

Psychotherapy Guidebook

PUPPET THERAPY



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Puppet Therapy

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Puppet Therapy

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DEFINITION

Puppetry, a form of drama in which human figures or fantasy creatures imitate life, can be a valuable tool in therapy with children, as it provides a nonthreatening and spontaneous means of communication.

HISTORY

From the “string pullers” of early Greek literature to the “Cookie Monster” of today, puppets have been a popular form of theater as well as a favorite child’s toy. Woltmann, one of the first to explore the psychological rationale and therapeutic use of puppetry, has traced the development of Casper, his main puppet character, to an East Indian shadow puppet in 5000 B.C. Woltmann produced carefully designed puppet shows for the in-patient child audience at Bellevue Hospital, and thought of his shows as representing universally accepted prototypes of all people that were projective in nature.

It has not been the marionette, however, but the hand puppet that has been popular in child therapy. The ease of manipulation combined with the

richness of the symbolism of the spontaneously enacted drama has led to the use of puppets in diagnosis and treatment with children as well as families. Currently, puppets seem to be available in most playrooms, but are often not used in a planned way that could take advantage of their usefulness as projective tools.

TECHNIQUE

For many youngsters, talking is difficult, but communicating through puppets is easy and nonthreatening. Children seem to identify readily with the puppet characters, which have a unique potential for eliciting conflict and action. Additionally, as the child is caught up in the action, there is a wealth of nonverbal behavior that can aid in the understanding of the child's difficulties. Thus, the spontaneous stories not only give valuable information, but the pleasure and catharsis that accompany the play experience can promote a positive attitude toward treatment, aiding the formation of a treatment alliance.

For diagnostic purposes particularly, it helps to have a range of puppets available, from realistic to fantasy ones, as well as an adequate choice within each category. While some young or emotionally immature children use only animal or symbolic characters, most utilize a variety, from real to fantasy figures, aggressive as well as nonaggressive types. Providing a variety of

materials can help elicit the expression of both acceptable and unacceptable impulses in physically safe, disguised play. Therefore, categories could include: realistic as well as royalty family figures; wild as well as tame animal puppets; and symbolic character types, such as the devil, witch, or ghost. Quantity is not important, but choice (in terms of specificity and degree of disguise) and range of materials are crucial considerations.

Puppet Diagnostic Interview

If puppets are to be used to gather diagnostic information, the child's spontaneous communications and nonverbal behavior are carefully noted as he begins to select from among the puppets placed on the floor in a random pile (Irwin and Shapiro, 1974). When the selection is complete, the child is invited to go behind a stage, or to some other comfortable spot, and begin by "introducing" the selected characters, as though performing a "real" puppet show. With an overcontrolled or undercontrolled child, the therapist might wish to lengthen the "warm-up" and engage in friendly dialogue with the puppets, thus helping the child to feel less anxious and more comfortable.

Once the characters are introduced, the therapist can announce the beginning of the show and become the audience/observer. According to style and preference, some therapists tape record the session; others take notes on dialogue, character, action, and conflict; while others are able to capture and

recall the essence of the session without the aid of either.

Once the child has spontaneously enacted his story, the therapist can extend the format of the show by interviewing puppet and/or puppeteer, thus eliciting further associations that can help to unravel the story's symbolic meanings. Not infrequently, this post-play dialogue produces rich associations that help to clarify some of the numerous messages within the story. The story material in some ways can be likened to the manifest content of a dream, while the associations can expand upon some of the possible latent meanings. Sensitive questioning that encourages the child to be introspective about the play can aid in the assessment of the child's observing ego and capacity to think symbolically and abstractly.

Examining the Form and Content

Puppet material can be looked at in terms of both form and content. The latter is often easier to identify, being reflected in the characters, plot, themes, setting, overall affective (emotional) tone, and ending. In following the sequences within the material, one can often see "self" and "other" representations, as well as the conflict between impulse and defense. The therapist's understanding of the material comes from the verbal, nonverbal, and symbolic information expressed in such facets as setting, names of characters, slips of the tongue, etc.

The content may give some idea of the nature of the conflict, while the form often gives clues about how the child is handling the conflict, in terms of ego defenses, perceptions of self and others, general developmental level, etc. The form of the play — i.e., the level of organization and structure, process and sequences, perceptual and motor behavior, as well as verbal and cognitive capacities — is important in understanding how the child is integrating inner and outer demands. Together, form and content form a multilayered picture of the child, just as the puppet interview complements the social history and other clinical data, aiding in the formulation of a diagnostic recommendation.

Using Puppets in Ongoing Treatment

Generally, puppets are used in the treatment context in the same way that other relatively unstructured materials are used, with the child free to choose what he wishes to use and how. Frequently children play with particular puppets over many weeks or months, almost as though the materials become an externalized part of them, a kind of self-symbol. In following the ongoing symbolic play, the therapist can keep track of the ever-shifting psychic currents, the transference, and the degree to which the child is able to accept and integrate interpretations. Some children seem able to “hear” interpretations given via the puppet play before they can hear the connections to their own lives. Carl, an inhibited and frightened child, could

acknowledge the puppets' wish/fear of acting aggressively against the father figure; this afforded cathartic relief and led to the gradual recognition and working through of his own fears of aggression. Rambert (1949) has described how she dealt with resistance and introduced specific themes into treatment via puppet play. In general, therapists seem to utilize puppets in the context of child therapy or play therapy, operating within their own theoretical framework.

APPLICATIONS

Puppets have been used educationally and therapeutically for many purposes with families as well as preschoolers, physically ill and emotionally disturbed children, and in in-patient and out-patient settings. While some writers have discussed the presentation of puppet shows or the making of puppets, this article has focused on techniques that can elicit fantasy through spontaneous storytelling, using ready-made hand puppets. The material that emerges can then be used within the therapist's own theoretical framework, in diagnosis or treatment.