

# A Case Study of the Use of Sandplay Therapy to Help Kids Feel Better about Starting Kindergarten

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**Abstract:** *The purpose of this article is to investigate the efficacy of Sandplay Therapy (SPT) in reducing children's kindergarten entrance anxiety in an effort to provide front-line preschool teachers with insights and strategies for addressing the emotional distress of children in their first days of nursery school. As a case study, the application of SPT to a 3-year-old boy who struggled with his transition into kindergarten was cited. The differences in his emotions and behaviors before and after six sessions of SPT were evaluated, revealing that the intervention through SPT significantly decreased his anxiety level while increasing his willingness to attend nursery school and that he finally developed a sound adaptation to the school, according to the comments of the observers. Findings showed that SPT could help kids feel less nervous about starting kindergarten and adjust better to new situations.*

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**P**RESCHOOLERS commonly suffer from kindergarten entry anxiety, also known as separation anxiety. It refers to emotional reactions such as tension, unease, and sadness generated by the effect of alien environments when children are admitted to kindergarten for the first time and removed from individuals with whom they have formed bonds (mainly their family members). This fear may result in behaviors such as sobbing, difficulty eating, difficulty sleeping, repetition of the same topics, attachment to instructors, unwillingness or refusal to attend kindergarten, etc. (Li, 2020). Prior studies indicated that, without appropriate intervention and therapy, kindergarten entrance anxiety could persist throughout adolescence or even adulthood and be a risk factor for adult anxiety disorders (Pini et al., 2012). Common ways to help kids who are worried about starting kindergarten are to make and read picture books, play graffiti games, and do other kinds of play.

Sandplay Therapy (SPT), also known as sand tray play, is a method of psychotherapy in which the client uses a tray of sand and a variety of toys to build a representation of his or her inner world in the presence of the therapist (Zhang, 2006). Different sorts of mental illnesses and disorders respond differently to SPT, and in some respects, it is preferable to conventional psychotherapy (Roester, 2019). It can successfully identify problems in the unconscious of individuals, thereby enhancing their mental and personality development (Ji, Kang, & Du, 2020). The effectiveness of SPT in correcting psychological and behavioral abnormalities in children has been well acknowledged. In the current study, SPT was used as a way to help kids who were nervous about starting kindergarten. Its healing processes and effects were carefully recorded to provide proof and experience that kindergarteners' anxiety can be helped.

## **Background Information on the Subject**

### ***Demographic Characteristics***

Li was a three-year and eight-month-old boy of Zhuang nationality with normal weight and height who was born with an easy delivery.

### ***Family Background***

Since they were little children, Li and his younger sister had shared a home with their parents. Li's mother was a college professor, but his father worked in an ordinary office. Even though everyone is busy at work, family members get along well because of the way they raise their children.

### ***Main Problems***

Li started going to nursery school when he was three years and eight months old, but during the first few days of kindergarten, he put up a lot of resistance. On the first day of school, he was able to walk to the kindergarten with the help of his grandmother because he was curious about the new environment of school. However, when they arrived at the school gate and he realized that they would have to part ways, he balked at entering and had to be carried in by teachers while sobbing. The cry subsided after five minutes, but when he later witnessed other children crying, it started up again. Basically, he could follow directions from teachers but had trouble dozing off around lunchtime.

Li made it plain that he didn't want to attend nursery school in the morning from days two through five. He purposely dallied on the way to kindergarten, and then he stopped going anywhere. Grandma had to carry him on her back to the school, where she handed him off to the teacher at the gate as he sobbed. He stayed linked to the teacher who was in charge of the kids' day-to-day care all day after finding her to be friendly. On day six of the second week, Li resisted leaving right away and pretended to have a stomach ailment as an excuse. Li's mother took him there to go sliding after the kindergarten's afternoon dismissal in an effort to persuade him that the nursery school was a fun place to be. Li was unhappily carried on Grandma's back to school on the seventh day. On the eighth day, Grandma and Li came to an understanding that she would only carry him a portion of the way from his house to school, and that each day the distance he would travel on her back would be cut in half. Starting on the seventeenth day, Li was able to walk to school in the company of an adult family member, and he did so joyfully.

## **The Intervention Protocol**

### ***Therapy Time***

Based on Li's emotions and behaviors, the protocol scheduled him for six sessions of therapy (two per week, over the course of sixteen days) on the following days: Saturday in the first week, Tuesday and Saturday in the second week, Monday and Saturday in the third week, and Monday in the fourth week.

### ***Therapy Venue***

Li was enrolled at the kindergarten, Tongxin Garden.

### ***Therapy Tools***

A wooden sand tray (57 × 72 × 7 cm), a wooden sand tray table, three wooden display shelves (120 × 120 × 30 cm), 10 kg of natural sea sand, 1,250 toys, and a cell phone with a 64-megapixel high-definition camera.

### ***Therapy Procedure***

- *Determining Therapeutic Objectives* (jointly by the therapist, Li, and Li's father)
- The immediate goal was to reduce Li's anxiety about starting kindergarten to the point where he would be willing to walk to school with a family member.
- The main goals were to improve Li's ability to communicate and adapt, as well as his ability to deal with anxiety.
- *Setting the Therapeutic Plan*

It was a therapist-led, one-on-one SPT procedure with no other people around. The steps were as follows: learning about SPT, playing with sand, creating sand tray models, reflecting on and changing the works, talking and communicating, photographing the works, and disassembling the models.

## **The Intervention Process**

During the SPT time, Li continued to attend nursery school but did not get any other therapy.

### ***The first Sand Tray Model (on Saturday in the first Week)***

#### *The SPT Process*

When the therapist was giving the SPT orientation, Li could not wait to get to the shelves and begin arranging his favorite toys.

He began by placing two cops at the lower edge of the left corner of the sand tray, followed by a police car and a dinosaur at the feet of the two lying policemen. There was an empty falling-over glass, three sharks, an SUV, a pair of scissors, and a basketball stand to the right of the police officer. Between the SUV and the lower edge of the room were a piano and a vanity. On the roof of the SUV were an apple, a watermelon, and a green and yellow snake. In the middle portion of the sand tray, from right to left, were a building, a bus with a crab next to it, a larger yellow snake, and a ship with a man in red clothing lying next to it. In the center of the sand tray was a dark green stone with a blonde doll, black and blue stones, a yellow rhinoceros, a lying-flat police officer, and a dinosaur (who was biting the rhinoceros), an orange man lying flat, and a pink car to its left. From left to right, there are four armed soldiers, a tyrannosaurus, a yellow airplane, a truck, and two cacti in the upper portion of the tray.

#### *Conversation and Communication*

*The therapist tried to make conversation with Li: "Could you say a few words about your work? What is there in it?"*

*Li replied excitedly, "There are cops, snakes, and soldiers! The soldiers are fighting. There are birds, sharks, rhinoceros, dinosaurs, and even tyrannosaurs. Wow! And cars."*

*The therapist said, "What a rich work! Could you name it?"*

*Li thought for a moment: "A fight between the police and dinosaurs."*

*The therapist asked, "Which toys do you think are the most important?"*

*Li responded quickly, "The police, dinosaurs, and tyrannosaurs."*

*The therapist asked, "Which part of the work are you most satisfied with? Why?"*

*Li answered, "The policemen, the police car, and the dinosaur" (the lower left corner). He did not realize that he had missed the other question.*

*The therapist asked again, "Why this part?"*

*Li replied, "Because policemen and dinosaurs are my favorites!"*

#### *The Therapist's Comments*

The first sand tray model created by Li was essential to his therapy since it accurately reflected his mental state and inner turmoil. First, the entire model was cohesive and not

severely fragmented. Second, the image of the sand tray depicted an abundance of 43 toys. However, the disorganized arrangement of the toys reflected his lack of inner stability and order and his inability to exert control over his life. He could only take the new world passively and react with some trepidation. Third, the sand tray labor was lively, but the energy flows were disordered and marked by conflicts. The three snakes, massive and violent fighting dinosaurs, and armed soldiers in the model represented his inner confusion and desire to attack and grow stronger; all of the figures lying on the sand could represent people Li did not want to confront or those he valued. The cacti with thorns indicated that Li may have been injured by recent experiences and prompted self-protection awareness. From the miniature work as well as his emotions and behaviors in the nursery school, it could be inferred that his kindergarten attendance had disrupted his original life order and deprived him of some of his preferences and hobbies, which were not being properly addressed at this time, and that professional guidance and self-discovery were required to reorganize his confused psyche in order to assist him in navigating this transitional phase of his life.

## ***Displays of Consciousness (Tuesday and Saturday in the second Week)***

### *The SPT Process*

Li happily embraced the therapy sessions as his interest in sandplay grew. During therapy, Li was completely enthralled by the toys on the shelves and enthusiastically arranged them in the sand tray until it was full. Constant verbal and visual contact with the therapist was also maintained. When Li couldn't reach the toys at the top of the shelf, he would seek assistance from the therapist. He would smile and share his favorite toys with the therapist whenever he saw them. At the end of the second session, he would have photos shot of him in exuberant poses with his favorite toys (tanks and dinosaurs), expressing his unwillingness to go and his desire to play for longer. In the third session, Li was able to decide on which toys to include in his sand tray picture, as opposed to the first two sessions, when he simply took whatever toys were within his grasp.

### *Analysis and Interpretation*

- *The Selection of Toys*

In the second session of SPT, Li eliminated the everyday utensils, snakes, policemen, and cacti from his sand tray display, but included two tanks, a Spiderman, Minions, and three automobiles. The overall arrangement of the toys (38 in all) remained sloppy but no longer congested. In the third session, the tray had a wider assortment of toys, including structures, daily utensils, and food. Only two dinosaurs and one tank remained, bringing the total number of people to nine. Scenes of police officers and females lying in the sand and troops half buried occurred. There were a total of 46 toys used.

- *The Sand Tray Model*

Li's second task demonstrated less inner conflict when compared to the model from the previous session. Despite this, a portion of the battles remained, as depicted by the two tanks, five dinosaurs, and five armed soldiers. The second image was more powerful

since it included three automobiles, two tanks, and four warplanes. Li's secret wish for superhuman strength and emotional support was shown by the fact that Spiderman and the Minions existed. These characters represented supernatural powers and unknown forces.

In contrast to the second model, the third model exhibited a greater focus on daily life, indicating that Li's attention had shifted from inner difficulties to daily living. Aircraft, motorcycles, electric bicycles, and bicycles added to the model's dynamism, enhancing the image's depiction of pleasant and harmonious landscapes. The arrival of three pink houses (castles) and food showed that Li was getting more mental energy and feeling more comfortable and stable.

## ***The Healing Stage (Monday and Saturday in the third Week)***

### *The SPT Process*

Li got extremely concentrated on the large variety of automobiles of all types, colors, and styles during the fourth session. He liked them all and tried to pick his favorites to put in the sand tray. However, there are too many of them for the tray's limited area. The cars chosen in the previous session were his favorites in the fifth session, although he was dissatisfied with the sand tray's limited area. When he discovered some more interesting train lines, he began to play on the floor because the sand tray was too small for them.

### *Analysis and Interpretation*

- *The Selection of Toys*

During the fourth session, a total of 28 vehicles filled the sand tray, including tanks, aircraft (civil airplanes, helicopters, and military aircraft), mud tankers, excavators, cranes, fire trucks, trucks, garbage trucks, and cars. In between the cars were four armed troops, some buns in a bamboo steamer, a pair of art scissors, and a box of paint. A dining table, stools, food, two enormous gas stoves, and two pots were located from the middle left to the top. For the first time, an Ultraman emerged from the center of the tray, carrying a large pot of prepared food and other food beside him. Four lying-flat dinosaurs rose over the Ultraman.

Li filled the entire sand tray with vehicles and added additional items in the sixth session. The dinosaurs were reduced to three, with one under the gas stove and one under the airplane. The dinosaurs did not stay together as they had before, but instead stood in different places on the tray. The model now includes some furniture and tools, as well as some bright crystals.

- *The Sand Tray Model*

Fifty-six toys were utilized in the fourth model. The fact that the whole sand tray was full of different kinds of cars, animals, food, and household items showed that L was strong and active. Some parts of the kindergarten were also in the model, like the Arabic numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, paints, and art scissors. This showed that Li was getting

used to the kindergarten environment more and more. Ultraman stood for the supernatural power and emotional support that L has always wanted.

The number of toys in the fifth model grew to 78. Every square inch of the sand tray was occupied by various types of vehicles. The additional bed was located in the lower right corner, reflecting Li's exhaustion. After an investigation, it was discovered that Li was an early riser who could not fall asleep at lunchtime unless accompanied by the assistant instructor. Colorful crystals represented beauty, brilliance, and hope. If there are train tracks, it could mean that Li has found a way to deal with his bad feelings.

## ***The Conclusion of SPT (Monday in the fourth Week)***

### *The SPT Process*

Li was very excited about the sixth session. Before the play, L and his therapist had a short conversation about what had been going on in his life at the nursery school. This time, L treated his model like he was making a piece of art. First, he looked carefully at all the toys on the shelves and seemed to have a clear picture of the whole situation in his mind. Soon, a big tree was chosen to go in the lower left corner of the tray. It was followed by a row of trees that included a coconut tree, a tree with a small flower, a smaller tree, and a big willow at the top. A plane was hiding behind a small tree. There was also a row of plants on the far right side of the tray. There were two coconut trees, a pine tree, two trees without leaves, a cactus, and a young tree. A tank with its barrel pointed up stood at the top of the line. At the end of this line of plants, there was an orderly line of dinosaurs, with a lion and tiger at each end and a pine tree next to the tiger. To the left of the animals is another row of green plants: seven trees, four bigger trees, and two coconut trees. In the middle of the tray was a big green lawn with three soldiers, a coconut tree, a plane, two white trees, and a pine tree. On the left side of the lawn, from the bottom edge to the top edge of the tray, there were two vertically stacked engineering vehicles, a red excavator, a skateboard with a soldier on it, four soldiers with a vertically stacked vehicle behind them, a big shell, and two big trees at the top.

### *Conversation and communication*

*The therapist said, "Say something about your picture, please."*

*Li pointed to the soldiers on the left side of the tray excitedly, "They are Chinese soldiers, brave and resilient. The dinosaur wanted to defeat them and eat the grass."*

*Li then fell into silence, and the therapist gave him a push, "What's next, please?"*

*Li thought for a moment, "The dinosaur assumed that the grass was delicious and took a bite but found it not so tasty. He just spat it out."*

*The therapist said, "What a wonderful world you have created! Can you name it?"*

*After a little bit of reflection, Li said, "Let's call it Forests: Dinosaurs' Home."*

*The therapist asked, "Which part of the work do you like best? And why?"*  
*"Here are the soldiers and trees (to the left of the lawn). They are so vigilant."*



*The therapist asked again, "Then which part of the work do you like least? And why?"*

*"The leafless trees," Li responded without any hesitation. "They look like monsters."*

*The therapist nodded in agreement, "I see. How do you like this model in comparison with the prior ones?"*

*Li said loudly, "This one is the best! Beautiful!"*

*The therapist agreed, "Yes, beautiful, indeed!"*

*Li reiterated, "It is the most beautiful!"*

*The therapist: "Please grade it. How would you score it if the perfect score is 100 points?"*

*Li answered confidently, "Then I will give it a score of 1000 points!"*

### *The Therapist's Comment*

First of all, in the last model, the layout of the toys has become more organized and even beautiful in some ways. This shows that Li's internal order has been established, which is a sign of his psychological healing up. Second, for the first time, strong trees showed up on the tray. People usually think of big, tall trees as the "axis of the world" and as signs of life. They also think that the forest has some mysterious power to change. The green spots on the plants in the picture showed how Li's strength and mental energy had come back. Third, the toys worked well together. Their directions matched, they were spaced out evenly, and there was a good amount of space in each area. The whole piece has a lot of harmony and elegance, which shows that Li's mental energy has been rekindled and given a good outlet.

## **The Efficacy of Intervention**

### *Li's Self-Reported Evaluation*

Sand is fun to play with. There are numerous toys. I enjoy dinosaurs, trucks, tanks, policemen... I would like to spend more time with them. Kindergarten is a great deal of fun. You can glide, build using bricks, and doodle... I am fond of both Teacher Tan and H. I no longer wish to cry in kindergarten.

### *The Therapist's Evaluation*

With the progression of therapy, the client's transformation and development have become evident. According to feedback from follow-up appointments, the therapy has largely achieved its intended objectives. The client's concern over entering kindergarten has been alleviated and eliminated. He is now in good mental and physical health, and his intelligence, emotions, psychology, and practice have all developed in tandem. Because of this, he can well follow teachers' instructions and enjoy all of kindergarten's activities.

### *Others' Evaluation*

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**Box 1**

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**Before Intervention (the first few days)**

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Anxious  
Nervous  
Uneasy  
Distressful  
Lots of cry  
Unwilling to enter the kindergarten  
Deliberate dawdling on the way to school  
Being carried to school by the adult  
Attaching to the child-care teacher

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**After Intervention (the fourth week)**

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Enjoying the stay at the kindergarten  
Looking forward to attending the kindergarten  
Interested in kindergarten life  
Willing to share his joy  
No more crying  
Willing to attend the kindergarten  
Going to school on foot  
Fond of Teacher Tan (assistant class teacher)  
Sociable among classmates (making friends with two of them)  
Ready to help teachers with class affairs

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Li's parents said that he didn't want to go to nursery school for the first two weeks, but things got better after that. Now that he had said goodbye to his family member at the gate, he could walk into school with a smile on his face. Every day, he had a lot to tell his parents about kindergarten, like the nice songs and games he learned, the things Miss Tan did, the compliments his classmates got, the new friends he made, etc. Now that he liked his teachers, classmates, and some of the toys at kindergarten, going there was something he looked forward to.

Li's teachers said that he still cried at the school gate in the second week, but that after ten minutes of comforting from a teacher, he forgot about his sadness and went on to play in kindergarten. From the third week on, he stopped crying, and each week after that, he got better and better. The teacher once wrote in the Home-School Communication Manual, where the child's performance at kindergarten is recorded every week, which Li was always willing to help the class and teachers and always did his best.

Compared to Li's pre-therapy and post-therapy actions and mental states, SPT in a free, safe, and protected setting considerably reduced his kindergarten entrance anxiety and enhanced his adaptability (*Box 1*).

## Discussion

SPT can effectively alleviate kindergarten anxiety in children, but it requires multiple therapy sessions. It should be noted that family-related factors, such as maternal emo-

tional characteristics (Xiao, 2021), parental state-trait anxiety (Lyu, 2021), and parent-child interaction (Ma, 2017), as well as kindergarten-related factors, such as teachers' coping responses (Li, 2020), can influence the efficacy of SPT even when no other therapy is administered concurrently. To control the effects of family and kindergarten-related factors on SPT, a more rigorous research design is required. On the other hand, it's also worth looking into whether or not a mix of SPT, family, and kindergarten factors can help kids get used to nursery school more quickly and easily.

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