



The Embodied Process in Gestalt Sandtray

Renee Turner


Expressive Therapies Institute, PLLC, San Antonio, Texas

Gestalt therapy is a dynamic, relational therapy emphasizing embodiment, curiosity, and awareness. This article explores the application of sandtray therapy through a Gestalt therapy framework. Centered around the theoretical principles of embodiment, curiosity, and awareness, this article highlights the importance of the therapeutic use of self and the person-of-the-sandtray-therapist (POST). Special consideration is given to the embodied process as a foundational element for facilitating the Gestalt therapy and Gestalt sandtray process. Gestalt sandtray principles are applied through a case study to illustrate the process, the experience of the therapist (POST), and the builder's reaction.

Keywords: Gestalt therapy, sandtray therapy, embodiment

Sandtray therapy is an expressive modality incorporating symbols and sand through the lens of various theoretical models and approaches (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2022). While each theory and model outline a unique stance for conceptualization, facilitation, and processing, most approaches underscore the role of the therapeutic relationship. A recent international meta-analysis study supports the importance of the therapeutic relationship as a mediator for positive outcomes with a range of internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Wiersma et al., 2022). Unfortunately, many clinical training programs do not adequately train clinicians to cultivate and balance therapeutic use of self. Many clinical training programs encourage clinicians to remain objective and set aside their thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences to prevent countertransference. Without a doubt, practitioners must manage countertransference. However, if they do not let themselves fully engage with their clients in the room, their lack of authenticity can make the therapeutic relationship feel cold or distant. This can also negatively impact the client's sense of felt safety.

Seasoned sand tray professionals understand the dynamic process involved in sand therapy and recognize the risk of facilitating and processing trays without clarity of self. Homeyer and Lyles (2022) introduced the concept of the person-of-the-

Renee Turner  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0451-5488>
There are no known conflicts of interest to disclose.
Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to
Renee Turner. Email: drreeneeturner@gmail.com
210-380-3274



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sandtray-therapist (POST), an expansion of Aponte's (1992) Person-of-the-Therapy Training model (POTT). POST work encourages intentional integration of the sandtray clinician's use of self, including "dual attention to [clinician's] inner worlds inevitably touched" (Homeyer & Lyles, 2022, p. 91) by the client's work in the sand. Homeyer and Lyles (2022) suggest that the POST influences all aspects of the sandtray process, from room preparation to documentation.

A recent research study (Hartwig et al., 2023) identified the POST as an essential knowledge competency for all sand tray professionals. In their research, Hartwig et al. (2023) also identified the importance of sand tray professionals integrating a primary theoretical orientation in their sand tray practice. Thus, sand tray professionals are bound to identify ways to incorporate the POST into their sand tray practice through a consistent theoretical lens. Integrating the POTT and therapeutic use of self is valued differently among theoretical orientations. Gestalt therapy is an example of an orientation in which the therapeutic use of self is intertwined with all aspects of the therapeutic process.

Gestalt Therapy

Identifying a precise definition of gestalt therapy is difficult because of the expansive nature of the therapy and underlying philosophies. Each Gestalt therapist may even define Gestalt differently based on their unique way of "making sense of the world" (Mann, 2020, p. 5). As a result, there are countless Gestalt styles and approaches. However, Joyce and Sills (2018) suggest that good Gestalt practice incorporates six characteristics: 1) a focus on the here and now, 2) commitment to a co-created, relational stance, 3) an embodied dialogical relationship, 4) a field theory perspective, 5) an intense curiosity, and 6) a creative, experimental attitude to life and to the therapeutic process (p. 3). Reviewing all these characteristics is beyond the scope of this article. This article discusses the principles of embodied process, curiosity, and awareness, with integration into sandtray therapy. Readers less familiar with Gestalt therapy are encouraged to explore the theoretical constructs more deeply (see Joyce & Sills, 2018; Mann, 2020; Yontef, 1993).

A Way of Being

Another way to think about Gestalt therapy is that it is a way of being with clients (Oaklander, 1978) and extends to a way of being in the world and in relationships. I practice Gestalt therapy because it presents a way of being both in and out of the therapy room that encourages my growth as a human and a helper. The theoretical congruence I experience when practicing Gestalt therapy facilitates healthy integration of the POTT and therapeutic use of self and aligns with a "creative, experimental attitude to life and to the therapeutic process" (Joyce



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& Sills, 2018, p.3). The difference is that POTT work is an "add-on" in some orientations, while in Gestalt therapy, therapeutic use of self is the fiber binding the therapeutic process. When I hold this tenet at the center of my mind, I connect with clients more deeply and meaningfully.

Martin Buber, an existential philosopher, described the concept of I-Thou that has influenced existentialism, theology, psychology, and Gestalt therapy. I-Thou relating encourages individuals to strive for deeper and more authentic connections with others, recognizing the sacred dimension of human encounters and the potential for genuine dialogue and understanding in a fragmented and often impersonal world, or as Buber said, "healing through meeting" (Yontef, 1993). Buber stressed that while I-Thou encounters are essential for genuine human connection and meaningful existence, many of our interactions tend to be dominated by the I-It objectified or transactional style of relating. The concept of "healing through meeting" suggests that one can achieve healing by connecting with others, but only when the encounters are genuine. Similar to the POTT work, this stance indicates an authentic connection where two people meet. Gestalt therapy argues that 'meeting' starts with the body.

Gestalt as an Embodied Process

Embodiment is the most foundational skill a Gestalt therapist can develop in themselves and their clients. Embodied presence is the culmination of embodiment, attunement, and somatic resonance. From a Gestalt perspective, embodiment extends beyond the embodiment of the individual to the relationship to form *relational embodiment*. Relational embodiment involves being *with* and being *in* the energy field with clients somatically.

Joyce and Sills (2018) outline tasks for developing an embodied relational field. The *first task* is "to find a connection with your own embodied self" (p. 173) and invite the client to increase their bodily awareness. Playing with breath, movement, posture, and gestures are all ways to promote curiosity about the body. When relevant, providing observational statements (*external data statements*) about the client's body (e.g., I notice your breathing has slowed; I see your fists are clenched) also increases awareness.

The *second task* is "to sensitize yourself to the physical process of the client" (p. 174). Actively noticing movement, posture, gesture, breath, and expression provides data about the client's somatic experience. Somatic awareness involves listening to the client's whole body with recognition of body language (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, posture) and physiological responses (e.g., breath, eye movement, skin flushing, or paling).

The *third task* is "to be aware of your own bodily reaction to the client" (p.174). Staying actively aware of one's somatic experience (e.g., chest tightening, holding breath) provides data about the shared relational field. Kepner (2003) describes this process as *embodied empathy*, a process in which the gestalt facilitator *experiences* the client's movements, gestures, breathing patterns, etcetera, to attune to the client's experience.



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The *fourth task* is "to find a way of understanding your resonant experience" (p. 175). Providing statements about one's internal experience (*internal data statements*), mirroring, gesturing, or touching your own body (e.g., hand on chest) simultaneously provides data to the client and conveys attunement and empathy. For example, the therapist might state, "When you said you were scared, I noticed you held your breath, and then I held mine, too." Gestalt therapists can even deepen their experience by 'trying on' an observed movement, gesture, or sound. Of course, this experience can offer profound healing to clients, especially those with attachment wounds. This does not suggest energetic countertransference but attuning to one's somatic awareness and resonance while concurrently attuning to the client's somatic experience and its impact.

Therapist embodiment and therapeutic use of self are essential ingredients in the embodied process. Yontef (1993) wrote that in the Gestalt model, "both therapist and [client] grow by being actively present and engaged" throughout the therapeutic process (p. 6). From this perspective, the work of POTT and the embodied process are strikingly similar. Both aim to cultivate greater awareness for the therapist and client as a shared experience. Mann (2020) describes Gestalt therapy as "a voyage of discovery" (p. 5), which beautifully articulates the necessity for "intense curiosity" (Joyce & Sills, 2018, p. 3).

Curiosity

Gestalt therapy places a strong emphasis on curiosity, which helps to ignite a sense of wonder, energy, and awareness. It is considered a fundamental aspect of the therapy and plays a crucial role in the process. Being curious is a valuable experience that drives exploration and personal development. Curiosity invites the spirit of learning, opens doors, and paves the way for new possibilities to emerge within a fixed field. Through curiosity, individuals can envision and create new worlds and see beyond the current frame.

Adopting a stance of curiosity can be difficult for some practitioners trained to diagnose, assess, and target specific outcomes. It is also challenging when stakeholders (i.e., agencies, insurance companies) enforce an agenda. When an agenda is present, the therapist guides the process, even if this is done outside their awareness. As a result, curiosity is stifled.

The purpose of curiosity is simply to expand and deepen awareness. It is important to note that Gestalt therapists do not interpret data generated from their inquiry. From a phenomenological standpoint, meaning about the client's experience is the client's to make. Another way to think of this is that Gestalt therapists show clients the door, but it is up to the client if and how they open it and what they see on the other side.

Relating through a lens of curiosity also impacts the therapist. Erving Polster (2021) stated that "curiosity opens a mutual process of discovery" (p. 21) between therapist and client. From the therapist's position, curiosity replaces judgment with openness and compassion. Like the



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"process of discovery," compassion experienced for the client by the therapist is also available in the relational field. Gestalt therapy emphasizes the shared experience and co-creation between the client and therapist by actively exploring how the client experiences or makes contact with their environment. In this way, curiosity and awareness are intertwined aspects of the Gestalt therapeutic process.

Awareness

Increasing awareness is the primary goal of Gestalt therapy (Yontef, 1993). A comprehensive analysis of awareness would need to encompass theoretical elements extending beyond the scope of this article, including contact, contact styles, and contact boundaries. Mann (2020) and Yontef (1993) offer a complete discussion of these concepts for readers seeking additional information. The following discussion highlights the integral role of the embodied process and curiosity in facilitating awareness.

Awareness is described as the non-verbal sensing of the current moment (Joyce & Sills, 2018, p. 33). It involves being fully present, exploring inner experiences, and gaining insight into one's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. However, because awareness occurs along a continuum (Perls, 1992), awareness can but does not necessarily equate to insight. In the Gestalt process, awareness is a constant element, while insight is a sporadic occurrence. The embodied process and curiosity facilitate increased awareness along the continuum.

There are numerous ways in which Gestalt therapists can enhance awareness. One method is to invite clients to explore how they experience emotions, bodily sensations, thoughts, behaviors, and contact with others and their environment (Joyce & Sills, 2018). Also, Gestalt therapy posits that sensation is the entry point of awareness, but that sensation may be outside of the person's awareness based on contact boundaries. Slow and intentional invitations to experience embodied sensation with immediacy promote awareness. Through a mix of embodied reflections, relational engagements, and experiments, clients increase awareness holistically and move toward wholeness. Gestalt sandtray is an expressive method geared to increasing awareness.

Gestalt Sandtray

Expressive modalities, including sandtray, are methods for increasing awareness of sensations, emotions, and thoughts (Malchiodi, 2023). Because Gestalt therapy identifies sensation as the starting point for awareness, the multi-sensory, mind-body aspect of sandtray therapy is a natural match. Applying sandtray through a Gestalt lens provides a medium to create a symbolic representation of the field (i.e., field theory).



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Drawing from field theory, one can conceptualize the sand as the ground and the scene as the figure (Pernet & Caplin, 2020). As the builder processes their tray, different symbols become 'figural' (the subject with the most focus) in the tray. Directive or targeted trays identify something already figural, such as "create a tray about your grief." Non-directive or spontaneous trays allow the figure to form without direction from the therapist. Both approaches are valuable depending on the client's immediate needs. Regardless of how the tray originates, the therapist follows the flow of energy, staying with the figure of attention until the energy flows to another figure. While the symbols are often the first figures of interest for the client, anything can become figural during sandtray facilitation, including emotions, somatic experiences, thoughts, and narratives.

As awareness builds, incorporating experiments broadens and deepens figural awareness. Creative experiments include but are not limited to giving symbols a voice, having symbols 'talk' to or with one another, using repetition and exaggeration, and becoming and embodying the symbols. Experiments are spontaneous, not scripted or stepwise. As such, there are unlimited options based on the emergent experience. The case illustration below elaborates on these principles.

Case Illustration

The following case example illustrates the use of the embodied process to facilitate sandtray therapy. The image (below) is a recreation used with the builder's consent. The builder was familiar with Gestalt therapy, and the tray was created as a demo at a Gestalt Sandtray workshop with the author. The builder also confirmed the accuracy of the process and reflected on her experience.

The builder created the tray using an open, non-directive prompt to "build a world in the sand using as few or as many items" as she would like. In the tray, the client placed a shell holding a pearl of wisdom at the bottom, a sun (which she identified as rising) on the left, an amethyst-adorned tree at the top, and a black symbol holding a gold pearl on the right.

Gestalt principles: Non-directive trays create space for any figure from the ground (field theory) to emerge.

POST: I was familiar with the builder, but this was the first tray she created with me; therefore, I wanted the figure to emerge spontaneously rather than guide the client or dictate the figure of interest. I was aware that the builder was amidst a family emergency but did not want to assume the emergency was figural for the builder.

Builder post-process: I felt very comfortable building the tray and felt very comfortable being witnessed by you. I felt regulated, although I was a little nervous. I thought for sure it would just be something very superficial.



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Once the tray was completed, I said to the builder, "Before you tell me about your tray, I'm curious how it feels to look at the tray (gesturing to the body)." I observed the builder's somatic and physiological reactions as she looked at the tray. I noticed she held her breath, then stated, "I'm surprised what's coming up because I have worked on this, and I didn't think there was this much emotion." I reflected, "It feels surprising and even takes your breath away;" "Yes," the builder confirmed, and I responded, "I'm curious if you can stay with whatever emotion is coming up for you." She nodded and was silent for a few seconds then, after a slow, deep breath, began to tell me about the tray.

Gestalt principles: Following the embodied presence process, I typically begin sandtray facilitation by asking the builder to "take in" their tray. This process connects the builder to the tray and invites somatic and emotional awareness before clients move into the tray's narrative.

POST: I immediately sensed the heaviness of the scene and the builder's somatic reaction and experienced somatic resonance (tight, heaviness in my chest). Although I suspected the scene was related to her family emergency, my focus was to note and follow the energy of her somatic and non-verbal cues.

Builder post-process: I started relatively calm, but I noticed my breath got a little shorter, and my heart pounded a little more when we started the process. The fact that we processed in front of the group was figural for me, and I wanted to focus on the process. I tried to stay in my head because people were watching.



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In the initial discussion of the tray, the builder shared that the tray represented her development and coming into her own. She also mentioned her primary attachment figures with little detail in the story. As she introduced her tray, I noticed that she repeatedly touched the tree, and I reflected, "I notice you touching the tree" (*external data statement*). The builder said, "Yeah, I'm thinking about how the tree has shown up in my trays before to represent my grandmother. I have never identified with the tree before, but now I feel like *I am the tree*." I reflected, "You're standing taller as you tell me that" (*external data statement*), to which she responded with a smile and a gentle nod, "Yeah, I'm really proud of myself." I noted the smile and said, "I'm noticing in myself how it feels to be proud" (*internal data statement*) and mirrored her smile and posture. She looked at me with moisture in her eyes, smiled, then returned her gaze to the tray.

Gestalt principles: A combination of internal and external data statements invites the builder to make contact with their internal experiences and deepens awareness of the figure and contact with the builder's experience.

POST: The tree is the most figural symbol at this moment. I still sensed that the emerging figure was related to the family emergency. I noticed an intense curiosity about the tree emerge in me and played internally with the idea of offering an experiment; however, the figure was still unclear, so I did not offer an experiment.

Builder post-process: In talking about my grandmother, I always get emotional; I still miss her. I thought the tray would continue to honor my grandmother's role in my life. I love it when she shows up in my trays. I was okay with that part. I loved making contact with the wisdom that my grandmother poured into me and seeing that I had transformed into the tree!

After some silence, the builder said, "And now, I'm noticing the amethyst on this tree, which is my birthstone and my grandmother's favorite stone." I breathed deeply and replied, "You're the branches, and she's the roots." Then, I noticed moisture in her eyes, which I reflected, "I notice your eyes are wet" (*external data statement*). The client shed tears as she discussed her grandmother's influence in her life, how she continues to feel very connected to her teachings "dichos," and how she is "keeping her ancestor's legacy alive." When she looked up and made eye contact with me, I took a slow, deep breath, which the client mirrored.

Gestalt principles: Presence, silence, and being with allow the builder to stay with and integrate their awareness.

POST: I was aware of the client's emotion and the resonance it created in me. Like the builder, grief is one of my central themes (POTT). The feeling resonated with my experience of grief after my grandmother's death. My thoughts briefly floated to my grandmother and her love, which brought a sense of regulation and warmth across my body. I was aware of love and compassion for myself—and the builder. My inhale was somehow both intentional and unconscious to ground myself back in the here-and-now experience with the builder.



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Builder post-process: I realized that now I provide guidance to my family, continue the legacy, and carry the wisdom of my ancestors. I almost lost it (which was unexpected), especially when we both had water in our eyes. I broke contact with your eyes to avoid my intense feelings.

I noticed that the builder was still emotionally connected to her tray. I refrained from using words to avoid breaking her contact with her tray.

Gestalt principles: Words and questions can disrupt the awareness process. Longer pauses increase the chances that the builder is withdrawing from the experience in their own time.

POST: I am comfortable in silence and take the time to check in with my own body, which I experienced as regulated.

Builder post-process: I noticed I could not hold eye contact for an extended period. I definitely felt very seen in the process, which is important because I have struggled to make contact with my needs because, culturally, they do not matter.

When the builder's energy shifted back, and she appeared to center herself, I said, "I notice you didn't say anything about this symbol (gesturing to the black symbol with the gold pearl)." She stated she was unsure why she placed the item in the tray, but it stood out to her. I noted that as she spoke, she held her hands together with one hand on the other, palms facing upward. I also noticed that she was subtly rocking her hands from side to side. I said, "I notice your hands (gesture mirrored). I'm curious if we can play with this movement a little" (*invitation to experiment*). I slightly exaggerate the movement with my cupped hands. She mirrored the movement with me, and we silently moved this way for some time. She broke the silence by nodding and said, "I didn't even realize it, but this (black symbol) is absolutely my mother (who was hospitalized at the time).

Gestalt principles: There are many reasons to apply experiments. Experiments are not outcome-based, and the facilitator must be careful not to possess an agenda about the experience. In this case, the purpose of the experiment was to deepen the builder's awareness of the gesture and movement through exaggeration while sharpening the figure (the black symbol with the gold pearl).

POST: Mirroring the builder's movement allowed me to "try on" and tune into her experience. The movement piqued my curiosity.

Builder post-process: When you brought my attention to the symbol, I wasn't sure why I placed it in the tray. I was nervous and curious again. When you mentioned my hands, it made me nervous. I was unaware of my movements until you experimented with me, but once I "tried on" the movement, I felt more relaxed and curious about why I made that gesture. After that, I knew it was about my mother.

The builder shared that her mother had dementia and spent time with her in the hospital the day before. She noted that during the visit, her mother had a brief "period of lucidity," and the pair shared a healing moment. I noticed her shoulders were slightly lifted toward her ears and her breathing shallowed. In response, I noticed a shift in my body (tightness in my chest, eyes



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burning, shallowed breathing) and placed my hand over my heart with a deep inhale. The builder mirrored my movement, and after a few inhales, her shoulders dropped, and her breathing evened.

Gestalt principles: The builder's posture indicates a possible contact boundary or contact interruption.

POST: I experienced the builder's energy as heavy and frozen. Although I recognized the builder was experiencing a contact boundary or contact interruption, I did not interpret or assume why this was happening. Instead, I used my body and breath for co-regulation.

Builder post-process: I felt a bit overwhelmed and slightly dysregulated when I realized my mom showed up in the tray because she usually doesn't show up in any of my trays.

After she regulated, I noticed she was stroking the item she identified as her mother. I asked if she wanted to say anything to her mother or anything the item needed to say to the builder (*invitation for dialogue*). She rocked her hands again and said, "No, I'm just thinking about the healing experience I just had with my mother." I mirrored her movements and held the silence. Finally, the builder said, "I am who I am because of her;" I repeated, "You are who you are because of her." I noticed the client was humming and invited her to sing the song out loud if it felt right. The client laughed and said, "Oh no, you don't want to hear my singing. Plus, she didn't speak English." Hearing her contact boundary, I said, "That's okay. You can also sing the song inside your head like you remember her singing it. It's not important that I hear."

Gestalt principles: Experiments increase awareness for clients but also increase awareness about the client's experience and needs. Declined experiments can happen for multiple reasons, including contact boundaries, the need for organismic self-regulation, interruptions in contact, timing, misattunement to needs, or tending to a figure that is not of interest to the client. In this case, a combination of those factors likely occurred.

POST: Seeing the builder make contact with the symbol again sparked my curiosity about deepening her awareness through dialogue. The initial invitation to experiment was met with a contact boundary, so I focused on her movements to reattune to her experience.

Builder post-process: I am aware that my contact boundary is to deflect with humor, and that is what I did when you brought the humming to my attention. I was able to make contact with the part I have tried to deny: that my mom has positively influenced me.

The builder smiled, took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and rocked slowly and hummed. Then, after some time passed, she opened her eyes and said, "Thank you. I needed this."

Builder final reflections: I am both surprised and pleased with that tray. I always saw my grandmother as the one who provided the most guidance. However, this tray also showed me the influence of my mother, who, despite our tumultuous relationship, has been very influential in who I have become.

As the case study illustrates, therapeutic use of self and awareness of the POST was active throughout the process. As the sandtray facilitator, I tracked multiple levels of data concurrently



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and followed the builder's energy with a spirit of curiosity, and slowly built awareness. I was aware of the builder's flow of energy and contact boundaries, relationship, and response to her tray and symbols, her somatic data, her organismic regulation, and her narrative. At the same time, I was also aware of my somatic responses, regulation level, and focused presence; the relational energy between the builder and me; and the energy contained within the tray. The embodied process, combined with my intense curiosity about the builder's experience, facilitated embodied awareness and growth.

Conclusion

Gestalt sandtray therapy is a dynamic, relational approach emphasizing embodiment, curiosity, and awareness. The basic principles contained within Gestalt therapy provide a theoretical framework for integrating the POST and therapeutic use of self, which align with the sand tray therapy competencies (Hartwig et al., 2023). From a Gestalt perspective, POST work deepens when the clinician adopts an embodied perspective to experience the therapeutic process. As a result of the embodied process, Gestalt sandtray therapists experience a co-created relational field with relational embodiment that increases awareness and broadens the here-and-now experience unfolding in the tray.

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