HELPING ABUSED AND TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN

BY ELIANA GIL

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Reviewed by
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For over the past thirty years, Eliana Gil has devoted her entire professional practice to the prevention and treatment of child abuse. This, her latest book, provides a masterful synthesis of the knowledge she has acquired during this time from her theoretical study and clinical practice. The structure of this volume reflects this same two-fold emphasis. Part I presents the overall context, research, guidelines and theoretical principles in achieving an integrated approach to the assessment and treatment of traumatizing child abuse. Part II provides four extended case studies demonstrating the flexible application of these same principles and guidelines to actual clinical situations.

The first half of this book expertly articulates the need to address the multilayered dimensions of a child’s overall development and functioning in the assessment (Chapter 2) and treatment (Chapter...
of trauma while providing numerous current references supportive of such an approach. Here Dr. Gil makes a convincing case for the inclusion of both expressive therapies, namely art, play and sand therapy (Chapter 4) along with more directive, cognitive-behavioral techniques (Chapter 5) in working with this fragile population. Attention to the overarching family structure throughout this process and the suggested use of family play therapy is also discussed (Chapter 6). In doing so, the author delineates the contribution each modality makes to the overall therapeutic effort. Of particular interest to this sandplay therapist is Gil’s emphasis through clinical example on “sand therapy” as an especially effective and essential therapeutic tool in the play therapist’s expressive therapies arsenal.

In promoting the need of an integrated model for engaging in this demanding work, Gil emphasizes that such an approach must be flexible and sensitive to the unique needs of each, individual client. Age, gender, cognitive level of development and emotional resiliency are pertinent to understanding the flow and movement of progress in therapy. The duration and frequency of the identified abuse as well as the gender and relationship of the perpetrator to the survivor are additional factors that also must be considered. While based in current research, Gil’s theoretical discussion of this model is amply illustrated by the inclusion of relevant case examples, elaborating on the points under discussion.

It is however in the extended application and explication of this integrative approach provided in the second half of the book where Dr. Gil is most engaging. The reader enters personally into the therapeutic container along with therapist and client and clearly comes to understand both the challenge and necessity of such a comprehensive approach for effective treatment. The author presents a most realistic picture of the interplay between progress and set-backs inherent in such work while always maintaining a positive and optimistic perspective on the potential for healing innate within even the youngest of psyches. The four case studies included in this part of the text represent a variety of different clients, presentation issues and types of abuse with a discussion of how the suggested integrative model was essential in addressing the unique requirements of each individual case.

As one who is especially committed to the use of sandplay therapy, its development and appropriate application in various clinical situations, this reviewer was interested in Dr. Gil’s discussion and incorporation of the sand as an example of the expressive therapies in her model along with art and play therapy. Refraining from adopting
the more theoretically based and identifying terminology of either 
“sandplay” (Kalffian/Jungian) or “sandtray” therapy throughout her 
presentation, the author nonetheless strongly promotes the use of 
“sand therapy” by appropriately trained professionals in her approach. 
She speaks convincingly of its effectiveness particularly with those chil-
dren who are less verbally inclined and/or exhibit evidence of earlier 
levels of cognitive development. It was most striking to this reader how 
prominent a place “sand therapy” actually played in the therapeutic 
work of each child described in this part of the book, especially the case 
of “Jessica” (Chapter 10). In addition to the spontaneous construc-
tion of sand pictures in a sand tray with which sandplay therapists are 
readily familiar, Gil expands the utility of one’s miniature collection in 
the therapeutic enterprise. She suggests and describes the use of mini-
tures in the construction of family genograms as part of the assessment 
process as well as in other forms of symbolic play and strategies. 

In the Epilogue of this volume, Eliana Gil articulates in her own 
self-effacing style what trained sandplay therapists have come to know 
and experience in the course of their work. She states:

I don't see myself as an expert with all the answers. Instead I see 
myself as an explorer who has learned to identify important guide-
posts as I travel...my greatest responsibilities are to keep trying to 
create a safe environment, to be patient, to hear what is not spoken 
out loud, to see what is not shown obviously,...and to trust...

One could not ask for a more accurate statement of the attitude 
necessary to the effective sandplay therapist. It is only hoped that 
in future editions of this significant and important work, approp-
rate updating of references to contacting ISST/STA, its membership 
and resources for training are addressed. Likewise a brief theoretical 
discussion of the delineation between sandplay and sand tray therapy 
would also be helpful, although perhaps not essential for those practi-
tioners being introduced to the use of sand in therapeutic work. 

Ultimately, however, whether one is a newly “minted” profes-
sional just becoming involved in this demanding aspect of clinical 
practice or a seasoned practitioner profoundly familiar with the assess-
ment and treatment of trauma in children, this book will be most 
welcome. Its extensive grounding in current research, sound theory 
and years of clinical practice by a recognized “explorer” in this field 
make it an indispensable resource for graduate training programs or 
one’s own ongoing professional development. 