

# Therapeutic Puppet Play

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Before delving into the world of therapeutic puppet play, it is important to clarify some terms:

*Therapeutic* puppet play is not limited to psychotherapy. Instead the term “therapeutic” is meant in a more general salutary sense.

*Puppet Play* always refers to playing with children as opposed to playing for children (ie. puppet theatre).

In general role playing is a helpful way for children to understand their world. As they play the father, mother and child roles, children try to understand the relationships and social rules of how a family lives together. If unknown or anxiety provoking events occur, they imitate the situation with their pets or puppets, eg. a visit at the doctor or a parents argument. Future situations - still unknown or fear inducing - are played to explore how they may feel. There is no child who has not played a school lesson some time before going to school. While doing this the child not only tests how they feel to be the teacher but also how they feel as the new pupil. Such role playing has the advantage of not always being the little and weak child. If they can play the role of the teacher or the doctor (or the person who is strong and in control), this experience will help them to clear their feelings and cope with their difficulties. Puppets are a useful tool as they can endure much more than a living person.

Therapeutic puppet play systematically uses this style of role playing. It gives the child the chance to bring inner stories outside and onto a stage. Children often do not have words but only pictures or symbols for these stories. Furthermore - it gives the child an opportunity to make/create his own puppet(s). In this way they can give a “gestalt” to their inner pictures, externalise them and give them life. Children find it easier to play with their own puppets as opposed to commercial puppets or puppets made by other people. Regardless of who made the puppets, the child has the chance to actively search for answers for his questions and problems.

Core Components to Therapeutic Puppet Play:

1. The Puppets.

We work only with hand puppets as they speak directly from the soul. Puppets on a string are difficult to co-ordinate and require complex cognitive-motor processes. The more complex the thought processes, the more feelings are lost.

A central assumption is that children always choose puppets, which have a significant meaning. The puppets reflect parts of their own character (e.g. the hare for the coward in them) or the character of people around them (eg. the very severe king as the personification of their own father, who is angry with his child).

Consequently we offer a more or less standardised collection of puppets, all of which are symbols for people a child may meet in his life or internal personality-characteristics. These include:

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Madeline Patrick for corrections!

- the king and the queen as father and mother
- prince and princess as their children
- a baby for the very little child (the inner child of the playing child)
- a witch for the severe and hard mother who says „no“ to the child
- the bad magician for the threatening father
- a good fairy for the helpful women
- a strong policeman, representing the father’s helpful power
- a grandmother and grandfather as people who have more distance to the problems and generally are more patient than the child’s parents
- a robber, symbolizing the child’s own greediness or the greediness of someone else
- a devil symbolizing temptation
- a death figure as a symbol of change
- a hunter, generally perceived as helpful
- a doctor for healing and
- a cook who is able to change things and make them eatable.

Finally there are several animals which are very important:

- a dog as protector for the child and threat for others
- a horse as symbol of free thought
- a dragon as symbol of threat and luck
- an always hungry wolf and
- a crocodile - the one and only puppet that can open his mouth for devouring whatever it meets.

Basically the puppets represent the personal fairytale, which may be a tale of hope and optimism or one of despair and destruction, depending on the child’s perspective.

## 2. The Props.

Given that therapeutic puppet play is an attempt to affect change in a child’s life, it is important that toy objects are part of the play. These props play a significant role in triggering change. Perhaps you are aware of what happens when puppets meet one another on a stage and begin to talk without props – at the beginning it is interesting and funny, but the longer they speak, the more boring it becomes. In therapeutic puppet play, children can get stuck in boring dialogues or in worst cases begin to fight just for the want of something to do. If we want to change something in our life we need action, rather than just words and props within the play help achieve this. Therapeutic puppet play is an attempt at change, which can be repeated without danger and as often as necessary. Consequently it is imperative to have:

- a treasure box as a symbol for the client themselves, with all their treasures (in German a loved one is called: “mein Schatz” – my treasure). The treasure box is the most used and important object of all the props. It belongs to the very rich king; it may get lost, hidden or taken by force. It must be won back or stays forgotten for hundreds of years at the roots of a tree.

Since therapeutic puppet play stories often involve a journey, the following items are also required:

- Something to transport the things needed eg. a basket, bag or suitcase.
- Something to find the way eg. a light, map, compass or binoculars.
- Some weapons eg. a sword, pistol and/or boxing gloves, which can be used to defend the client or the treasure.

It is also critical to have:

- Something to eat. To start off with - bread and a bottle for water/wine and a cake (for festivities) and then some apples and other fruits.
- A mirror – mostly used as instrument for self-perception.
- Some keys in different sizes and one of them should be a little golden one. They importantly represent opening up all the things which have been unknown up until now.
- A mobile phone for communication and calling help from anywhere.
- An alarm-clock to show the hero when he has to get up. Often this is used as a terror instrument, which does not allow the hero a peaceful moment.

Finally but of great importance

- A first-aid box with medical instruments and bandaging material. Very important because the heroes fight a great deal with dangerous enemies and get a lot of wounds.

### 3. The Setting.

The places where the puppet play is set are always inner representations and reflections of the child's mood. Therapeutic puppet play does not take place in an open room or upon an undecorated stage. Instead the playing child shapes the room according to their imagination: a dark wood or a very light wood, an open field or a closed garden, a golden and rich castle or a dark and old mediaeval citadel. Aside from the meaningful symbolism of the place, the setting gives the play outer and inner roots and the child does not have so many opportunities to "fly away". For practical reasons we use an ironing board as a stage and for the decoration we have a lot of materials (cloth) in different colours and textures. There are also some natural materials, such as stones or pieces of wood. It is imperative that the child be allowed to decorate the stage using their own imagination. The therapist should only make suggestions when the child has no idea at all. Otherwise they can help with practical questions and support wherever necessary.

### 4. The Story.

If a child is told "Let's play a story that you've made up!", generally two things happen: either the child has no ideas at all and all the blood runs from brain.... or they have too many ideas and are not able to structure them. They need 100 puppets and props and at the end there is a battle field instead of a setting and no story.

Therefore it is necessary to create the structure for a story. One of the easiest ways to do that is below:

- Firstly the child chooses three props. Props should be chosen first because it avoids the giving of stereotypical objects to specific puppets. eg. The pistol being given to the policeman, or the pot ladle to the cook etc. If the child

chooses the props before the puppets, it is assumed that the chosen objects will have a significant meaning in regard to exploring solutions for their problems.

- Secondly the child chooses three puppets. These should either be three human characters, three animals or a combination of the two. The child decides who (the child or therapist) should play which puppet. It may be necessary for the child to give the therapist a little explanation about how to play the puppet ie. what they will do and how they are.
- Thirdly, the setting needs to be decided upon and subsequently the stage should be decorated as such.

If this structure is followed, a story will always come to light. Sometimes it might be necessary to interrupt the play and confer about how the story should continue. When this happens, the therapist and child should take the puppets from their hands and make eye contact with one another. Whilst playing occurs the eye contact is between the puppets themselves or the player with their own puppet. Playing with very silent children might need quite a few conferences. A new direction in the story may require further props, puppets and settings which is acceptable. It is important to remember that only the child decides how the story will be and how it will continue. If the child has absolutely no ideas, the therapist can make some suggestions, but it is still the child who decides. Furthermore, the child is allowed to correct the therapist if they are not playing as per instruction. It is assumed that the child will play their own life story and therefore choose their own solution for the problems, which may well be different from the therapist's proposed solution. That is why the therapist can support and encourage the child and give them ideas or examples if they have none – but in the end the therapist does not dictate the resolution - they do not know the way forward.

While playing it is critical to remember the two following concepts:

1. It is not necessary to speak about what we do! (eg. do not say "I open the door" while doing it!)
2. On the stage all things are allowed!!