

Expressive Sandwork with children in areas of conflict:

*“Oh... in silence... when there’s silence outside, we can hear the
voices that speak inside”*

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We feel privileged that Expressive Sandwork - the topic of this presentation - has always been present in the conferences of Analysis and Activism: in 2013 in London, in 2015 in Rome, in 2017 in Prague and at the online conference in 2020.

Expressive Sandwork can be seen as a form of political activism: it is a social application of Jungian theory. And, in the words of our colleague Renos Papadopoulos: *“No one would doubt that Jung himself would have been considerably excited by this type of development...”*

Expressive Sandwork is a transcultural, non-verbal method of therapeutic care for situations in which individual psychotherapy is not available. It is an adaptation of Margaret Lowenfeld's World Technique and Dora Kalff's Sandplay Therapy and it is especially designed for emergency situations, disaster settings and long-term interventions in vulnerable communities. Its goal is to help children and adults activate a process of psychological self-regulation, using their own creative potential.



Image 1 Founders: María Claudia Munévar, Mónica Pinilla, María Camila Mora (Colombia), Eva Pattis (Italy)

Expressive Sandwork began in 2002 in China and in South Africa, was brought to Latin America (first to Colombia and later to Argentina), was expanded to Romania and Ukraine, to Palestine and to Malaysia. In Europe, Sandwork has been used with refugee populations in Germany and in Italy. The latest project had just taken place in January 2020 in Jaipur, India.

Since March 2020, Expressive Sandwork activity in eleven countries has come to a complete stop because of the pandemic. Children could not complete their therapeutic processes. Schools and childcare facilities were closed.

But there is hope: since our Colombian colleagues had applied Sandwork in a children's cancer clinic in Medellin, Colombia, they became familiar with using sophisticated hygiene protocols, including disinfecting the sand and the toys after each session. Therefore, we can go on: the first project "After Covid Project" started in October, in Northern Italy for children with psychosomatic symptoms after the lock-down period.

What is specific to Sandwork?

The method is based on the work of locally trained volunteers, who are not necessarily psychologists. It has a very specific setting which is a combination of a group experience and an individual encounter. The sessions are held in a group, with each child being paired with his or her own individual witness throughout the 12 sessions. This arrangement means that each child has access to a personal, intimate reference figure.

Since we don't take pictures during the sessions, here is a representation of the setting in the sandtray itself by a child.



Image 2

The group is seen as an alchemical vessel that needs to be hermetically sealed for the process of psychic transformation to occur. As soon as symbolic processes begin to express themselves in the children's play, the emotional temperature begins to rise, everyone's involvement is intensified, every gesture becomes significant and every observation important. The subtlest emotions are noted, and every individual is connected in unconscious energetic interaction with every other individual present. This web of interconnectivity increases from session to session.

Seen as a systemic entity, a number of groups are in constant interaction with each other in Expressive Sandwork: the groups of volunteer-facilitators, the children, their parents, the group project leaders, the teams of the different institutions involved, and, last but not least, the branching group of the international wider network.

What are the Conceptual Bases?

They are: the bond, the play, the spontaneous creation of Images (imaginative experience), the self-regulation of the psyche and the symbolic process.

The Bond: According to Bowlby's Attachment Theory, the child needs a relationship with a sensitive and receptive caregiver for their social and emotional development. The importance of the bond, one to one (facilitator-child) re-edits the mother-child relationship.

Expressive Sandwork proposes an attentive and empathic attitude of the facilitator allowing the child to express what her/his psyche needs. It is done in 'a free and protected space' (in Dora Kalff's words), without judgment and without an interventionist or pedagogical attitude.

In this context, the child is watched and thought by someone: *Maybe someone is interested in me.*

The free **Play** allows and favors:

- Setting situations of conflict
- Connecting with emotions
- Experiencing oneself in a multiplicity of situations and roles
- Experiencing their own creative potential
- Learning to solve problematic situations
- Influencing brain maturation (according to Panksepp)

The imaginative experience: Imagination as a bridge between conscious and unconscious, between the inner and outer world. Jung speaks about the "imaginative essence of the soul" (Jung, 1926 OC8, par. 618), and according to Henry

Corbin, he recognized a ‘productive’ function in imagination, a true organ of knowledge, capable of ‘creating’ being, and not only the strictly ‘reproductive’ function, to which Western philosophy, from Plato onwards, had confined it.

The self-regulation of the psyche, the symbolic process and the transcendent function that creates a new symbolic position which contains both perspectives at the same time, the emergence of the third term.

And What about Silence? Another important issue in Expressive Sandwork

It is surprising and touching to see the children play in their sandtrays with concentration and silence. This silence is not one that hushes, omits, or fragments the psychic structure which, as products of violent situations and abuse, is usual in many children’s lives. This silence, on the other hand, is a fertile ground for the child to express what his or her psyche needs. This silence and the facilitators’ availability and an empathic understanding, enables the emergence of both, the conflicts and the child’s potential and creative transformation.

There are moments... certain situations in which we feel different emotions, sadness, joy, anger, and also tenderness, frustration, smiles, but above all, the silence prevails.

How do we unveil what the presence of silence in Expressive Sandwork shows us?

While children are out, getting ready for our meeting, they are usually loaded with excitement. Their world is full of sound and movement. However, once they

enter to the space of ES, they also encounter silence: the adult is silent, the environment is silent. They are also prepared to be part of this silence since they find a welcoming and safe space there. Children recognize that this place is special and different from their usual surroundings.

Silence turns up the volume of their inner world. And those inner voices guide them in an encounter between their inner world and the outer reality. Their playing and what they build have the particularity that what happens there, happens in the presence and company of an adult who is attentive to their play. This play is part of a continuum between the inside of their voices and the outside of what they do in their sandtray. This psychic experience that occurred between the inside and the outside while they are playing determines what Winnicott called the *transitional space* from which culture, and perhaps spirituality, comes. This silence in Expressive Sandwork allows a special play experience and lets the children enter that *transitional space* we consider almost as a sanctuary (*temenos*) where everything is potentially possible.

The equation that characterizes what surrounds the group atmosphere of Expressive Sandwork can be stated as: attention + silence. And since this is a shared silence, it generates communion, in the sense that it allows us to perceive our deepest common-union. The most important thing is to share silence in silence.

Now, silence in Expressive Sandwork is not silence without sounds since there are sounds that arise from silence. We hear the sound of the miniatures while children play with them, we also hear babbling and sounds of children as they play, or we occasionally hear words or short stories from a game or a child's question.

This special playing emerging from silence offers the children the possibility to explore, create, and transform, at their times, even the horror that may be paralyzed inside. Thus, we witness their play and learn to trust in their process and in what is the most genuine expression of their need: to build or to destroy, to bury

or to uncover, to confront or to harmonize. And while this happens, we know that children are in the presence of the most intimate part of themselves and we carefully protect that experience which had previously been violated by abuse, neglect, violence.

Some of that silence, full of potential, nourishes us all. As adults, we are witnesses of the children's play and of the child within ourselves who reminds us of the possibilities of silence, of our silence.

There are some testimonials of the facilitators:

- *"It has been an opportunity to discover the other in silence, not trying to guide but allowing to be"*
- *"I received more than I gave. It's a life-changing experience"*
- *"You have to be prepared to learn how to let go, to trust in your child's and the group's process, and fundamentally to learn to just be there in silence. There is an enormous development of sensitivities; we are all transformed by this experience. I could understand my small effort to accompany these children in their process and I could witness their capacity and strength to transform their inner world. I am really glad of being able to be there"*
- *"Expressive Sandwork in vulnerable populations touched something very sacred in me: the symbolic rescue of deprivation and the value of an adult's gaze for a child who feels unseen by their parents"*

Some examples

Many changes are observed after Expressive Sandwork processes: decreased levels of aggression or anxiety, better relationship with themselves, better relationship with others and progress in cognitive processes.

Furthermore, we also observe that many times children can talk about traumatic situations they have never shared until that moment.

That is the case of Jorge, a 10-year-old boy who, almost at the end of the process, told his teacher -through drawings and texts- what was happening to him: his father hit him with a belt every time he didn't get good grades.

But the significant thing was that at the end of the process, in the meeting with the parents, the facilitator (who was not aware of what had happened), explained to Jorge's father the qualities and skills of his son. At that moment, the father gets excited and told the facilitator that he is very hard on his son because he does not want him to be like him...

We can notice that during the process of Expressive Sandwork, the child can reveal, make visible or express something that was previously hidden or silenced.

Another example is the case of a girl who told her teacher that she had been abused by a relative, or another girl who asked her mother not to hurt her and to speak to her in good manners.

This is how the children begin to put their needs in words.

Then... silence as a fertile ground allows silenced words to emerge...

Oh... in silence... when there's silence outside, we can hear the voices that speak inside...



Image 3

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