



TRINITY WESTERN UNIVERSITY

Trinity Western University

MCS-MFT GRADUATE PROGRAM

Graduate Course Syllabus

Course Number: CMFT 685

Course Name: Child and Family Therapy
through Sand Tray

Semester and Year: Summer 2026

Instructor: Patricia Felzien, C.C.C., R.C.C., MA CPSY

Co-Instructor: Beth Scholes, MA, RCC

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Office Hours: Please email instructor for appointments

Co-requisites: N/A

Pre-requisites: CMFT 664: Ethics; CMFT 552: Theories; CMFT 553: Advanced Skills

Semester Hours: 3

Semester Dates: 19 June to 30 August

On Campus Class Dates & Times: Monday, 22 June to Friday, 26 June [8:30 am to 4:30 pm]

Online Class: Day 5 only

We acknowledge that Trinity Western University, Langley campus is located on the traditional ancestral unceded territory of the Stó:lō people.

Course Description

This advanced experiential course examines Sand Tray Therapy as a flexible, integrative therapeutic approach grounded in trauma-informed, neurobiological, developmental, attachment, and relational frameworks. Students will expand their theoretical and practical understanding of how metaphor within the sand tray supports emotion regulation, attachment repair, right-brain-to-right-brain coregulation, and transformation across diverse client systems, including children, youth, parents, and families.

This course emphasizes applications in family therapy, parental involvement, and child-centered practice, guiding therapists to shift from a behavioral management lens toward a nervous system and relationship-based perspective. Through hands-on experiential learning, case conceptualization, triads, and group process, students will develop the ability to integrate expressive, somatic, and digital modalities to enhance attunement, safety, nervous system regulation, and connection within therapeutic relationships.

Emerging considerations in virtual play therapy and the ethical use of AI-assisted tools for clinical practice will be explored, with attention to how these technologies can extend accessibility, creativity, and co-regulation in online settings while maintaining therapeutic relational integrity.

Template approved by Senate December 9, 2025

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Identify and differentiate behavioral presentations underlying nervous system states of safety and threat.
2. Develop and apply attuned interventions that support regulation, connection, and relational repair in children, parents, and families.
3. Apply Sand Tray interventions with individual children, dyads (parent–child), and family systems.
4. Integrate trauma-informed, neurodevelopmental, and relational principles into intake, assessment, and treatment planning.
5. Deepen therapist self-awareness and skills through experiential process, reflective practice, and group learning.
6. Integrate concepts related to neurodiversity, typical neurobiology, anxiety, and related presenting concerns of the family.
7. Facilitate playful, systemic engagement of multiple family members during assessment, goal setting, and treatment planning.
8. Evaluate and apply parent-support strategies that enhance caregiver insight, regulation, and co-regulation capacities in the home environment.
9. Examine and ethically apply virtual play therapy adaptations and AI-informed tools to support clinical creativity, accessibility, and relational presence in digital environments.
10. Demonstrate supervised competence in utilizing sand tray tools for grounding, processing, assessment, and intake.

Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, the student should:

1. Analyze the purpose of emotion and identify the emotional roots underlying behaviour across developmental stages. (K, CC, ASL, MCC).
2. Explain the therapeutic properties of play and evaluate how play modalities support emotional processing. (CC, AEI, MCC).
3. Facilitate play-based therapeutic practices that support emotional processing for clients and promote therapist attunement and regulation. (CC, AEI, MCC, PT, SP, FI).
4. Identify and align clients with the expressive 'emotional playgrounds' most supportive of their regulation and healing, while developing insight into one's own therapeutic expressive preferences. (CC, IIW, MCC).

TWU Graduate Student Learning Outcomes Abbreviations: K = Knowledge and its Application; CC = Cognitive Complexity; IIW = Inter- and Intra-personal Wellness; AEI = Aesthetic Expression and Interpretation; SR = Social Responsibility and Global Engagement; SP = Spiritual Formation; L = Leadership. Full description of TWU Graduate Learning Outcomes available [here](#).

MFT Program Learning Outcomes Abbreviations: ASL = Apply systemic lens (Apply family systems theory and systemic thinking to practicing therapy with couples, families and individuals); MCC = Master clinical competencies (Master clinical competencies to provide therapy for diverse populations); FI = Faith Integration (Apply thoughtful faith-integrated perspectives to the practice of couple and family therapy); DA = Diversity Awareness (Promote understanding of diverse cultural and social components that impact the practice of counselling and therapy); PT = (Person of the Therapist) Establish ethically responsible practices and self-formation through the development of the person of the therapist.

Required Texts and Materials

1. Selected textbooks and podcasts (see below)
2. Access to sand tray materials (in-person or virtual equivalent)
3. Internet access for hybrid participation

Course Activities/Requirements

Pre-Reading Preparation and Report:

Students must complete readings and listening, and a reflective writing assignment 3 page reflection including: 1 page on De Little, 1 page on Siegel, and 1 page on podcasts.

Due: Friday before course start date (10%) June 19, 2026

1. Required Texts:
 - a. De Little, M. (2020). *Where words can't reach: Neuroscience and the Satir Model in the sand tray* (3rd ed.). Madeleine De Little.
 - b. Siegel, D. J. (2012). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (2nd ed.). The Guilford Press.
2. Lessons from the Playroom (host: Lisa Dion.)
 - a. Episodes 84, 133 and 191 Required
 - b. Plus 2 LFTP podcasts (not restricted to suggestions below). Available via Spotify, Synergetic Play Therapy or Lessons from the Playroom web libraries.

- Episode 197: “The Future of Digital Play Therapy” Continuation of Episode 84. Explores the future of virtual and digital play therapy.
- **Episode 191** : “Little Lessons Series: Addressing Hesitation, Aggressive Play, and Emotional Boundaries in Play Therapy”— Focuses on how to handle hesitation, aggressive play, and emotional boundaries in the therapy playroom.
- Episode 190: “When the Aggressor is You: Therapist Activation in the Playroom with Mili Shoemaker”— On therapist’s internal experience of aggression/activation.
- Episode 136: “3 Types of Relationships That Come into Play when Working with Parents/Caregivers”— Identifies and explores 3 different types of relationships that can be active in family and parent support work and the implications of these.
- **Episode 133** : “The Challenges of working with Parents and Caregivers” Conversation about working through the challenges and dilemmas of this aspect
- Episode 99: “Pre-Teens & Teens in Play Therapy”— Discusses how children in the pre-teen/teen transition show up in therapy, what changes for them (identity, social tasks, brain changes) and how to support them.
- Episode 93: “Separation Anxiety in Play Therapy”— Explores separation, transitions, and internal sense of safety.
- Episode 92: “Jackie Flynn: Embracing Online Play Therapy” Explores how to make online play therapy a more deeply connected experience.
- Episode 89: “Non-Directive vs. Directive Play Therapy” Explores the strengths and possibilities of each approach, and how each or both can be used effectively.
- Episode 85: “Understanding Left-Brain / Right-Brain Decision Making”— Explores brain/decision-making processes, which maps onto coregulation supporting the development of more complex cognitive/emotional skills.
- **Episodes 84** : “Wrapping our Minds Around Digital Play Therapy”— This touches on the digital realm, navigating screen time, social media, online interactions.
- Episode 77: “Emotional Age in Play Therapy”— Helps distinguish emotional maturity vs chronological age.

Daily Experiential & Triad Work (30%) **Due:** End of Day

Participation in guided exercises, case discussions, and role play.

1. Triads: Practice and debrief of experiential tools
2. Group work: with provided intake info for case study
 - Create a hypothesis for issue presented in case study:
 - Developmental stages, assessment, hypothesis for behaviour, and attachment/ polyvagal framework
 - Experiential practice - rotate through characters in the case study
 - i. Psychoeducation for client
 - ii. Practice
 - iii. Debrief

Final Project: Sand Tray Therapy Case Analysis (60%) Due: August 30, 2026

1. Purpose:

To demonstrate applied competency in Sand Tray Therapy through a structured therapeutic encounter, incorporating theoretical integration, treatment planning clinical observation, and reflective practice.
2. Project Description:

Students will facilitate one full Sand Tray session with a client (child, adolescent, or adult), documenting the process through photographs and observational notes. Using these materials, students will create a PowerPoint presentation that provides a clinically informed analysis of the client's internal world, therapeutic process, and change indicators in alignment with their theoretical orientation.
3. Required Components:
 - i. Client Context (1– 2 slides)
 - Developmental overview (age-appropriate considerations)
 - Relevant history (presenting concern, family/ social context)
 - Consideration of identity and cultural factors

- Resiliencies and family strengths
 - Therapist's intention and goals for the session re personal theoretical orientation and how sand tray fits
 - Assessments, Symptoms
 - Clear statement of session goal in context and meta-goal of therapy/ treatment plan
- ii. Sand Tray Images (3– 6 slides)
- Include:
- Initial tray image
 - Any changes or restructuring during session
 - Final tray
 - Each image should be accompanied by:
 - Therapist hypothesis with theoretical orientation language and client description (Themes rising to support/ shift hypothesis)
 - Rationale for therapist choices and observed shifts
 - Verbatim client statements (Metaphor description; Somatic sensations & Key interaction/ transformation conversations)
- iii. Process Assessment & Analysis (6– 8 slides)

Incorporate the following frameworks:

<u>Framework</u>	<u>What to Observe</u>
First-Order Change	Concrete behavioral or narrative corrections (symptom-focused shifts)
Second-Order Change	Meaningmaking, worldview transformation, identity restructuring
Neurobiology Lens	Neuroception of safety, physiological shifts, co-regulation moments
Somatic & Non -Verbal Cues	Posture, breathing, gestures, pacing, proximity to figures, voice tone
Symbolism & Thematic Patterns	Figure roles, spatial relationships, metaphors

(You may use arrows, symbols, or timeline organization to show shifts through the session.)

- iv. Therapist Reflection (2– 3 slides)
 - Countertransference awareness
 - Internal reactions and regulation strategies
 - Ethical and culturally-responsible decision-making
 - What you would do next (treatment implications)

- v. Conclusion & Integration (1– 2 slides)
 - Synthesize key insights
 - How theory guided practice
 - Limitations of the session

Note: APA 7th edition format required

Course Evaluation

Item	Learning Assessment Name	Course Learning Outcome	Weight %	Due Date (TBD)
Assignment 1	Pre-course Reflection	#1 K, CC, ASL, MCC	10	June 19, 2026
Assignment 2	Daily experiential participation & triad work	#3 CC, AEI, MCC, PT, SP, FI	30	At end of each class day
Assignment 3	Final Sand Tray therapy case Analysis	#4, #2 CC, IIW, MCC, AEI	60	August 30, 2026

General Assignment Formatting and Submission Requirements

- All submitted documents / written assignments must be saved in MSWord format (DOC or DOCX), **do not submit as PDF documents.**
- All assignments are submitted electronically on assigned due date into the appropriate Assignment Drop Box on Moodle. Turnitin and other checks will be used.
- Carefully follow the guidelines for each assignment.

- Written and formatted as a formal paper using APA style. The best website for APA is the publisher at <https://apastyle.apa.org/>. Moodle also has resources specifically regarding APA.
- Double spaced and typed using Times New Roman or Calibri 12-point font.
- Free of grammatical, spelling, typographical and other editorial errors.
- Arguments should be clearly, logically, and succinctly presented and adequately supported by the literature.
- Self-reflections should be thoughtful, intentional, and indicate a graduate-studies depth of interaction with material.
- All sources supporting your work must be cited in the body of the paper. To learn about the types of unintentional plagiarism see <https://www.scribbr.com/plagiarism/types-of-plagiarism/>
- The TWU Standard Grading System is used (see below).
- Please include your name & paper name in your “saved as” version: e.g.:“yourlastnameyour first initial_assignmentnumber” (if Sue Johnson was handing in a paper, it would look like this: JohnsonS_Genograpaper). If you have attachments, then number them in the same convention with attachment number to follow (looks like this JohnsonS_Genograpaper_Attachment1

Grading System

Letter Grade	Percentage	Grade Point
A +	97-100	4.30
A	93-96	4.00
A-	90-92	3.70
B +	87-89	3.30
B	83-86	3.00
B-	80-82	2.70
C +	77-79	2.30
C	73-76	2.00
C-	70-72	1.70
F	Below 70	0.00

Course Outline

Day 1: Sand Tray Therapy - Basics

- Theoretical underpinnings of sand tray, experiential practice
- Foundations of sand tray including metaphor, interpretation, history - review of 3 different practices
 - Attending vs investigation - person of the therapist in sand tray
 - Trauma informed practice
- **Experiential and Demo:** Safety game, vagal break, check-in game
- Case conceptualization and integration with chosen theoretical orientation
- **Group Work:** Triad experiential and debrief - Demo
 - Building safety and co-regulation in the sand tray

Day 2: Theory Foundations

- Overview of neuroscience and polyvagal theory in expressive therapies; Interpersonal Neurobiology review
- Attachment, co-regulation, and relationship building
- Developmental stages in child and family therapy
- Informed consent for sand tray therapy
- **Experiential and Demo:** Guided regulation and relational exercises
- **Group Activity:** Triad practice
 - Assessment and intake practice - identify goals, patterns and stages
 - Coping strategies and resource identification
 - Psychoeducation for clients and caregivers practice

Day 3: Sand Tray Therapy - Intakes and Families

- Integrating Day 1 and 2 learning into parental intakes, family sessions and caregiver sessions
 - Attunement and attending
- **Experiential and Demo:** caregivers and families
 - Perceptions and yearnings trays; family mapping; multiples safety game and marbles game
- Case conceptualization and integration with chosen theoretical orientation
- **Group Work:** Triad experiential and debrief - Demo
 - Perceptions and yearnings trays

Day 4: Triad Day

- Triad practice - 3 long triads
- Debrief
- Case studies by instructors
- Q and A with demos
- Setting up sand tray spaces
 - Figurines, storage, cleaning
 - Note taking and supervision

Day 5: Virtual Therapy (possible virtual day - Zoom)

- Incorporating digital tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Canva, Virtual Sandtray)
- Ethics of virtual therapy
- Physical sand tray done virtually
 - Safety and grounding virtually; integrating context and using found objects with sand tray theories
 - Use of technology - cameras
- Virtual parent support
- Case conceptualization and integration
- **Group Work:** Triad planning and role play

Virtual sand tray breakout rooms

Course Policies

Academic Integrity and Avoiding Plagiarism at TWU

One of the core values of Trinity Western University is the integration of academic excellence with high standards of personal, moral, and spiritual integrity. The University considers it a serious offence when an individual attempts to gain unearned academic credit. It is the student's responsibility to be informed about what constitutes academic misconduct. For details on this policy, go to the URL [[Academic Misconduct & Fraud](#)]. More information about identifying and avoiding plagiarism can be found in the presentations below.

- <https://prezi.com/view/Cesy!UF884GKYSCYbaoj/> (Prezi presentation)
- <http://bit.ly/1p00KX3> (Google Slide presentation offering more comprehensive information)

Use of Generative AI in this Course

TWU places a high value on academic integrity. Using an AI tool can shortcut the process of critical thinking, academic originality, and personal responsibility for content. The use of generative AI for any assignments in this course without securing prior permission will be considered academic misconduct.

As your instructor, I have designed the assignments of this course in ways that discourage the use of AI. Therefore, I will assume that should you use an AI tool to complete the assignments, you are deliberately choosing to shortcut the learning process. I consider this to be misconduct and will process such incidents in accordance with TWU's policy and procedures.

Campus Closure and Class Cancellation

In the event of extreme weather conditions or other emergency situations go to the <https://www.twu.ca/campus-notification>.

Final Examinations

A student who is absent from a final examination without an acceptable excuse will be assigned a zero for that examination. Absence due to illness must be supported by a medical certificate indicating the nature of the illness. If an examination is missed for any reason, including illness, the student must notify the faculty member prior to the examination and the Office of the Registrar within 48 hours of the missed examination, giving written documentation explaining the absence."

Late Assignment Policy

All assignments are due at the time of your presentation. The research paper is due one week after the last day of class. If you need an extension for the research paper, you need to ask via email, explaining the reason for extension. If there is no request for extension, there will be a 5% deduction/day.

Program Grade Submission Policy

3 weeks after the last day of class.

Course Statements

Academic Freedom

With our charter, mission, and identity as a Christian university, Trinity Western University is committed to academic freedom, affirming and supporting it as defined and described in the statements of Universities Canada and the Tri-Council Research Granting Agencies provided in full at this URL [[Academic Freedom at TWU](#)].

Students should familiarize themselves with both the academic freedom statement and policy found at the Academic Freedom website. In this course, the academic freedom of both the course instructor and students is to be respected. Trinity Western University welcomes a diversity of academic perspectives, both in class discussion and submitted course work, provided they are thoughtfully and respectfully presented. Hate speech will not be tolerated.

Accessibility

The Centre for Accessible Learning oversees learning support plans for students with a disability at TWU. Students whose disability affects their academic progress are invited to register with the Centre for Accessible Learning for guidance in accessing learning supports and to determine their eligibility for academic accommodations. Academic accommodations are specific, recommended provisions that enable students with disabilities to have an equitable opportunity to meet course and program learning outcomes, and are guided by the TWU Accessible Learning Policy. All academic accommodation requests are overseen by the Centre, rather than by individual professors. For more information or to contact a team member, please visit the [Centre for Accessible Learning website](#).

Hospitality in the Classroom

TWU is committed to an ethic of inclusion centered on the principles of Christian hospitality, reciprocity and reconciliation. We seek to cultivate generous learning spaces that are based on respect for differences and are open to diverse views, opinions, and identities that are thoughtfully expressed in a collegial manner. We welcome and value all voices, including those from under-represented groups or those who have been marginalized.

Learning Commons

Academic professionals in [The Learning Commons](#) support students in all aspects of academics, including graduate level writing support, accessible learning, academic concessions for students facing difficulties, support for students with concussions, creation of learning plans, time-management and planning, academic strategies for reading, writing, note-taking, test-taking, presentations, and more. Book an appointment [here](#).