

1<sup>st</sup> International Conference of SAARC Psychiatric Federation  
Hotel Mughal Sheraton  
Agra, India  
2<sup>nd</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> December, 2005

PERBI

29919

**PLAY THERAPY WITH CHILDREN SURVIVORS OF TSUNAMI:  
MALAYSIA EXPERIENCE**

Lee Siew Siew & See Ching Mey  
School Of Educational Studies  
University Science Malaysia  
&  
Penang Association of Counseling and Psychology (PACP)

**INTRODUCTION**

Play is the most complete form of self-expression developed by the human organism (Landreth, 1991). Play is a child's medium for expression. Play provides a non-threatening and comfortable environment for children to express their unpleasant thoughts and feelings that might become overwhelming. In play, children are given the opportunity to play out feelings and problems so they become more manageable (Axline, 1969). Through play, the child reestablishes some sense of control in his life. According to Landreth (1991), as the child begins to feel more control over his life through the active process of play, he begins to feel more secure in his life. This feeling of control is essential for emotional development and positive mental health.

The tsunami disaster is a threatening and traumatizing experience for children survivors. According to Terr (mentioned in Webb, 2001), trauma does not ordinarily get 'better' by itself. It burrows down further and further under the children's defenses and coping strategies. Play therapy is a recommended therapeutic medium because play is the children's natural means of expression. Play enables the children to distance from the traumatic events through the use

of symbolic materials (Webb, 2001). By acting out traumatic experience or situation, and by returning to that happening again and again through play, the children move toward an inner resolution and is better able to cope with or adjust to those experiences outside play (Landreth, 2001). In Malaysia, we use play therapy as it provides a safe and non-threatening environment for the children survivors of tsunami to express their feelings and to establish sense of control or security in their live.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study is to explore the use of play therapy for children survivors of tsunami. The aim is to provide the child a safe environment to play out his traumatic experience, bring his feelings to the surface of awareness and help the child to move toward an inner resolution. In this study, two children survivors who were directly involved in the disaster were selected but only one case is elaborated in this study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Approach**

This is an in-depth description of a case study of a child survivor of tsunami who underwent the play therapy. The case study used child-centered play therapy. This approach is based on the philosophical belief that children have the capacity within them to grow, develop and solve their problems when they experience an environment of safety and trust. The counselor will not direct the therapeutic process, but facilitate the process. The counselor trusts the inner person of the children. Play therapy is a journey of self-exploration and self-discovery (Landreth, 2001).



Sandplay is the main play therapy technique that is used in the case study. Sandplay is a wonderful way of exploring the inner world. A lot of transformations can happen as the figures are arranged in relation to each other (Pearson & Nolan, 1995). Sandplay is a tool, which not only facilitates therapy but help the healing and growth process (Klaff, 1980). In order to create a non-threatening environment for the children survivors of tsunami, sand and water were only provided for the last two sessions. Drawing paper was used for the first four sessions to indicate the boundaries of the sand tray. According to Pearson and Wilson (2001), the physical dimensions of a sand tray, which are limited and containing, has the effect of helping the children focus and then reflect their inner vision, thoughts, feelings and unfinished business. The sand tray is a means of assessment and therapy in its own right (West, 1996). The counselor also used role-play technique from Gestalt Therapy to help the child release his inner emotions.

### **Subject**

A Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms Screening was held seven months after the disaster, to an 8 years old male child call Mhd (not his real name). He still has some post-traumatic symptoms such as chest pain; difficulty in breathing; insomnia; feelings of fear, anger and insecurity; and lack interest in joyful activities.

Mhd was at home when the disaster happened. He was swept by the wave twice and nearly died. His mother managed to rescue him from the wave. His house was partly damaged in the disaster. After the disaster, Mhd did not dare to go near the beach. He became very sensitive to noise. Any loud noise would trigger his thought that tsunami is coming again. He had difficulty sleeping well and was easily awaken.

### **Materials**

The materials used in this study are drawing papers, colour pencils and some categories of toys such as domestics animals, wild animals, sea creatures,

insects, vehicles, human figures, cartoon figures, dinosaurs, trees, stones, sea shell, corals, doctor's kits, fences, toy soldiers and guns, plastic dishes, boats, furniture, and toy houses. These are toys that most likely represent the child's experience in tsunami. Drawing papers were available for the first four sessions. Sand tray and water were prepared for the last two sessions.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **Session One**

The first session was held seven months after the tsunami. The session was held in an administrator's office in the school of the child. The counselor arranged all the toys according to their categories before inviting the child for the play therapy session. When he came in, he was excited with the toys in the room. He went near the toys and touched some of the figures. The counselor explained to him the process of play therapy and the time allocated for him. He was given a drawing paper to create his own scene by putting the toys on the paper. The paper is the boundary of his symbolic play.

The child drew a road at the centre of the paper and patiently coloured it black (Appendix 1, Picture 1a). After he had finished drawing, he was invited to choose the toys to put on his drawing. Firstly, he chose many big size animals like dinosaur, snakes, lizard, and elephant. He placed all the animals in the same direction, which was left side. Then, he put some insects outside the road but they also faced the same direction. Later on, he chose seven human figures that represented his family members. They were all facing the same direction. Lastly, he put a house on the right side of the paper. He told the counselor that they were trying to run to a safe place in order to escape from the wave of tsunami. He showed the counselor that he was the soldier figure that was running ahead (Appendix 1, Picture 1b). They were safe and no one was killed in the disaster except the house was damaged.



## **Session Two**

In the second session, the child initiated the play without getting further instruction from the counselor. He drew an "L" shape road on a drawing paper and colored it black again (Appendix 1, Picture 2a). After finishing the drawing, he picked up some animals and human figures and put them on the paper. Then, he added some trees along the road. He repeated what he did in the first session. All the figures (animals and humans) were on the direction of running to a safe place to escape from the wave (Appendix 1, Picture 2b).

Since the picture looked very crowded, the counselor offered him an extra paper to extend his picture. He agreed and quickly drew another "L" shape road and colored it black. Then, he joined 'the roads' together (Appendix 1, Picture 2c). He added more human and animal figures along the road. They were escaping from the wave. He shifted a few figures that represented his family members to the front of the road to show that they were running away very fast (Appendix 1, Picture 2d). After completing the picture, the counselor asked him when they were going to stop running. He said they had already stopped. He pointed to a very small figure (with both hands raised as a signal to stop running) standing at the end of the road. He said the man asked them to stop running because they were safe (Appendix 1, Picture 2e). No one was killed in the disaster. When the counselor asked him "Are you in the picture?" He told her that the "hero" figure that was running ahead was he. Before the end of the session, the counselor got the permission from the child to take a photo of his picture.

## **Session Three**

In the third session, the child drew a hill in the middle of the paper. Firstly, he chose seven army figures with gun and put them on the hill (He has seven family members). Then, he added a boat and some sea creatures like dolphin, turtle, fishes, shark, lobster around the foot of the hill. He also put a scale outside, at the top right hand corner of the paper. Lastly, he put a house (the same house that was damaged in the first session) with a stethoscope below the scale. He said that the house was "under treatment". He said he was at the top of the hill

(Appendix 1, Picture 3). He was safe but all the sea creatures died because of tsunami. He looked calm throughout the whole process.

#### **Session Four**

In the fourth session, the child drew a sea that covered the upper half of the drawing paper. He colored the sea with ocean blue. Then, he chose five human figures that represented him, his mother, father and two brothers. Their backs were facing the sea. He said that they were trying to escape from the tsunami wave. Unfortunately, they were all killed in the disaster except him. He said he managed to escape from the wave because he was in front (Appendix 1, Picture 4).

Suddenly, he said, "I am scared". The expression on his face indeed indicated fear. The counselor reflected, "You're scared". He said, "Yes". The counselor asked him to choose a toy that can symbolize his fear. He chose an army figure (that was trying to take out the gun from his pocket) as the symbol of fear. The counselor invited him to talk about the "fear". He said, "I'm scared of you, I'm scared and sad". The counselor reflected, "You are scared and sad". He said, "I'm scared of tsunami". The counselor invited him to choose a figure that symbolized "tsunami wave". He chose a fireman figure (that was bringing a water hose) as a symbol of wave. Then, he said, "I'm angry". The counselor used role play to help the child expressing his anger. He talked to the fireman figure and said, "I'm angry". His facial expression showed anger. But, he couldn't express himself further. The counselor quickly rolled some newspaper to make a bat for him to beat on a plastic chair in order to release his anger. He beat the chair a few times and seemed relief after the process.

A first interview session was held (after the fourth session) with the child's mother. His mother said that she could see that her son was getting better now and emotionally more stable. He slept well and was able to play with his neighbours outside his house that he had always done before tsunami.



## **Session Five**

Sand tray and water were provided in this session. Before the play process, the counselor asked the child to choose either the sand tray or the drawing paper. The child chose the sand tray as his play medium. The counselor explained to him that the blue colour on the tray indicates the sky or the ocean. He was asked to feel the texture of the sand before he played. He was excited and started to push all the sand to the side. He said he was going to form a beach and the blank space was a sea. After a short while, he pushed all the sand to cover up the sea. Then, he used both hands to stroke the sand and pushed the sand all around the sand tray (Appendix 1, Picture 5a). He looked liked he enjoyed the process (the process seemed very nurturing). He spent about 25 minutes just playing with the sand. When he started to change his movement by making some holes in the sand tray, the counselor reflected that he looked like he was enjoying the process and he replied that he was. He said he was making the "wave". Then, he dug six holes in the sand. He explained to the counselor that those were his father's footprints at the beach. He said his father was searching for clams at the beach (Appendix 1, Picture 5b).

## **Session Six**

The child repeated the same process in the sixth session. He spent about 20 minutes playing with the sand. After that, he formed a monster's footprint on the sand tray. The footprint was very big and covered around 90 percent of the tray (Appendix 1, Picture 6a). Then, he put a Mickey Mouse holding a camera beside the footprint. He said that Mickey Mouse was taking photos of the footprint. He added other sea creatures and wild animals like stingray, sharks, dolphin, crocodile and octopus around the footprint. He also added a few big human figures around it. When the counselor asked him whether he was in the picture, he said he was not involved. Lastly, he put three different sizes of guns and pistols near Mickey Mouse. He said that this is for the purpose of shooting the monster (Appendix 1, Picture 6b). When the counselor checked on how he was feeling, he said "brave". The counselor reflected, "You are brave". He said, "Yes". After finishing the process, he told the counselor that he was tired.

The counselor had a second session of short interview with the child's father after the sixth session. His father said that his son was better. There was no more emotional disturbance and no more nightmares. He did not display or express any more fear. He could socialize with his friends and seem to enjoy his daily activities with his friends.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this section, we will focus on the process of the sessions and the overall changes in the play of the child. We try to avoid fixed interpretation of the child's play because we believed that each symbol can have different meanings and we respect the child's subjective meaning in the play.

According to Landreth (2001), a theme is the recurrence of certain events or topics in the child's play, either within a play experience or across several play experiences or sessions. In the case study, the subject repeated the same theme "tsunami" for six sessions. He played out the scene of escaping from the tsunami wave for the first two sessions. In the third session, he took a view from a hill to see the damages from the disaster. In the fourth session, he played out a scene near the beach where he and his family were swept by the wave and died. In the fifth and sixth sessions, he used sand to form waves and he left footprints on the beach. The repetition shows that the disaster has left a significant impact on the child. It affected him physically, mentally and emotionally. Landreth (2001) also stated that emotional experiences and happenings that are important or have in some way significantly impacted children would often show up as repeated behavior in their play.

From the child's play, it is clear that he was moving into his inner world. Through out the process, we can see that he was moving nearer to the scene. In the first and second sessions, he was only on the road and quite far from the sea. In the fourth session, he was very near to the sea. In the fifth and sixth sessions, he



was brave enough to touch the sand and worked with the wave. He was able to play through his trauma by using the sand. This implies that he has managed to gain control and feel less fearful towards his experience. The process seems very comforting and nurturing. According to Pearson and Nolan (1995), when the client uses his hands to shape the sand, energy can be released through the moving hands. For the child, being connected to the sensations of his hands means he has returned to the body form.

In the process of sandplay, the healing took place. The perception of the child about tsunami changed. We can see from the first picture that tsunami shifted the emotion in the child. A lot of animals and people tried to escape from tsunami. They were running in terror. However, the child's fear gradually reduced in the second session when he said they don't have to run anymore because they were safe. He put a stop on the running process by using a small figure. We can say that he resolved his fear in the second session. When the feeling of fear diminished, the healing started in the third session. In this session, the child put a house with a stethoscope. This implies that he was trying to heal the "wound" from the trauma. After this process, the child dealt with the feelings of pain, sadness and anger. He was afraid he might lose his family in the next tsunami disaster should it happen again. He was angry at the tsunami that had brought so much of damages and destruction. Because the environment is safe enough for him to be in touch with all these feelings, there was a transformation. This transformation was seen in his play in the last two sessions. He started to touch the sand gently and comfortably for about 20 minutes in two different sessions. He used his hands to build the tsunami wave with the sand. At the last session, he disclosed the feeling of bravely where he wanted to shoot the monster (tsunami). He also showed that the community would be ready if the tsunami happens again. The child has found a new source of strength to face his life. According to West (1996), the child's choice is often influenced by the resurgence of unresolved feelings, memories and events that have been repressed into the unconscious mind. As these precipitants are not in the

conscious awareness, they cannot be deliberately played out or discussed. However, they can be ventilated symbolically.

Besides that, from the child's sand picture, we can see that he has gradually integrated his experiences. In the last session, he built a big monster's footprints in the sand. This implies that unconsciously he is saying that the tsunami left a very strong impact in his life. But now, tsunami is past. The community has started their daily career. This is shown in the sand picture in the fifth session where he built his father's footprints on the beach and saying that his father was searching for clams. Furthermore, in the sixth session, he showed that many people went near the big monster's footprint and took photos. Although they were still scared, they were prepared to shoot the monster. They were getting ready to face the reality of the life including him. From the child's play, we can see that he is giving a meaningful expression of his thoughts and feelings. According to Landreth (1991), a major function of a play is the changing of what may be unmanageable to manageable situations through symbolic representation.

## **CONCLUSION**

Sandplay technique is an effective tool to help children survivors of tsunami as it allows them to work through their unresolved traumatic experience and to gain a sense of control over their environment. Sandplay enables children to process pain and trauma in a non-threatening manner (Sweeney, 1997). According to O'Connor (2000), it is through play that children learn to recognize, label, understand and express emotions.

## **Acknowledgement**

The authors wish to acknowledge Leong Ming See, A. E. Margarita Malayapillay and Professor Saroja Krishnaswamy for their contribution in the paper.

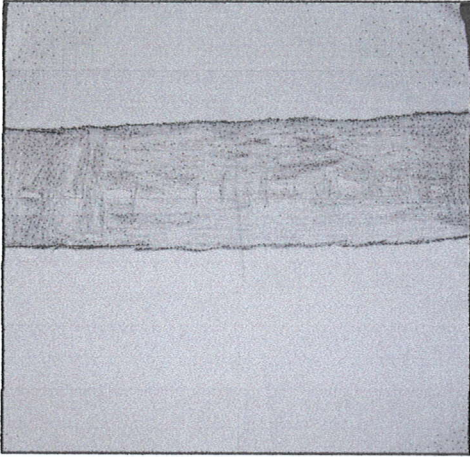


## References

- Axline, V (1969). *Play Therapy*. New York: Ballantine.
- Cattanach, Ann (2003). *Introduction To Play Therapy*. USA: Brunner-Routledge.
- Cattanach, Ann (1994). *Play Therapy: Where The sky Meets The Underworld*.  
London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Kalff, D (1980). *Sandplay: A Psychotherapeutic Approach To The Psyche*. USA:  
Sigo Press.
- Landreth, G (2001). *Innovations In Play Therapy: Issues, Process, And Special  
Populations*. USA: Brunner-Routledge.
- Landreth, G. (1991). *Play Therapy: The Art Of The Relationship*. Muncie, USA:  
Accelerated Development
- McMahon, L (2000). *The Handbook Of Play Therapy*. USA: Brunner-Routledge.
- O'Connor, K (2000). *The Play Therapy Primer*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Pearson, M & Nolan, P (1995). *Emotional Release For Children*. Australia:  
Australia Print Group.
- Pearson, M & Wilson, H (2001). *Sandplay And Symbol Work*. Australia: Shannon  
Books.
- Schafer, C & O'Connor, K (1983). *Handbook Of Play Therapy*. New York: John  
Wiley & Sons.
- Sweeney, D (1997). *Counseling Children Through The World Of Play*. USA: Wipf  
& Stock Publishers.
- Webb, N. (1999). *Play Therapy With Children In Crisis: Individual, Group, and  
Family treatment*. New York, London: The Guilford Press.
- Webb, N (2001) *Play Therapy With Traumatized Children: A Crisis Response*. In  
West, J (1996). *Child-Centered Play Therapy*. London: Arnold.

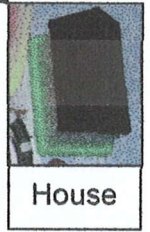
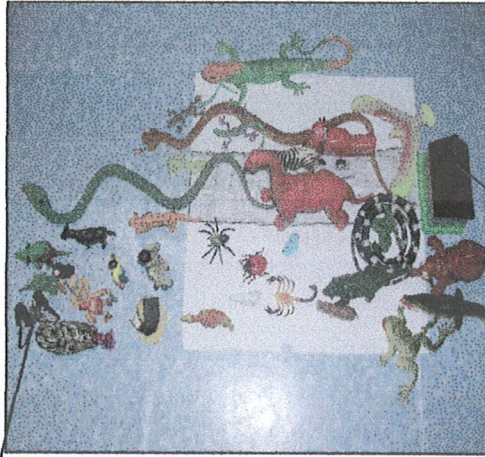
# APPENDIX 1

**Picture 1a**



A road drew by the child on a drawing paper.

**Picture 1b**



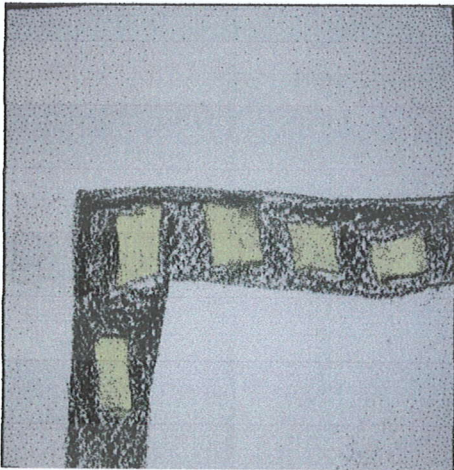
House



Soldier  
(The  
child)

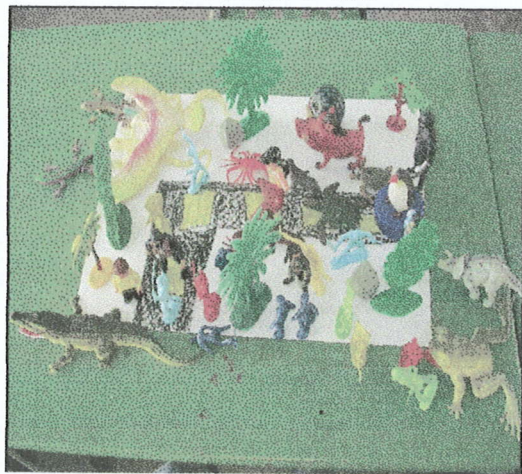
The child said that all the figures were running to the left to escape from the wave. No one was killed except the house was damaged (the child's house was partly damaged in the disaster). He said that he was the soldier that ran ahead.

**Picture 2a**



The child drew an "L" shape road on a drawing paper.

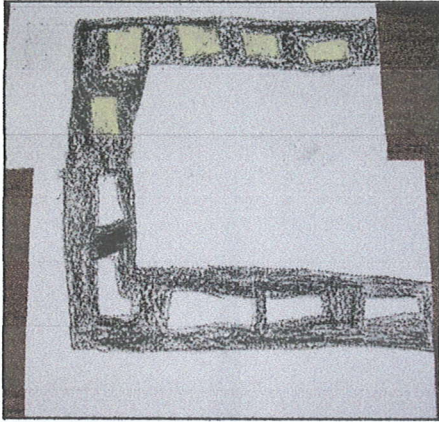
**Picture 2b**



The child repeated the same theme in this session. He said that all the figures were still running to escape from the wave. He said all of them were safe and no one was killed in the disaster.

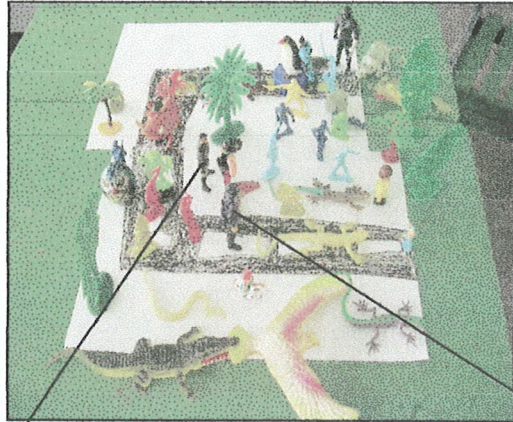


**Picture 2c**



Two drawings (roads) were joined together to form a longer road.

**Picture 2d**



The Child's Parent

In this session, the child also said that he was a hero that ran in front of everyone. His parents were just beside him. He said that everyone was safe.



Hero (The child)

**Picture 2e**



The small figure

The child said that everyone stop running because a small figure blocked their way at the end of the road. The figure asked them to stop running because they are safe.

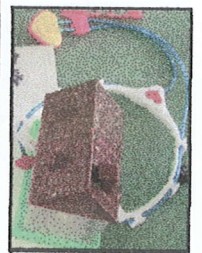


Soldier (the child)

**Picture 3**



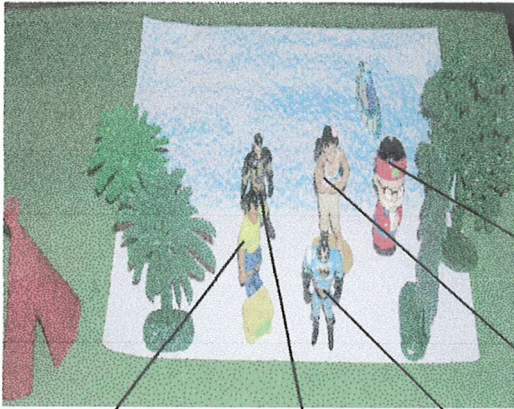
The child said that he was the soldier that stand at the top of the hill with six other soldiers. He said that they were safe but all the sea creatures died. He also said that the house was "under treatment".



A house under treatment



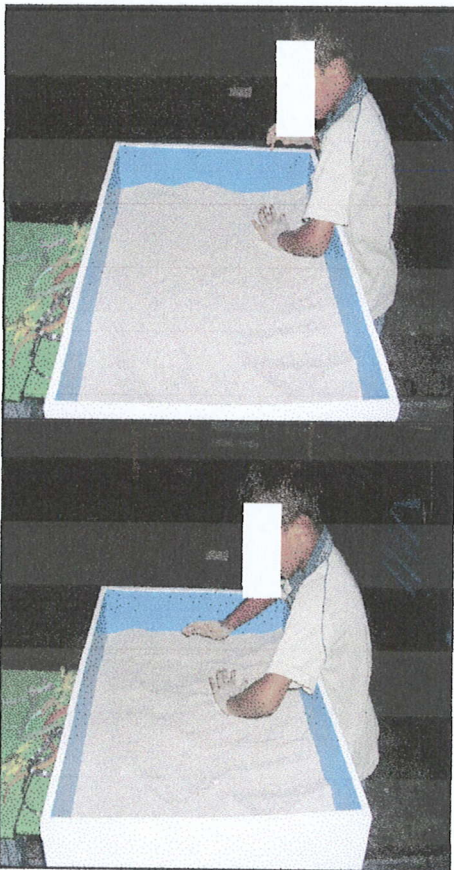
**Picture 4**



The child said that his family members tried to escape from the wave. Unfortunately they were all killed in the disaster except him. He said he managed to escape from the wave because he was in front. The child showed mixed emotions such as fear, sadness and anger in this session. The counselor used role play technique to help him release his emotions.

His Brother    His Father    The child    His Mother    His Brother

**Picture 5a**



The child spent about 25 minutes just playing with the sand. The process seemed very nurturing.

**Picture 5b**



He dug six holes in the sand. He said that those were his father's footprints. According to him, his father was searching for the clams at the beach.

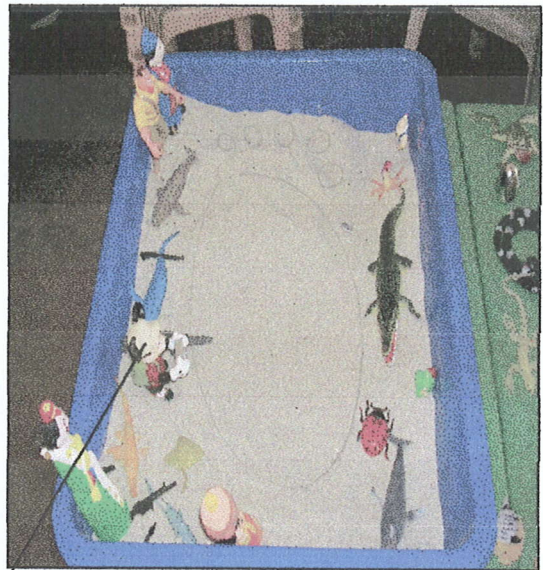


Picture 6a



The child spent about 20 minutes playing with the sand. Then, he formed a monster's footprint on the sand tray.

Picture 6b



The child said that all the creatures and human beings were watching the monster's footprint. Mickey Mouse was taking photos of the footprint. The human beings have prepared some guns to shoot the monster (tsunami) in case the monster reappear.



Mickey Mouse was taking photo