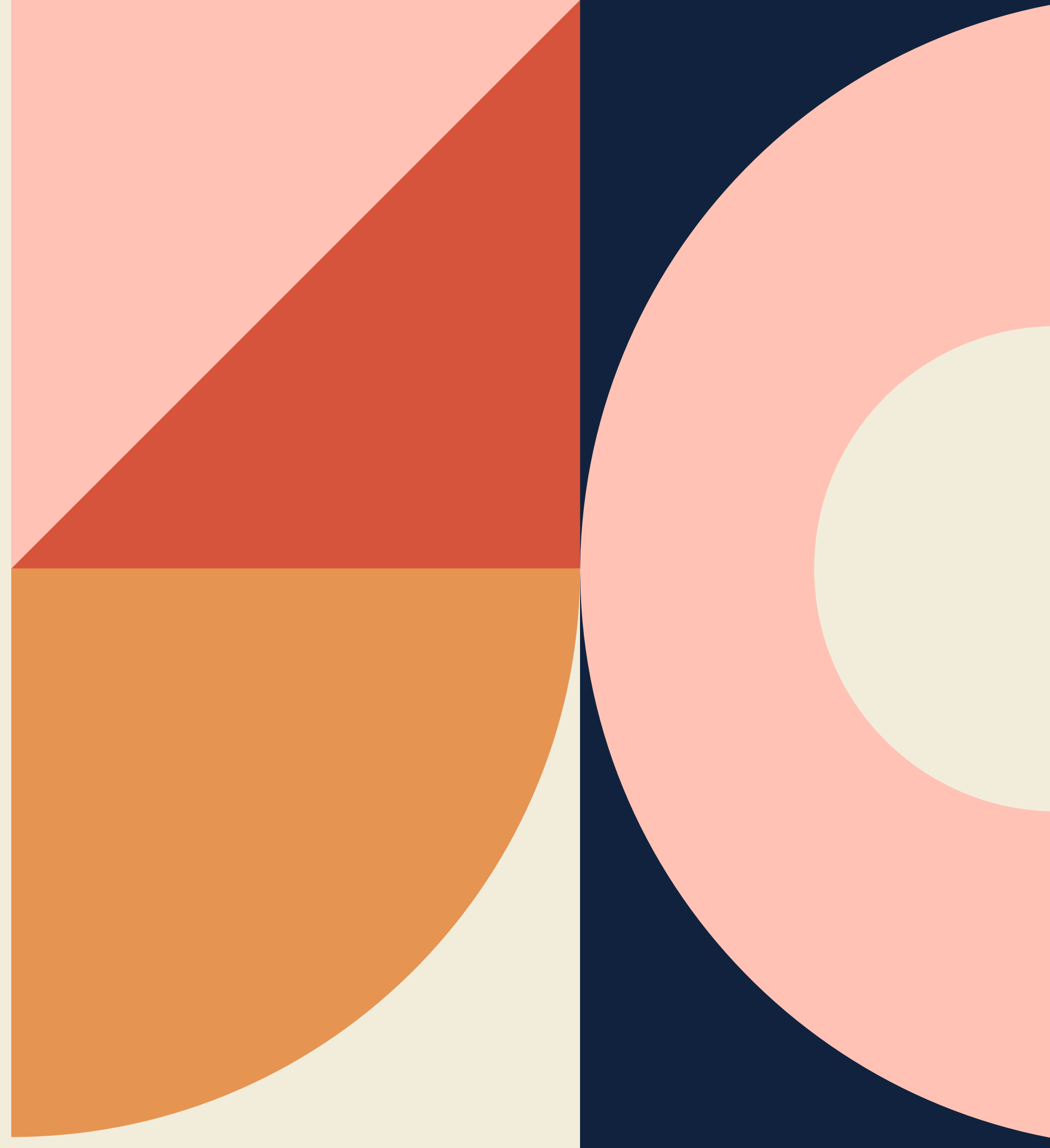


# SAND TRAY IN PLAY THERAPY

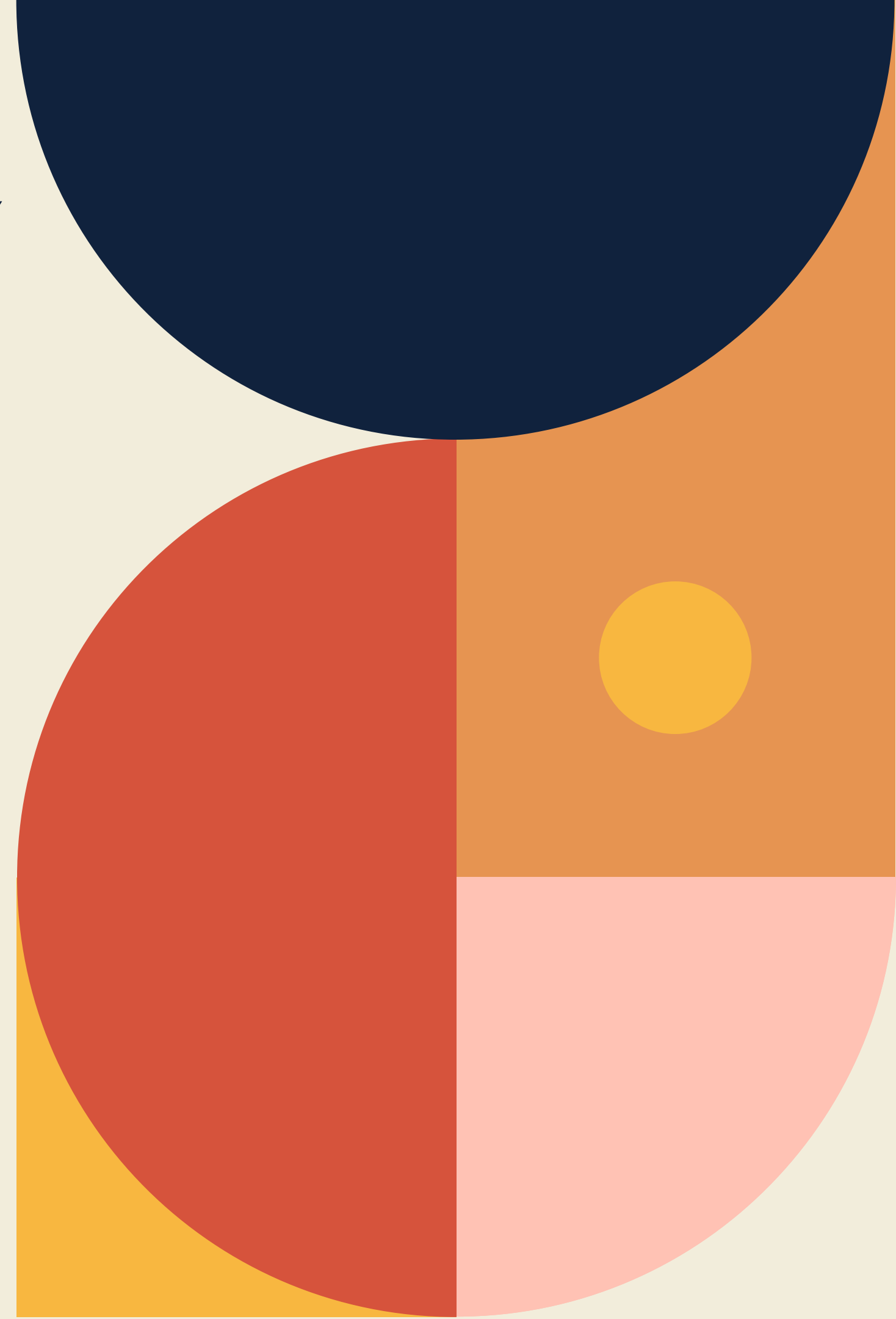
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Dr. April Duncan, DSW, LCSW, RPT-S  
Founder & CEO, BMH Connect



# SAND TRAY PLAY THERAPY HISTORY

- Developed by Margaret Lowenfield in 1939 who developed the "Lowenfield World Technique"
- Developed around the same time as play therapy
- Adaptations along the way
- Promotes safety and control for the client
- Appropriate for all populations
- Flexible sizes in sand trays
- Discovered the sand tray can bring forth the conscious and unconscious psyche
- She felt that the "World" and not the "Therapist" was the one to confront the "maker"



# WHY SAND TRAY PLAY THERAPY?

- Gives expression to non-verbalized emotions
- Forum of self-expression and self-exploration
- Kinesthetic experience
- Creates a necessary therapeutic distance
- Effective for traumatized clients
- Provides natural boundaries and limits
- Effective in overcoming client resistance



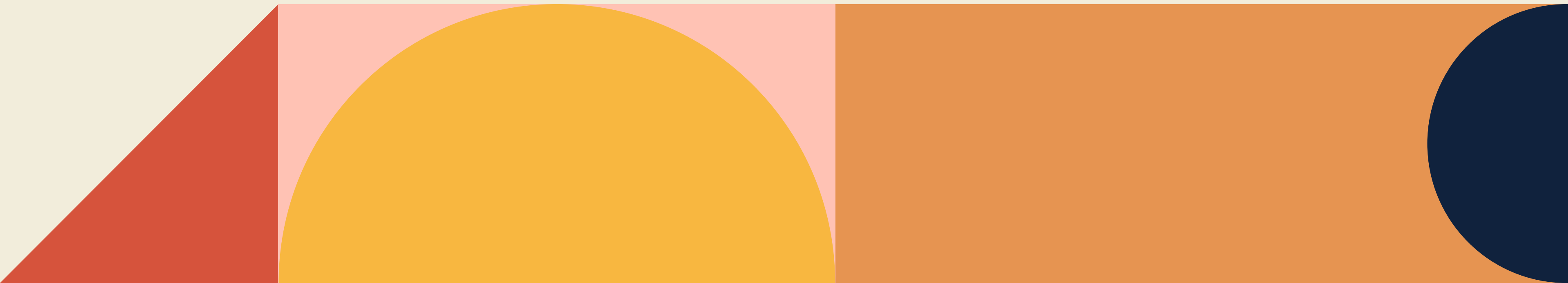
## WHY SAND TRAY THERAPY?

- Good for those clients with poor verbal skills
- Cuts through verbalization as a defense
- Place for clients to experience control
- Solution for transference
- Deeper intrapsychic issues can be accessed



# THE SAND TRAY PLAY THERAPY CLIENT

- Younger clients
  - May look more like play therapy in miniature
- Older children
  - Cognitively able to construct a tray but may choose to play after
- Adolescents
  - Attracted to sand tray therapy due to the nonverbal aspect
- Adults
  - May be resistant at first but play therapist can encourage them to try something different



# METAPHORS IN SAND TRAY PLAY THERAPY

- Miniatures and sand provide the ability to express therapeutic metaphors
- Reminder: it's about the client's interpretation
- Sharing the interpretation of a client's expression of an experience should be meant to serve the needs of the client





# THERAPIST ROLE IN SAND TRAY PLAY THERAPY

- The play therapist should:
  - Create a “free and protected space”
  - Receive training in sand tray therapy
  - Experience being a sand tray therapy client
  - Be deliberate and intentional when selecting miniatures
  - Act as a facilitator

# SAND TRAY THERAPY TIMING

- Introduction to counseling
- Great with resistant or reluctant clients
- Change of pace
- Can offer a change for those who have tried/experienced therapy
- Therapeutic progress evaluation
- Viewing sequences of trays can reflect ongoing progress





# SAND TRAY MINIATURES



# SAND TRAY MINIATURES

## People

- Family groups
- Marital couples
- Occupation
- Hobbies
- Stage of life
- Historical figures

## Animals

- Prehistoric
- Zoo/wild
- Farm/domestic
- Birds
- Insects
- Sea life

## Buildings

- Houses
- Business/civic/school
- Religious
- Historical

## Transportation

- Cars
- Trucks
- Flight vehicles
- Nautical
- "Other"

# SAND TRAY MINIATURES

## Vegetation

Trees  
Bushes  
Hedges  
Flowers

## Fences/Signs

Fences  
Gates  
Barricades  
Signs  
Railroad tracks  
Nets

## Natural Items

Sea shells  
Vegetation  
Rocks

## Fantasy

Magical  
Monsters  
Folklore  
Cartoon characters  
Comic book figures  
Movie characters

# SAND TRAY MINIATURES

## Spiritual

Western religions  
Buddhas  
Day of the Dead  
Gargoyles  
Magic/crystal balls  
Gold  
Crystals

## Landscaping

Sky/celestial  
Topographical  
Monuments  
Wishing well  
Treasure chests  
Coffin  
Bridges

## Household

Furniture  
Food  
Tools  
Mailbox  
Accessories

## Other

speciality miniatures  
Knights  
Army men  
Aggressive minis  
Substance use minis

# MINIATURE ARRANGEMENT & RATIONALE

- Open shelf arrangement for miniatures
- Can be in small plastic containers or baskets that are labeled
- Need to be placed in categories and located in the same place in the office for easy access
- Miniatures range going left to right
  - Good to evil
  - Passive to aggressive
  - Safe to scary

# PLACES TO PURCHASE SAND TRAY MINIATURES

- Garage sales
- Thrift/Antique stores
- Dollar Stores/Target bins
- Cake decorating supply stores
- Pet supplies (aquarium items)
- Oriental Trading
- eBay
- Michaels/Hobby Lobby
- Friends and family
- [www.Disney.com](http://www.Disney.com)
- Play therapy websites
  - [www.childtherapytoys.com](http://www.childtherapytoys.com)
  - [www.toysofthetrade.com](http://www.toysofthetrade.com)
  - [www.playtherapysupply.com](http://www.playtherapysupply.com)
  - [www.selfhelpwarehouse.com](http://www.selfhelpwarehouse.com)

# GUIDELINES TO SELECTING MINIATURES

- Size; miniatures that still have a variation in size
- A few non-miniature figures
- Made of various materials
- Representative of your clients world
- Various ethnicities
- Vegetation to represent different landscapes
- Houses and other buildings



# SETTING UP SAND TRAY





## SAND TRAY SET UP

- “Standard” rectangular tray
- Sand box should be clean
- Arrange miniatures by categories
- Room to walk around sand tray
- Inside and bottom should be painted blue
- One filled with wet sand and one with dry





## SAND TRAY PLACEMENT

- The height should be no higher than the waist of the client
- A low cart or lower table for clients to be able to sit around the tray
- The floor provides intimacy for children and creates comfort and safety
- Important there is enough room to walk around the tray and witness each perspective from each corner



# VIRTUAL SAND TRAY OPTIONS

- Simply Sand Play (<https://simplysandplay.com>)
- Virtual Sand Tray (<https://sandtrayplay.com/newsite/>)
- Online Sand Tray (<https://onlinesandtray.com>)

# SAND TRAY FOR THE MOBILE PLAY THERAPIST

- Portable sand trays
- Mobile sand tray kits
- Separate bags for each sand tray category
- Use of a drop cloth or table cloth
- Containers for categories of miniatures

# SAND TRAY MOBILE SET UP



# CONDUCTING A SAND TRAY SESSION



# INTRODUCING CLIENTS TO SAND TRAY THERAPY

- Nondirective
  - Minimal or no directions to the client
  - May use words such as “create a world/scene”, “build your world/scene”
- Directive
  - Good for clients who may be overwhelmed with a free/unstructured experience
  - Giving a specific direction to the client on what to create

Helpful prompts:

"If you could push pause on your life, what would that scene look like? Now use the sand tray to show that scene" or "If you lost your voice and these miniatures were your voice, what could they communicate using the sand tray?"



# CONDUCTING A SAND TRAY THERAPY SESSION

- Create a story or scene in the sand
- Be present with your client as they choose their miniatures
- Stand next to them and gauge the closeness depending on the client
- Process of picking miniatures should be completely silent



# FACILITATING A SAND TRAY THERAPY SESSION

- Pay attention to the approach of building the scene
  - Easy/difficult for them to construct the sand tray
  - Determined/hesitant to construct the sand tray
  - Able/unable to be fully involved in sand tray therapy creation & processing questions
  - Purposeful/nonpurposeful in placing the miniatures
  - Plans ahead/constructs as it happens



# PROCESSING SAND TRAY PLAY THERAPY WITH CLIENTS

GLOBAL PROCESSING



FOCUS PROCESSING





# GLOBAL PROCESSING

- Title
  - "Does your sand tray have a title?"
- General or global explanation
  - Tell me about your sand tray (or mention the title of the sand tray e.g. Tell me about The Worst Day Ever)
- Discuss each scene
  - "Let's start with this scene In the corner. Tell me more about what's happening here"
- Discuss specific miniatures
  - "Tell me more about the miniature you selected to represent you"



# FOCUS PROCESSING

- Title
  - "Does your sand tray have a title?"
- Describe the overall scene
  - Tell me about your sand tray (or mention the title of the sand tray e.g. Tell me about The Worst Day Ever)
- Discuss specific miniatures
  - "Does one miniature stand out?" Smaller? Larger than rest/
  - "How do you affectively respond to the tray?"
  - "Are you in here?"
  - "If you were in this scene, which miniature would represent you?"
  - "Are there other people represented in the tray?"
  - "Which miniature has the most power?"



# FOCUS PROCESSING

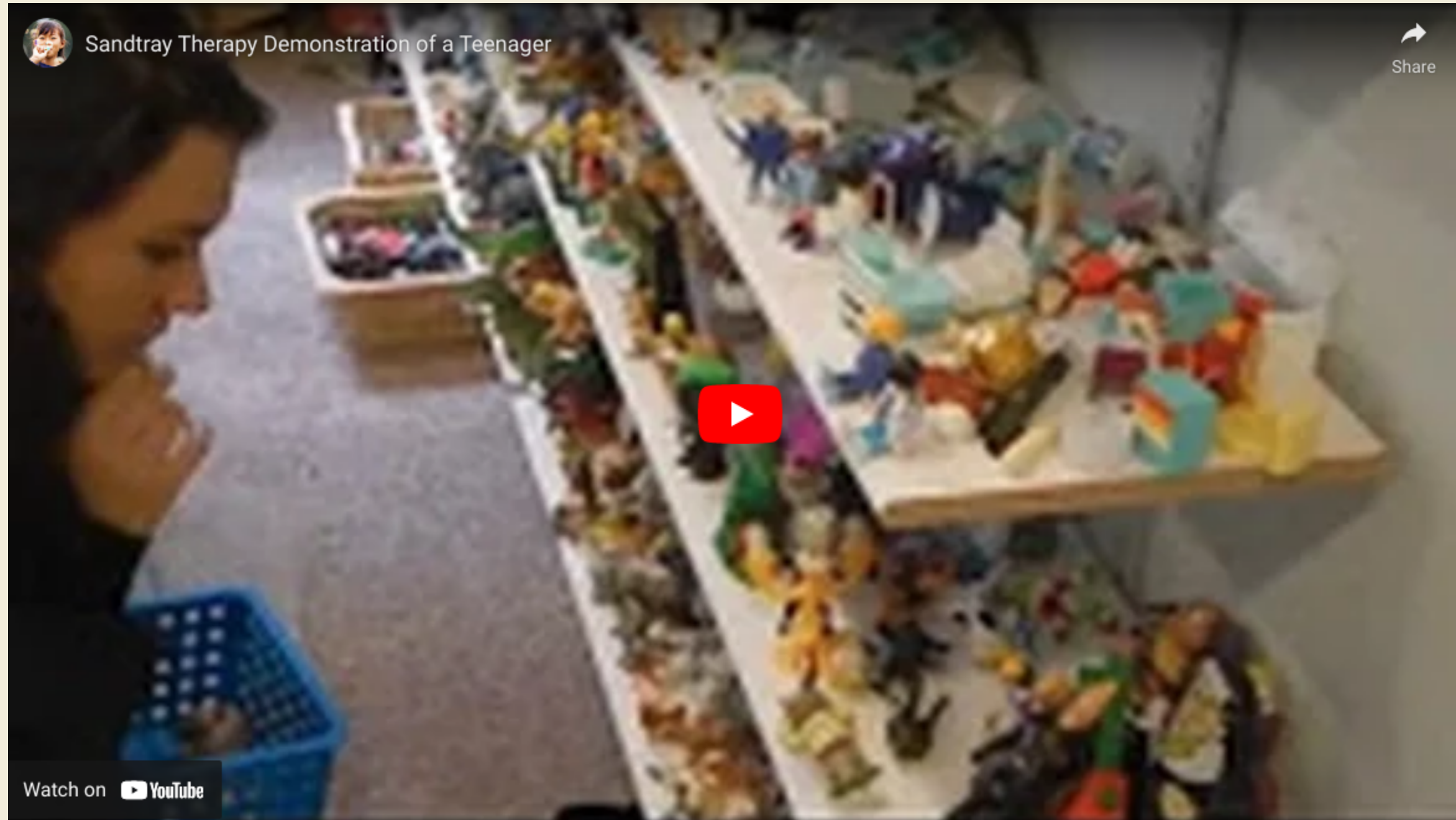
- Invite the client to give voices to the miniature
  - "What would that miniature say if it could speak?"
- Explore the intuitive nature or meaning of the miniatures
  - "You chose a dragon for your brother. What type of meaning does that hold for you?"
- Explore the client's interaction with the miniatures and media
  - "I noticed you took some time to prepare the sand before construction. Tell me more about the importance of having that sand the way you wanted"
- Invite the client to proceed with the action
  - "You mentioned wanting to spend more time with your brother. What are some things you can do to achieve that goal?"



# QUESTIONS TO HELP WITH PROCESSING SAND TRAY WITH CLIENTS

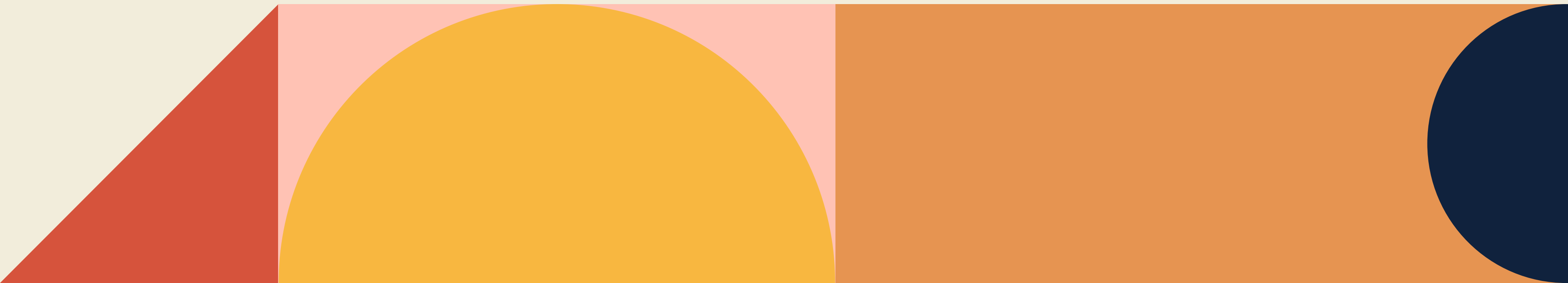
- What is the title of the tray?/What would you call this scene?
- What's happening in this scene/tray?
- What miniature has the most energy?
- What feelings are in the tray?
- Are there any resources? Obstacles?
- Are you represented in the tray? Who else is represented?
- Link miniatures: What would the monkey say to the dog?

# SAND TRAY EXAMPLE



# POST-CREATION PHASE OF SAND TRAY PLAY THERAPY

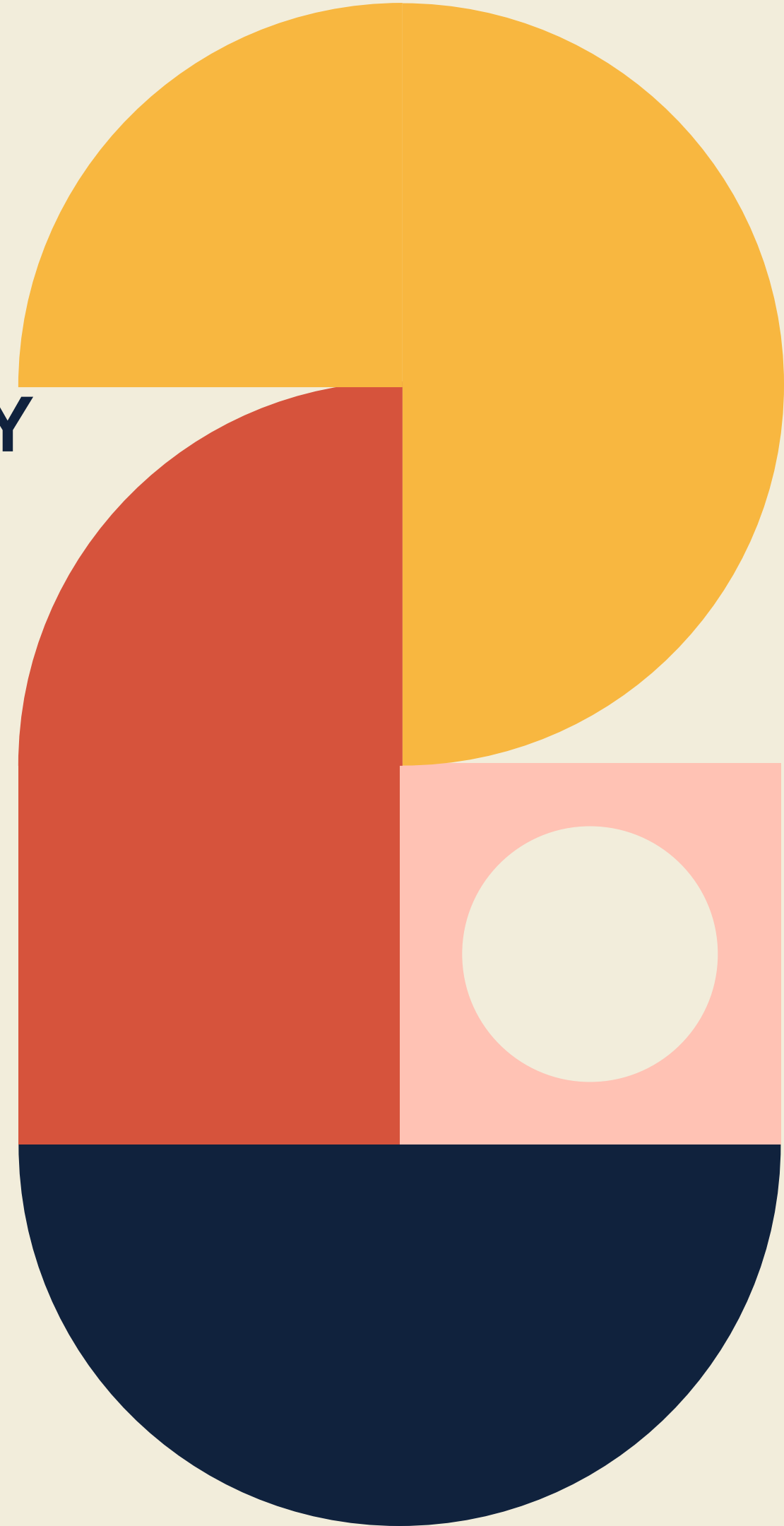
- Visually observe the completed sand tray
- Emotionally observe the sand tray
- Be mindful of your energy
- Evaluate the organization of the tray
  - “Classic” organizations of miniatures provide clinical hunches of client issues





# FINAL STAGES OF SAND TRAY PLAY THERAPY

- Sand tray cleanup
  - May or may not be a part of the session with the client
  - Dismantle the tray after the client leaves the room
- Documenting the sand tray session
  - Photographs of tray with client's permission
  - Helps with continued discussion in future sessions
  - Children may enjoy joining in on the picture
  - Fully screen content if picture is given to client

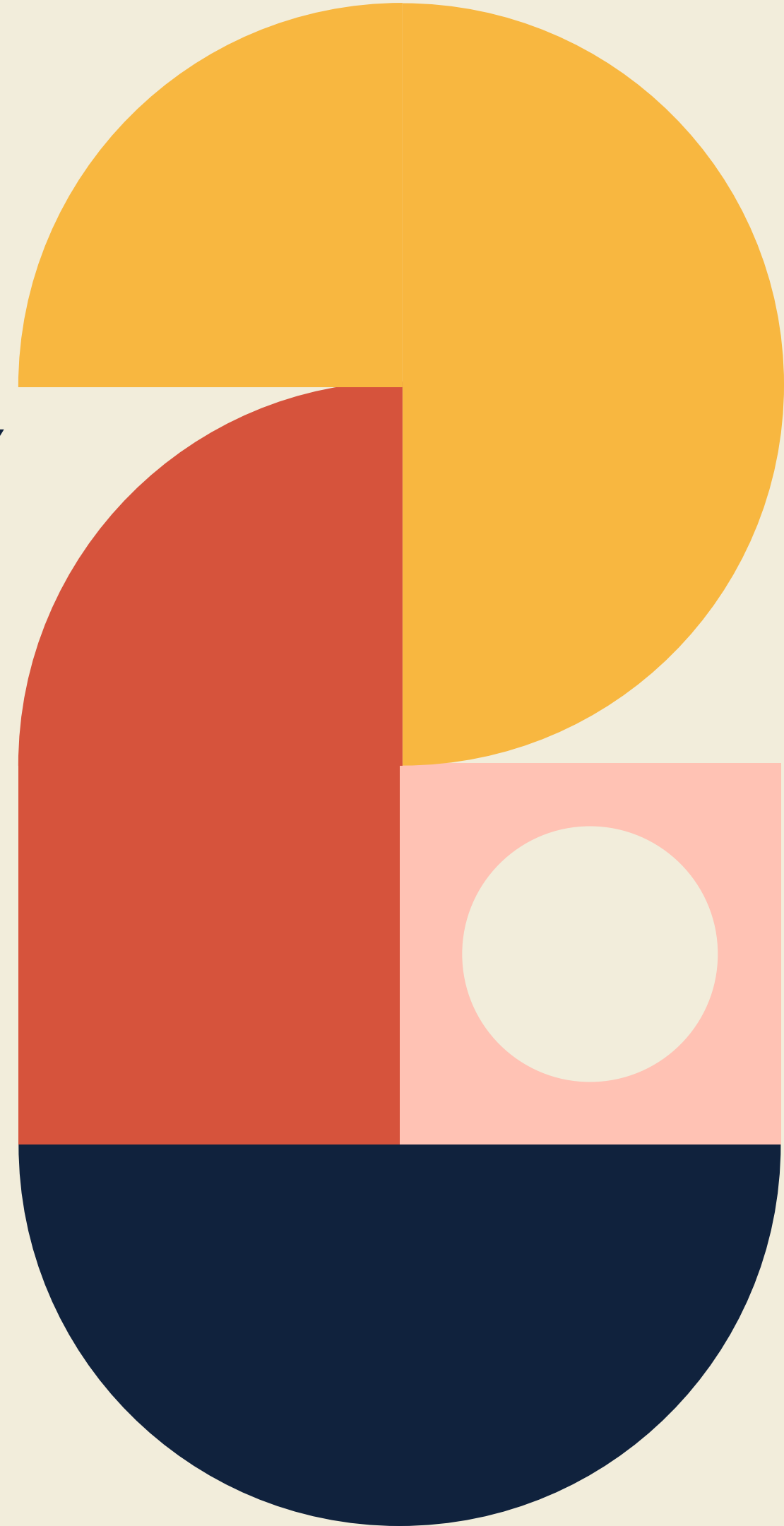


# SAND TRAY DOCUMENTATION



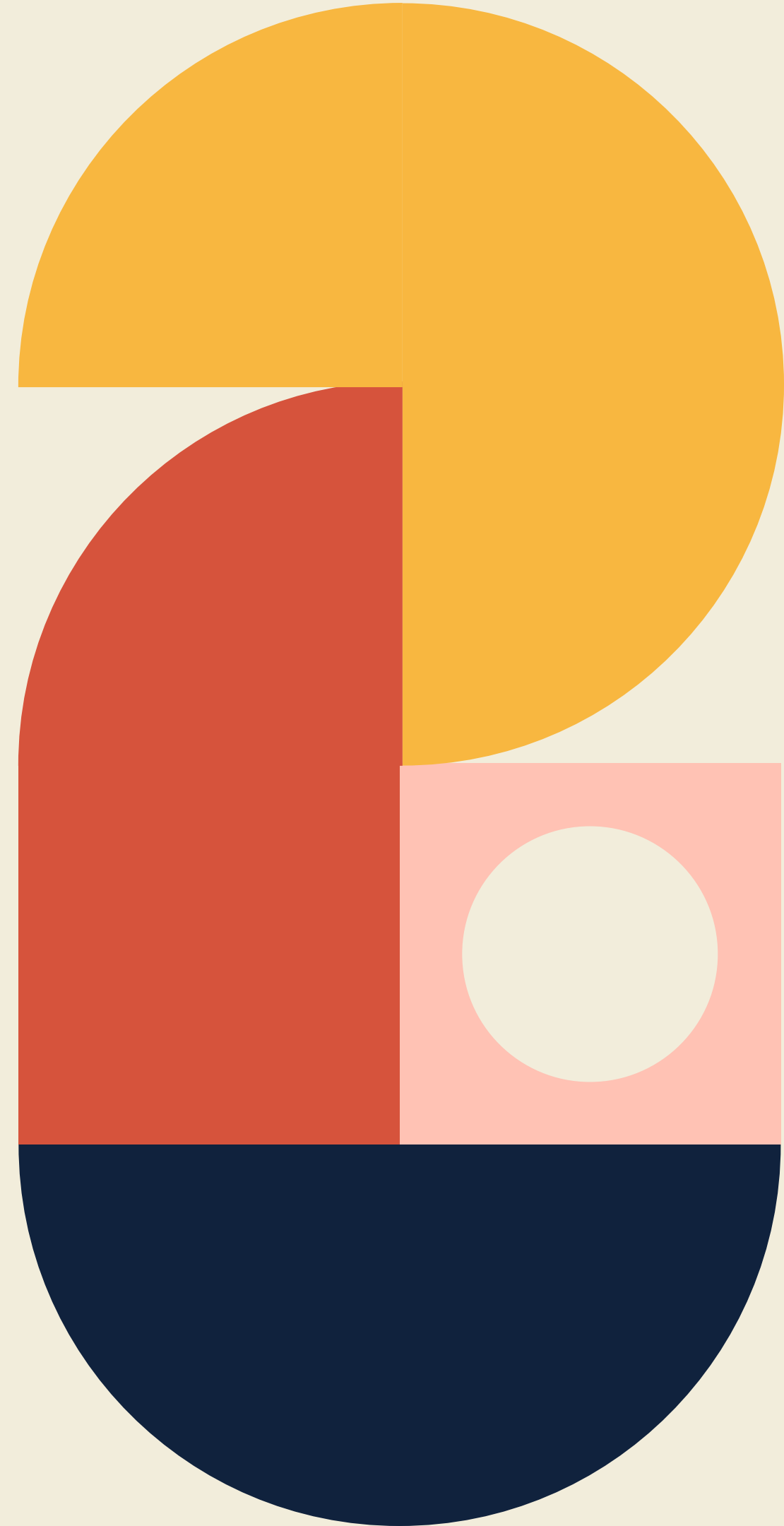
# DOCUMENTING SAND TRAY IN PLAY THERAPY

- Do not need to identify individual miniatures
- Identify any sand tray categories
- Note the client's interaction with the medium
- Identify play themes
- Include a picture
- Note any sand tray progress



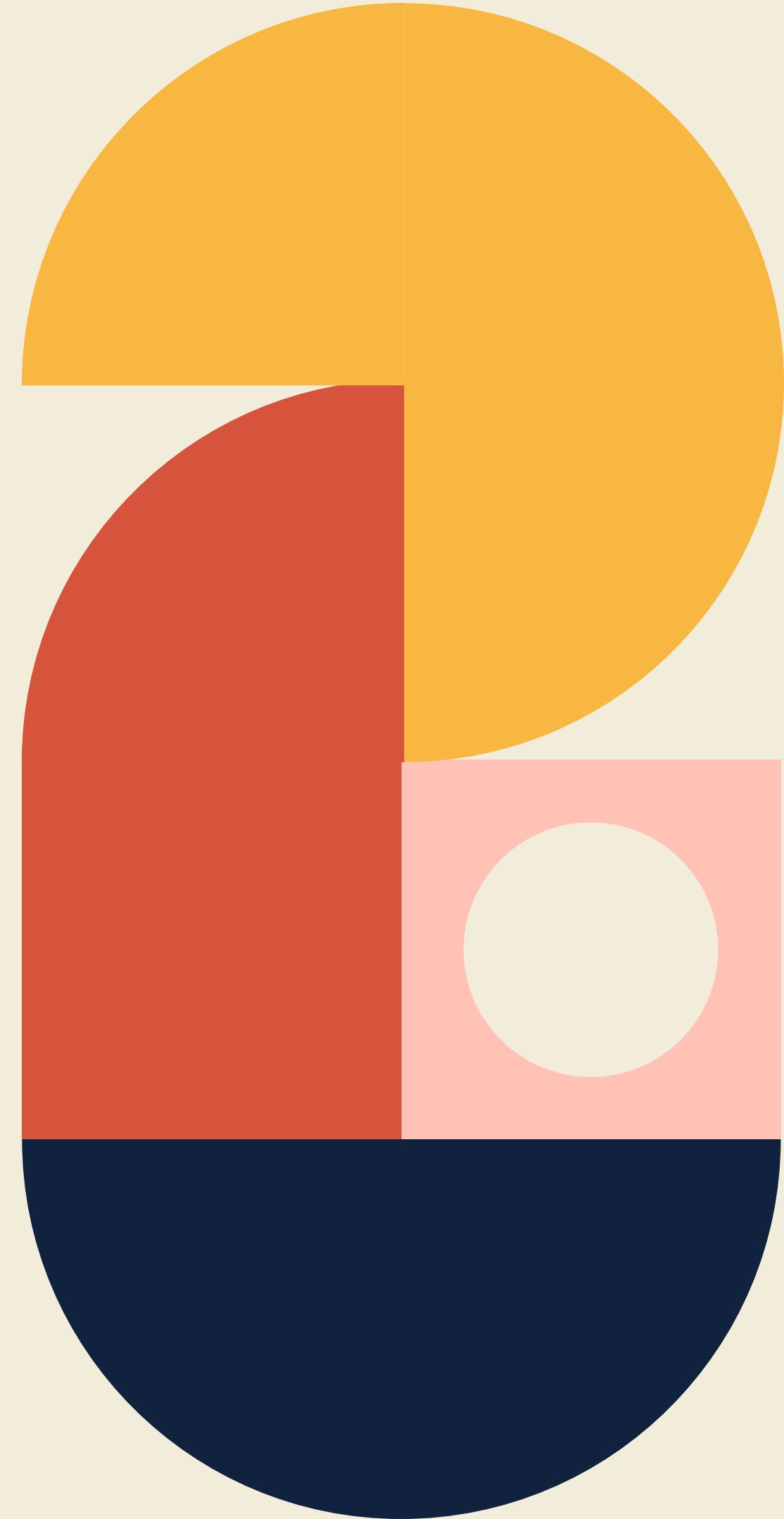
# EXPLORING PLAY THEMES IN SAND TRAY

- Themes can be inferred from:
  - Contents arising within one session (e.g. patterns of play and interactions that are repeated within the therapy hour)
  - Across sessions (e.g. a child may continue with a theme from one session to the next or may return to a previous theme after one or more sessions).



# MARKERS FOR INDIVIDUAL PLAY THEMES

- Repeated, similar play with the same materials or toys within a session
- High levels of emotional involvement and intensity in children's play
- A lengthy amount of time spent on the same activity
- Ideas and emotions that seem similar, even though toys or activities change
- Children verbally remembering previous play activities and/or relating the play with their therapist to their current/past/future life
- Repeated, similar play with the same materials or toys from one play therapy session to the next (or later session)
- Children verbally remembering with others previous play activities and/or relating the play to current/past/future life, immediately after a session or at a later date

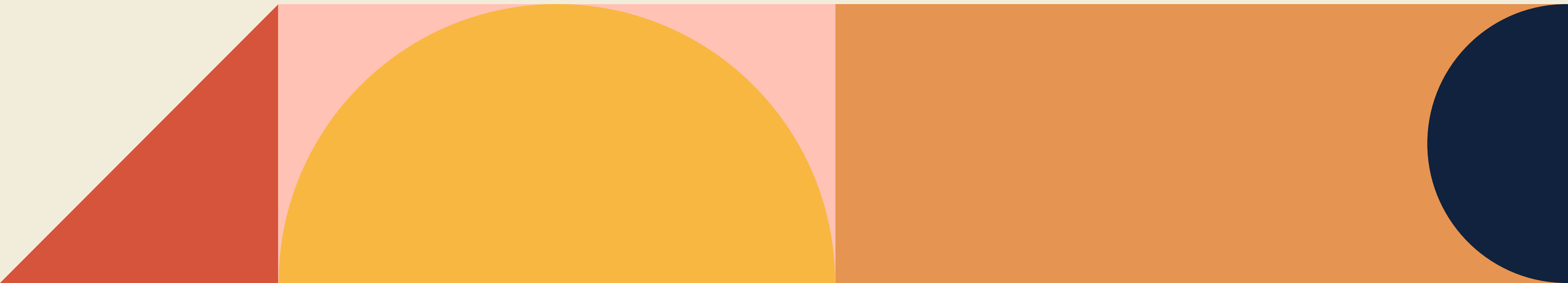


# SAND TRAY CATEGORIES OF CONSTRUCTION

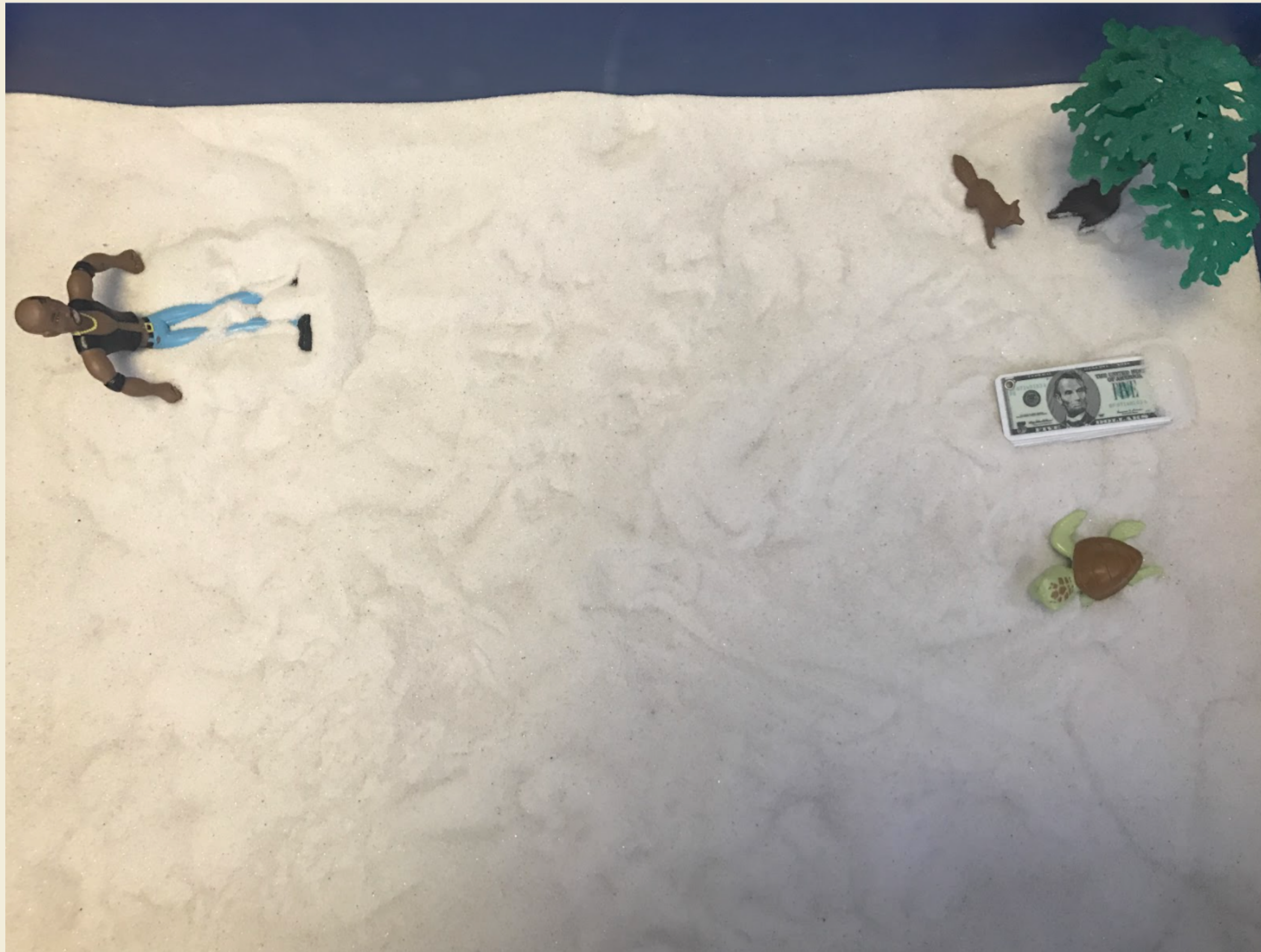


# EMPTY WORLD

- If 2/3 or more of the tray has no miniatures
- Can be reflective of:
  - Client viewing their world as unhappy, empty place
  - Client feeling rejected or having a desire to escape
  - Possible depression



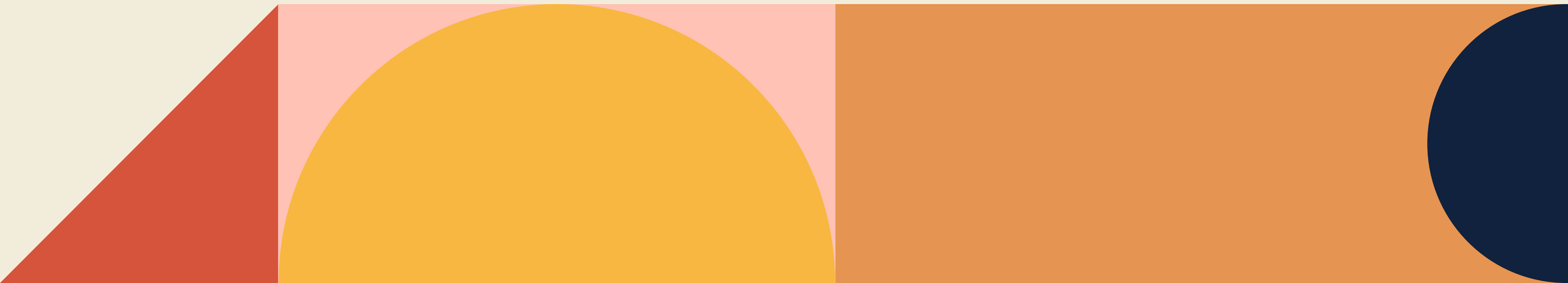
# EMPTY WORLD EXAMPLE





# RIGID WORLD

- Also known as a schematic arrangement or world of rows
- Could mean a need for order in a chaotic world
- Possible perfectionism or self control
- Client may be emotionally rigid or repressed

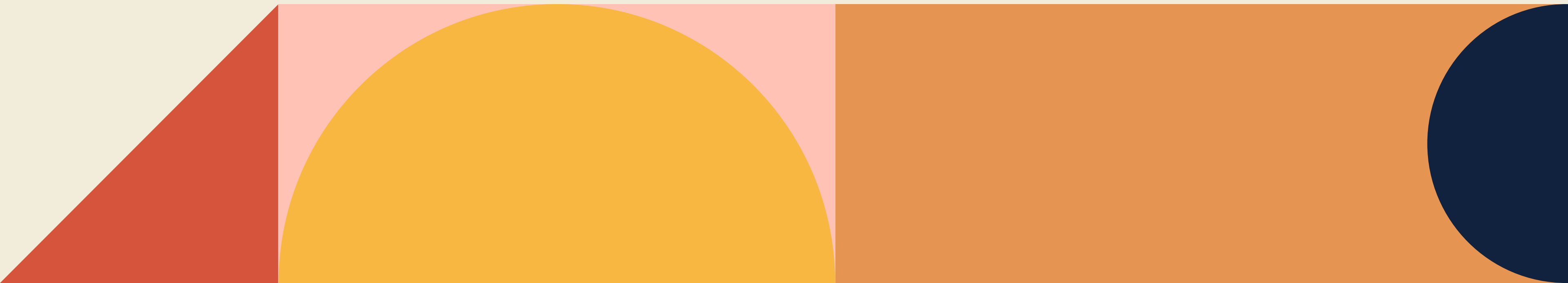


# RIGID WORLD EXAMPLE



# UNPEOPLED WORLD

- When there are no people in the tray
- Soldiers are not included as people, since they are often used in aggressive play in battle (unless Military child)
- May be seen as client escaping reality of people representing negative feelings and lack of trust
- Abused children may create an unpeopled world because real people hurt them

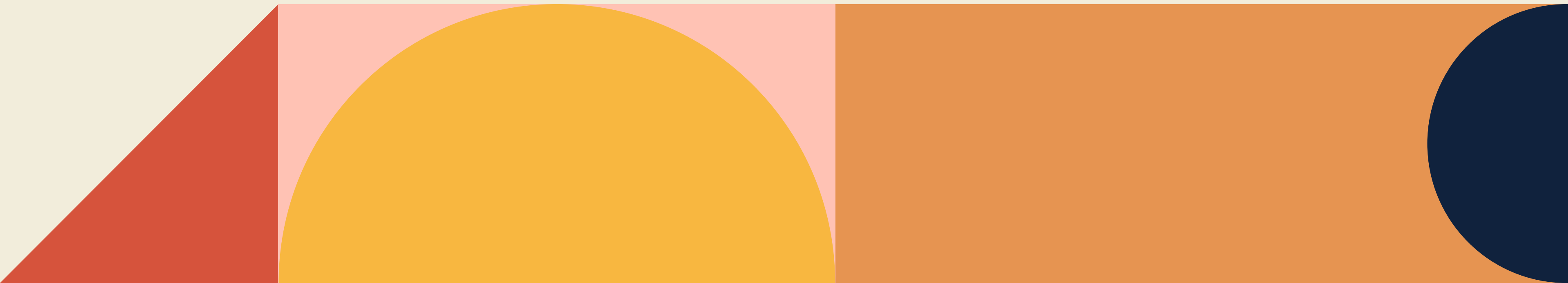


# UNPEOPLED WORLD EXAMPLES



# DISORGANIZED WORLD

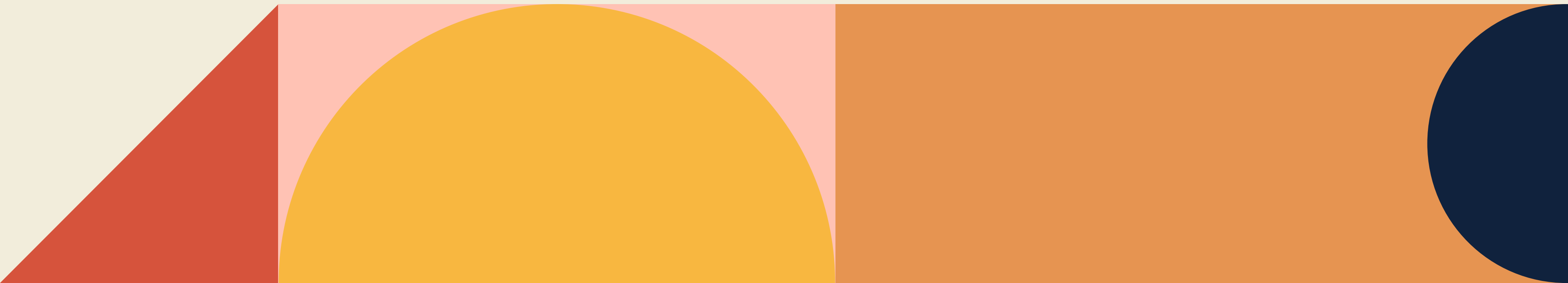
- Also labeled as an incoherent or chaotic world
- Miniatures placed in an impulsive, chaotic manner
- Dumping and flooding
- May indicate:
  - Showing their own inner confusion
  - Reflecting their own chaotic world
  - Client's inability to maintain self-control





# AGGRESSIVE WORLD

- Battle scenes with soldiers or characters fighting
- May be “socially acceptable” scenes (war or crashes) or unacceptable scenes (bugs attacking people)
- May be client internalizing or externalizing anger



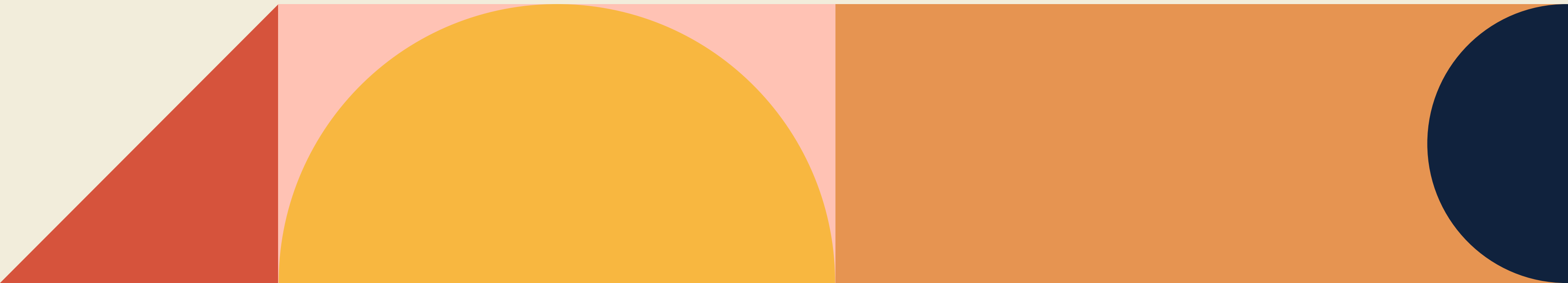
# AGGRESSIVE WORLD EXAMPLE





# CLOSED FENCE WORLD

- Scene is viewed as closed world if majority of the miniatures are inside the fence
- May be the client expressing:
  - Their need to compartmentalize
  - Their need for self-protection
  - Closing self off from others or closing danger out
  - Their fear of their own inner impulses and need for external controls



# CLOSED FENCE WORLD EXAMPLE

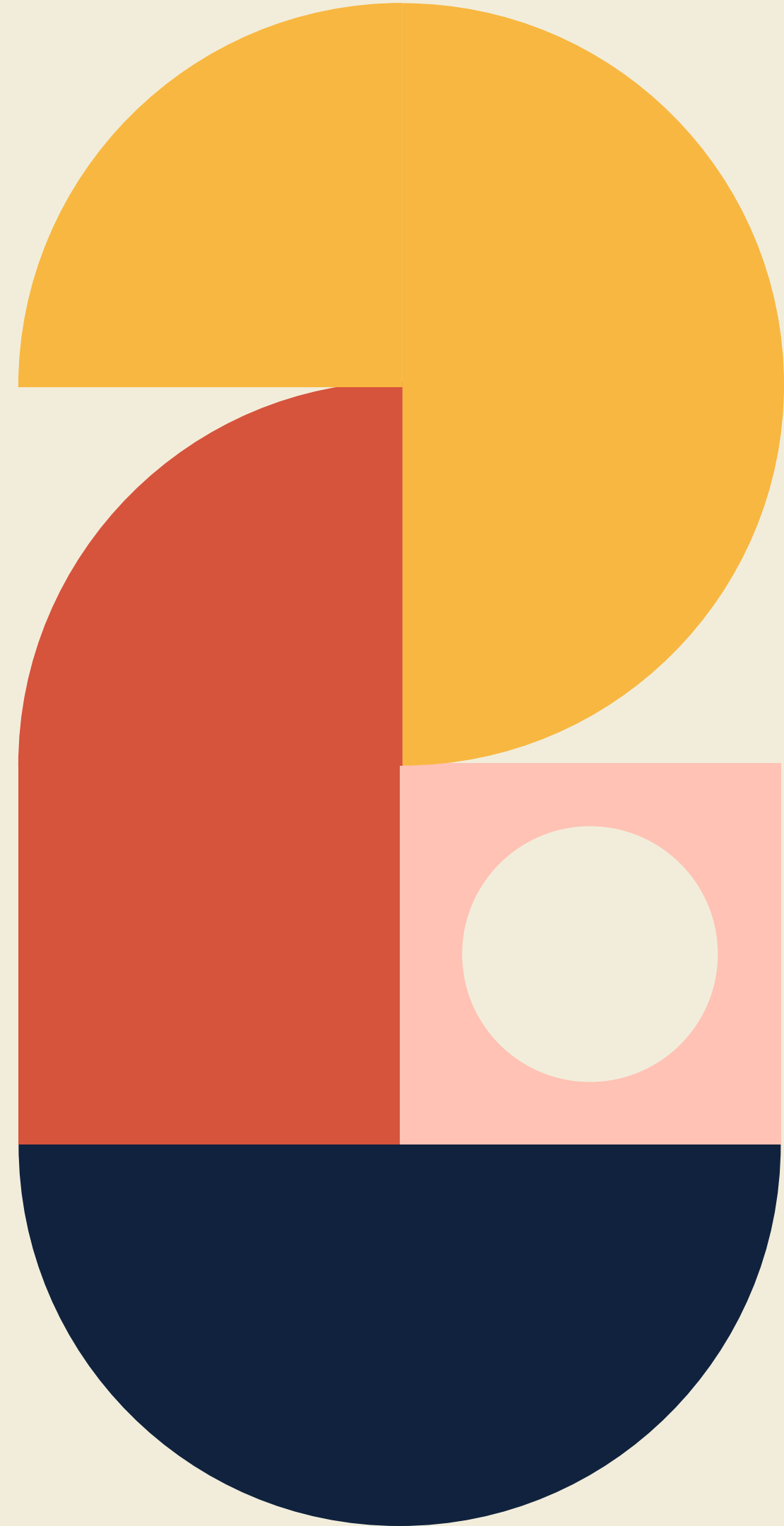


# ASSESSING PROGRESS IN SAND TRAY PLAY THERAPY



# ASSESSING PROGRESS IN SAND TRAY PLAY THERAPY

- Life changes that should be evident in both play and real-life situations
  - Increased verbalization
  - Greater willingness to experiment and explore
  - Increased ability to problem solve
  - Decreased anxiety and depression
  - Increased ability to organize and decreased chaotic thinking and behavior
  - Decreased aggression
  - Decreased fear of confrontation









## ADDITIONAL SAND TRAY RESOURCES

Homeyer, L.E. & Sweeney, D.S. (2017).  
Sandtray Therapy: A Practical Manual (3rd Ed.)  
Routledge: New York

World Association of Sand Therapy  
Professionals- <https://worldsandtherapy.com/>

Southern Sand Tray Institute-  
<https://southernsandtray.com/>

Sandtray Therapy Institute-  
<https://www.sandtraytherapyinstitute.com/>

Sand Therapy Training Institute-  
<https://www.sandtherapytraining.com/onlinecourses>



# REFERENCES

Homeyer, L. & Sweeney, D. (2011). Sand tray Therapy: A Practical Manual. Routledge: New York, NY

[www.southernsandtray.com](http://www.southernsandtray.com)

Stangline, Michelle (2012). The Creative Sand Tray 101: Creative Counseling Sand Tray Activities and Techniques.

Preston-Dillon, D. (2009, March). Narrative approaches in sand therapy: Transformative journeys for counselor and client. Paper based on a program presented at the American Counseling Association Annual Conference and Exposition, Charlotte, NC.

Turner-Bumberry, Tracy (2015). Finding Meaning with Mandalas: A Therapist's Guide to Creating Mandalas with Children. Turner Phrase Publishing LLC: St. Charles, MO

"What is Sandplay Therapy?" retrieved from [http://www.junginla.org/education/what\\_is\\_sandplay](http://www.junginla.org/education/what_is_sandplay) on August 8, 2016.