in a less directive manner. I would let the girls take the lead about what they wanted to

express, divulge or explore in the sandtray. I would not hesitate to use Theraplay® if I return to Haiti. Theraplay® allows us to provide therapeutic support without doing therapy that could be retraumatizing. It is an excellent tool.

These are benefits that I believe Theraplay® could provide for the children in Haiti who were sexually abused in the tent camps where they lived after the 7.0 magnitude earthquake in January 2010.

1. Theraplay® would create cohesion in the group.
2. Theraplay® would improve self- esteem for these traumatized girls.
1. Theraplay® would improve and enhance the ability of these girls to play.
3. Theraplay® would create group awareness and group connectivity.
4. Theraplay® would teach the girls to engage with each other and their peers.
5. Theraplay® would help the girls to relate to their caregivers.
6. Theraplay® would help the girls to see their caretakers as people in authority who are caring, helpful and nurturing.
7. Theraplay® would help the girls to experience their caretakers using structure and challenge.
8. Theraplay® would include activities that use healthy touch.
9. Theraplay® would help remind the girls that adults provide comfort and stability.
10. Theraplay® is nonthreatening.
11. Theraplay® is therapeutic without being intrusive.
12. Theraplay® would create a window of opportunity through safety, fun and trust after which the girls may be ready for directive therapy about their abuse and trauma.

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