

Puppets and Dolls between Playing and Therapy

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Nearly nothing can stop a child playing. In extremely small spaces, in the ugliest flat, under bad social circumstances children are playing. They are playing during war situations and they are playing their war situations. They are playing their dreams and their desires, their injuries and their defeats. They are playing their heroism and their fantasy of omnipotence. They are playing doomsday and they are creating new worlds.

Children's play is a miracle of perfection if, yes, if we do allow and do not subdue it under our adult's norms. Playing children explain the world to themselves. Playing children work on conflicts in their setting. Playing they conquer new strategies and knowledge. Playing is a basic requirement of getting a human being when adult.

What is playing? Why do children play? Why do they play different to adults? How does playing help to get stabile psychological health? Why is it the puppet or doll which makes the world accessible to the children. What is different between therapy with puppets and other therapies? In which case can puppet therapy be the choice? There are so many questions! Some of them I will try to answer.

WHAT is PLAYING?

Free from all pressure of life, children play in their own and only themselves totally accessible world. They forget and/or change their play world to their desires. They are kings and queens, they are winner or looser, they are child or adult. They define their play world as it is useful for them. Only if they notice that they are watched at they have regard for the norms of the adults. They play with trial and error all the roles which they are not sure of: to conquer, painful defeat, love, to be near, to be afraid, disappointment, being horrified, being tyrant, housewife, child, baby, worker, teacher, doctor, etc. Children play the roles as they think they should be and with the premises they define by themselves and with the dramaturgy they develop by themselves. They play as long as necessary and with the end that corresponds with their desires. Every piece of wood can be an enemy, every bowl of iron can be a car, and every rod can be a sword. Are there no companions things will be substitutes. All those things are partners to the children and take a defined role in the play. They are figures, puppets, they are dolls in the play. They are pushed to and fro, killed, swaddled, left and loved – what the situation is demanding in that moment. And they are spaces of projection for emotions of any kind.

This is what we can observe when watching children at their self-forgotten play. What does "self-forgotten" mean? Our brain has the wonderful power to relax in being concentrated. The so called Alpha Waves which are necessary to make learning possible are active during the relaxed play of children. They make it possible that children learn to deal with situations they have not been confronted with before. F.i. they refeel a situation that frightens, variate it in their play and learn that there is a way out of that fear. Through trial and error, with newly combined physical "laws" they are learning to solve problems creatively in "building" or "constructing" something, "flying", making something "waterproof", "hight", "depth", "wideness" etc. They try out in the domain of feeling when they play "If I were you". To emphesize with somebody is

one of the most important requirement to get a life strategy in our social community. And because our brain is a flexible mass and the synapses have to be trained to be able to learn, children very often play the same game again and again and do varyate them slightly until the play finally gets “free” and then children loose their interest in this play – that means the ways of learning got universal for the play. Then other interests and plays get priority.

Of course I can see the danger that the “wrong” plays can be played, that brutallity and noncreative and standard compliant behaviour can also be trained. But this fits more together with the problematic and increasing consumption of TV shows and the working on the aggressive and threatening scenes out of TV than with the blithe play of a child that is not under indoctrination of TV and other medias.

Now I answered the question why children are playing. It is to conquer the world of the adults, a world that is a mystery for children. F.i. until they are about 10 years old they do not understand every word of the adults. Their speech comprehension develops from the day of birth, but if we realize how long we need to learn a foreign language and to bring it into a certain semantic perfection we can imagine how the process of learning the language proceeds. They have no language training programm. They start with voice, mimic, gestures, how high or low a voice is and what the speed is and if it is familiar or not, to assign contents to certain sounds, vocal and konsonant combinations. All these components they use like a dictionary to get the sense of what was said. Short before they get to adolescence they finally do understand the words of our common speech in a dictionary’s way and can use it.

How much incomprehension, how many misunderstandings children have to clear up with themselves! How could they, if there was not the playing of “as if” through which they can prove how a mother feels while scolding. They would never learn to understand our world. Imitation also is a play. Imitation of an idol, of the beloved uncle, of an awful aunt, of a little baby, helps to understand what is going on in society. Through imitation children slip into a role which is not yet or no more adequate. Partners for this are the puppets. “I were my uncle and you were me!”, and then „uncle goes to the fields and works or to the Bazaar and sells things”. And the child will feel how it is this “must earn money” to support the children and the costumers do not want to pay. Or “I would be my aunt and you were me” and the child insults and threatens and may explore that also adults sometimes are at a loss, have sorrows, have to decide etc.

And because we are adults who hatch into another role only reluctantly, because we do not take the time to thoroughly and continually put oneself into the situation of the other one, and to feel, there is so much misunderstanding and strife between us. And the longer we refuse to move emotionally into the situation of the other one, the longer lasts the dispute - sometimes for generations.

How does play help to gain a stable mental health?

Simple toys are representatives of people and things that the kids deal with. These representatives of real people and things have the advantage that they

- a) do not have their own feelings,
- b) only give the answer that the child wants / the child tolerates,
- c) you really can do anything with them.

No child would dare to insult its mother with harsh words, and to put her in the corner, and possibly forget her.

The bad conscience would torment the child and the fear of losing mother's love would take over. But a doll, even if only a block of wood, which is defined for the mother, one can say ANYTHING. To which one can complain ALL, can refuse eating, love and obedience. But how does it feel when you are the stronger one? This experiment creates curiosity about the role of the others, can provide relief, because it was "just playing".

But - for example – isn't anxiety pleasure one of the feelings that we do not often have the opportunity to live out? The children play, to have fear of a lion, and they are either winners if they kill the lion, or losers if they are eaten by the lion. And the winner of the play will have a terrible revenge on the animal, and the loser will have the most cruel eating orgy, you can imagine and will enjoy it! Of course every child KNOWS that it is highly unlikely that it will ever be so close to a lion to be eaten or to kill him, but playing with the danger, or thinking it up is a great, often underrated (anxiety) pleasure!

The power of feelings can reflect only an object which itself does not require any special feelings (as do, for example Barbie dolls). Only then can the child determine the onset, intensity, duration, and the end itself. And only this helps to attain a stable mental health. "To solve something playful" is not an empty phrase. Only in playing we can have the emotional security, by which we arrive at a balanced psychological constitution. **Intense playing and social-psychological security in childhood are essential for psychologically healthy, creative, self-reliant adults.**

Why is it the doll/puppet that helps kids to open up the world?

Dolls/puppets are a wonderful and wonder-creating medium, whatever they may be: from rags or worked out beautifully, self-made or made available. **They are objects that are created to be a projection screen.** They give – played or not – so much cause to feel and to extend, as it is necessary for provocation, and they preset so little that they leave maximum room for own fantasies. Dolls/puppets of any kind are essential as interim objects for children, and the fascination is based on a deliberate farewell of the interim objects of our childhood (dolls, stuffed animals, blankets, pacifiers, etc.), which is possible only in very few families, so most of us the mourning accompanies us even through adulthood, as a farewell without mourning goes on living as long as we live.

To give life to the doll/puppet means to many of us, to be linked with the newly stimulated emotions of the interim object of our childhood. Only thereout the intensity of experience e.g. during a puppet show can be explained. What do the spectators see? A lifeless thing that produces awkward, imperfect movements (compared to a real human or animal), has no facial expressions (or very limited ones) and the sounds do not come out of its mouth, but from a human/speaker, which is not identic with the position of the speech organ of the object. Nevertheless this lifeless "thing" evokes our emotions, gives rise to laughter, thought, or even crying. We are able to follow its history, we suffer with it, and not remain uninvolved.

And the doll/puppet we can create by ourselves. We can choose it or build it. We only take it if it "suits", i.e. if it has something to tell us. No doll/puppet which helps us to understand life is perfect. It hasn't to be. Because it is imperfect, however, we can

project in it what we are able to project to start a communication.

People often hurt the feelings of children. A doll/puppet never does. The doll/puppet is the catalyst for communication with others, even with the therapist. The puppet/doll is a trusted one – from the child and from the patient. Adults are so perfect, so opaque and compact, so masterly, so worldly-wise. How can a child stand up to this? How can it conquer the world with its emotional curiosity in this situation? Only the doll/puppet has time, only the doll/puppet is waiting for the child to come. Only the doll bears cry and laughter, beat and fondle without crushing response if it does not come out of the child itself. Only the doll/puppet can be trusted, because it never abuses the trust. The doll/puppet is a secret ally and an enemy at the same time. With an ally like the doll/puppet, you can conquer the world without fear, because it knows the strength and the weakness and comforts and praises, just as the conquering of the world demands. The work must be done by the child itself. But with such a companion nothing can happen!

What is a therapy able to do that works with dolls/puppets?

To say it right away: puppet therapy is not a panacea. It is a psychotherapy that uses a particular medium, but it is not able to replace ALL therapeutic activities that we know. It is suitable for both children and adults, for "normal" people in difficult situations, such as trauma, loss, burn-out syndrome, etc. as well as for "disabled" people, for young as well as for the elderly.

Definition (after G. Gauda and B. Scheel):

Puppet therapy is a psychoanalytically oriented treatment method that puts the cooperative playing with puppets of client and therapist at the center. Depending on the theoretical orientation the procedure varies slightly. However, in common is the consideration that **the puppet as substitute of a person allows actions that in normal role plays are not possible**. In the 80s, the method was differentiated in Germany from Hilarion Petzold for the Integrative Psychotherapy and in Switzerland by Käthy Wüthrich for the psychology of C.G. Jung.

Since 1984 the "German Society for Puppets in Therapy" does exist, whose co-founder is Barbara Scheel.

Puppet therapy as individual therapy (after G. Gauda and B. Scheel):

In general, the puppet play in individual therapy is that the client is script "writer", stage director and actor of his play. The therapist gives structuring aids (e.g. easy ways to make up a story) and at the same time **he is takers on the client's instructions**. Unlike non-directive or other analytical techniques, the therapist is heavily involved in the proceedings.

With children the puppet play is not interpreted. Change and knowledge take place via the way of the puppet play itself and the possibility of acting always new alternatives to try out.

With adults, there may be common considerations which may include an interpretation of the proceeding.

The puppet is considered to be a thing that can be brought alive - just like the interim objects of childhood – and then it is the projection screen, the fearless partner for **attempt activities and it becomes a catalyst for communication**, if patients can not occur to an established communication with their concerns and distress.

Unlike the therapist, the puppet is an object that only has the character that is thought or built into it. Therapists have - thanks to their sophisticated and educated personality - a complex character, that often prevents that the patient can work on their problems without first having to deal with the personality of the therapist.

Playing Puppets with groups:

In addition to psychotherapy with individual clients, the therapeutic puppetry, however, has proven successful in situations when it is asked for **sustainable positive development of group structures**, i.e. in schools, homes, centers for the elderly, facilities for disabled, etc. There the puppets, which are made jointly or chosen, and where clothes, size, and décor are subordinate to the goal of a common play/show, appear as a communicative aspect that often allows the group for the first time, almost regardless of personal animosity, to unite over an object and its use. Nevertheless here is also asked for **trained, creative, patient caregivers** who must never forget the importance of not manipulative monitoring. An important aspect in processes that have to do with puppetry in groups, is the **danger of manipulation**. The caretakers always have to bring to their mind the high emotional value of the puppet, and may never abuse these fragile emotional contents to a manipulation – even if it is meant well. Is manipulation done, the puppet loses exactly what makes it so valuable in psychological and social psychological processes: the confidence in their impartiality.

Summary:

In summary it can be said that the puppet, both as toy and as a therapeutic instrument is a valuable aid to the development of personality, to explanation of the world in the broadest sense, of clearing in psychological stress situations, of social maturation in problematic groups, in depressive life situations, after traumatic experiences, etc. The play with the puppet, even if it is very "primitive", and watching a good puppet show can contribute significantly to healthy emotional development. BUT - and this is one of the most important factors - everything takes time. We should give this time to our children and patients!

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