

**ABOUT THE SANDTRAY** the brother said, "They are homes but most have safety vehicles because they go to work. They need one vehicle that stays on the ground to help. The one's on this end live by themselves — adults — because they choose to. I still need to make an adoption agency." About the policeman, he said, "He's a Greek person. He went into someone else's property he didn't know. Unless he is taking the kids to the underground school — it is the only place in the city it will fit (the school)." There is a lot of compartmentalization here. Only one person. Lots of "help" with the support vehicles and the policeman. This child didn't like school and had learning disabilities. It isn't surprising that the school was "underground." This boy wanted to quit school and created many sandtrays like this one. Eventually the sandtrays had more people and homes in them.

# Adoption, Play Therapy and Attachment-Focused Family Therapy

By Sandra Webb

In 1976, when I worked for the Children's Aid Society I was introduced to adoption when I was charged with finding an adoptive family for a 10-year-old girl we will call Sherry. I began to understand then about the intricacies of a child's trauma, loss and sadness, and the difficulty of finding a family who could meet the needs of that child. I also had my first window into how difficult it was to try to parent a child who still wanted to connect with her birth family and not necessarily have a "new family." I understand now that Sherry had trauma and attachment difficulties.

I think of the old adage, "If I knew then what I know now." If only we were wise from the beginning then we wouldn't have to look back on our failures, but we also wouldn't learn what we need to know. Sherry did stay in touch,

so I guess she had some positive connection to me. Sherry did become a single parent of two children and she had little idea how to be a parent. That is sad. It is also why I am so committed to helping children connect to their foster parents or an adoptive family. Children cannot grow up and be good parents if they do not learn how to have healthy relationships within a family.

During the last 30 years, I have learned that every adoption is unique and complex. I have learned that every adoptive family who comes to me for therapy needs me to approach them individually and I need to be prepared to have a large array of techniques and therapies to offer. In the end, the most important thing is that the child can function to his or her best ability in the environment he or she lives in and gets his or her best chance at happiness.

**SHOWING** how the two activities were happening side by side. The brother's picture was done on top of the sandtray and then half the lid was taken off. The processes of Play and Sandtray - Worldplay continue in the psyche of the child. We often don't know exactly what the child is "working" on but the work does happen within them, between whoever is in the room and continues when the child and family leave the session.

The thing that also matters a lot is — are the parents having their best chance for happiness? Do the parents feel sane? Do the parents have some quality of life? I meet parents and children who truly have so little quality of life. They feel crazy, hurt, put upon, and desperately disappointed in what life has given them — a deep sadness and loneliness. The children are raging, angry and sad while sometimes looking happy, and “normal,” to the outside world, but the parents are not experiencing the children this way. I have children spit at me, hiss at me and rage to the point of needing to be restrained. I used to say that I didn’t have children do those things in my office. I guess I wasn’t yet ready to know how to help them with these huge feelings. As Dan Hughes says, you have to find at least one small thing that you like in a child in order to do this work. Almost all of the time, I do delight in the children. They are amazing human beings. I also am utterly blown away by the strength and creativity of the parents.

To my great glee, I have had the great fortune of being part of amazingly wonderful, fulfilling, happy adoptions. This is what gives me hope. What worries me is that therapists who do not have the opportunity to see and celebrate fabulously happy adoptive families, have a one-sided view of adoption — and that isn’t a good one. I wish there was a way to help everyone understand that the “good adoption” stories aren’t fairy tales. They are real life — the same as the unfortunate, difficult adoptions that we read more about and hear about on the news. But, the most important thing is that we can effect change in difficult adoptions. I believe this.

Along the way during the last 35 years since I graduated with stars in my eyes and naïve blindness regarding the complexity of children, I have encountered, studied and been certified in many methods of treatment and many therapies. I have heard lectures — some good and some bad — on a disheartening array of the complex, bewildering list of behaviors exhibited by parents and children.

Behavior is a reaction to something. What causes the greatest problem for parents is that it seems like a reaction to them — a rejection

of them. Is it? Maybe, but probably not. It is a reaction to something, so is the behavior of a parent.

So what do we do? It isn’t anything new. It is what makes our world go around — relationships, and the most important relationships, those within a family. We help kids to know that the parent is here to understand the child better. The parent is the relationship figure. We can see children alone sometimes and in some situations but when we see kids who have serious trauma and attachment problems, we must see them with a parent figure. The kids are suffering from

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misattunement, broken attachment situations, serious fear and trauma. They absolutely must have a parent figure to work this out. When the children go home from therapy, we want them going home with a parent who has been present during the treatment and discussion of the trauma. We want the child to experience repair, attunement and a co-creation of their story with their parent figure. The therapist is the witness, the director and the one who holds the co-creation of their new story that integrates the past with the present. Parents put the co-created new story into play with their child.

In adoption, we, unfortunately, were a part of believing that an adopted child’s “new” story began with adoption. We all say “no we weren’t.” But we were. We understood at some level that the child had a past, but I do believe we were under the misconception that the “new and healthy” family would be enough. We were wrong. Just like we were wrong that “love is enough.” It isn’t always.

“Family-Focused Attachment Therapy or

Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy” with Dr. Daniel A. Hughes, has taught me the absolute vital importance of understanding not only what the child brings to an adoption, but what the adoptive parents bring to this match. I didn’t understand then that adoptive parents bring their own attachment history. I didn’t understand the potential disaster that the unknowns in a child’s history; the unknowns about the birth parent’s history; the unresolved grief and loss of the child; the hurt, anger, sadness and bitterness of the child coupled with the adoptive parents own loss and grief, traumas, sadness, anger and “naïve visions” were potentials for disaster. I didn’t understand

what I was going to have to know in order to help families heal their lives, integrate their histories, accept each other wholly and move on to new lives restructured together with new co-created narratives of their lives together.

Through play therapy, sandtray-worldplay, theraplay and family-focused attachment therapy or DDP, I work with families to find a way to understand each other and communicate with each other. In play we help children tell their parents’ more about their lives, more about their wishes and dreams.

One child created a sandtray that described how he wanted to reconnect to his birth parents. He said he was worried that his birth parents didn’t know how to find him. John put in a house for his adoptive family and a house at the opposite end of the tray for his birth parents. He put in a car and said his adoptive family drove together to his birth parents’ house and then brought them back to

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# Play Therapy

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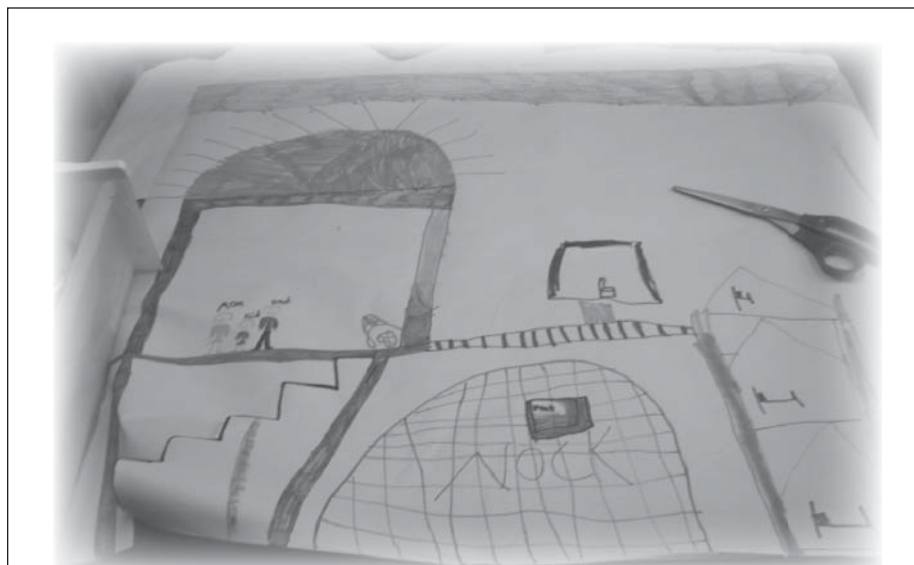
see where he lived. John said they would want to know where his bedroom was, that they had a dog and he would show them the backyard. The adoptive family drove them back home.

What did John work out here? He let his adoptive family see into his heart and his mind. John released some of the grief and sadness of loss while embracing his adoptive family. John “let” his adoptive family take him to visit his birth family and wanted them to know each other. John co-created a new story with his adoptive family that included his past. The adoptive father who was present in this session witnessed and accepted John’s birth parents into their lives. John let them know he was proud of where he lived now and wanted to show his birth parents his new family. John told his birth parents that he was worried about his birth family and he did think about them.

The questions John had about the birth family included, “Where did they live? How are you doing? When’s your birthday? How old are you?”

In the sandtray you can see the “tracks” of the vehicles going back and forth. The birth family are on the right (present) and the adoptive family on the left (past). The houses and vehicles are of similar size — seeing them equally? Projecting the adoptive family on to the adoptive family? The birth family was poorer and did not live in great places when he was with them. Both have mailboxes — a desire to communicate?

John later told us when he moved — three or four times — it was in a taxi because the worker didn’t have a car. Is that true? I don’t know. It is to him. Did doing the sandtray create a new way of remembering those moves? Maybe. One thing was different. A parent was with him in this journey in the sandtray, helping and supporting him through the move. And another thing was different. John had shared some of his longings, dreams and hopes with his adoptive father. They went



**THIS WORK** was done with the same child who did the “birth family visiting the adoptive family” sandtray. The “birth family trip” sandtray was done in a session with the boy and his father. The castle pictures and sandtray were done in a session with just the siblings. The father brought the children and we all chatted for about half an hour. The father left and came back to pick up the children. The sister was 9 at this time and the brother was 11.

The art activity helps a child express thoughts about “families” and “homes.” I asked these children to draw a picture of a “dream home.” In this case, I was working on individuation with these siblings. I wanted them to express their own dreams. Of course, the brother and sister were in this session together so there are indications of the effect they have on each other, such as the brother cut out the sister’s stairs, the sister called her picture a castle after the brother called his a castle and the sister’s castle has some features that reflect the brother’s.

The sister called her picture the Color Castle and said, “The door has a peek hole. There are poles for the floor so that it won’t fall. Two adults and a girl live here. This is a bridge and stairs. These are the bedrooms for the three couples.” She said, “It’s very odd — it’s the bathroom so they can go to the bathroom on the bridge” (in the middle with a box around it). This child was often mute in sessions so the fact she gave some description of her picture was great. The peek hole, size of the door, bathroom being isolated and poles to hold up the floor reflected her tendency to be anxious and insecure. This girl does put in a boundary and some safety with the word “nock” on the door. Interesting that even with her brother in the room, she left him out of her drawing. At least she drew herself with the parents and as part of the family. It is interesting that the figures all have their own bedrooms. This child often indicated that she saw her brother as her parent. Is she still having trouble understanding families and parents? Does she want to alienate and keep the parents separate? Is this her birth family?

home together and took this story with them. I believe that what John had shared came from his unconscious into his consciousness and would continue to evolve in the days to follow.

We don’t always know what happens in play or sandtrays. We don’t always know what happens in a session. A lot is about faith in kids and families being resilient and wanting to heal. The best thing we can do is believe with our whole heart that adoptive children and adoptive families can grow together, heal the traumas and learn to be more attuned, joyful families. As therapists, we must continue to learn and search for the answers and good

methods to support hurting families through their adoptive journey.

*Sandra Webb has worked in Child Welfare and Adoption for 30 years. She is also a Play Therapist, a Theraplay Therapist and a Sandtray-Worldplay Therapist. Webb was trained by Gisela Schubach de Domenico from California. She has presented workshops on adoption in Toronto, Ottawa, Ireland and the United States. She produced the DVD and CD, Building the Bonds of Attachment, based on the work of Dr. Daniel A. Hughes. For more information, visit [www.sandrawebbcounselling.com](http://www.sandrawebbcounselling.com).*