

Parts and Protectors



Many of us are aware of the tenets of Internal Family Systems (IFS) work. In this Done-For-You technique, we'll be focusing on two of the key concepts of this model. We all develop coping strategies for handling stressors and trauma as we grow. We develop ways to protect ourselves against the hurt and wounding that is part of being human.

The coping strategies are called "protectors" within the IFS model. They often begin as a way for the person to handle the hurt thrown at them by life. Examples may include overachievement, withdrawal (shyness), or extreme anger. Each of these behaviors (or parts) is present to protect the wounded part of the self against being hurt further.

The problem arises when these once helpful parts of the system become intrinsic, often negative parts of a person's personality and are used in harmful ways towards the self or others. For example, the perfectionism of a small child who earns positive rewards and attention from a neglectful parent evolves into a person who must work and achieve to feel worthy, even at the expense of others or the self.

If we, as therapists, can see these behaviors not as something that needs to be removed but rather as an outdated and often not-needed part of the self that is getting in the way of growth for that person. If we can "befriend" these protectors in therapy, they will often become smaller and now show up as much within the session. Once this happens, we can work with what is running the show - the wounded part of the self. Once the wounded part becomes healthier and more healed, the protectors aren't needed.

So, how can we use this in the sandtray?