

## ***Literature and Practice. Bringing Forward the Voice of the Child: What Can Family Therapy Learn from Puppet Therapy?***

***Notes from Helene Byhring Fosheim, family therapist, Norway  
from the speech at the Puppet Therapy Symposium  
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My work and education has been as a social worker, with 20 years of practice. I have a master degree in family therapy from Oslo Metropolitan University in Norway (former Oslo an Akershus University College). I am also a professional puppeteer, playing and making puppet theatre for children. To combine the two fields of professions, I was curious about all the different ways of using puppets in family therapy. This speech is a short extract from my master thesis from 2015, «The Healing Magic of the Puppets. The use of puppets in Family therapy»

What I did not include in my thesis, is data material from german speaking countries like Germany and Swiss. This because it was hard to find scientific articles in english. I am very happy to have the chance to participate on this Symposium, and especially to learn more about “Figurenspieltherapie” in Germany and Switzerland.

### **Short about my master thesis.**

In my master thesis, I have looked into the use of puppets as a symbolic therapeutic tool in systemic family therapy. This is a literature study based on some selected scientific articles. My research questions are: *How can puppets, as a symbolic therapeutic tool, be utilised within a narrative approach to systemic family therapy? How can the use of puppets, enhance the voice of the child?* The studied material consists of 9 scientific articles and one masterthesis, over the time span of 1936 to 2012. I used thematic content analysis. The purpose of the reading study was to look into how the articles describe the use of puppets in different ways. Engaging young children and parents as equal participants in family therapy can be challenging. My concern was how to enhance the voice of the child in family therapy, focusing on systemic family therapy. I searched for similarities and differences between the articles. Children need more ways to express themselves than just verbal conversations. Children`s sense of coherence is crucial for their mental health. I looked into how the use of puppets with a

narrative approach can bring forward narratives that has a strengthening effect on the relations in the family. I was also interested in how puppets can be used for reflections with the family.

I found that family therapy of today may learn from earlier practices using puppets, from family therapy as well as from child therapy. Interaction with puppets can create a playful atmosphere, making room for the voice of the child. My prior assumption that the therapist should only take a low level directing position, in effort to enhance the voice of the child, proved wrong. My understanding was broadened, as I found directed therapy with puppets as a suitable way to open up to topics that are difficult to put into words. Also, alternating positions between being audience and participants in the puppet play, may promote equal participation in family therapy. Reflecting through the puppet and using puppets as a reflecting team, may provide family therapy with an extra dimension.

### **The puppet as a symbolic tool.**

The puppet represent something else than just the puppet: One of the family members, a best friend, animals, fantasy figures, or the puppet can be a metaphoric representation of characteristics or emotions, for example anger, anxiety, restlessness or sorrow.

What we usually think of as a puppet theatre, puppets can be a finger puppet, a glove puppet, a rod puppet or a puppet on a string, or big puppets with people inside them. However, ordinary toys like a teddy Bear, cars, duplo toys or ordinary puppets, or even a tool like a spade or a hammer, or a piece of tissue that comes alive might as well serve as puppets. Any object can serve as a puppet, as long as the puppet player brings it to life.

### **Challenges communicating with children in family therapy**

While working with children and families one has to consider a balance between the adult and the child perspective. Conversations in family therapy are mainly based on verbal language, and often they are more tuned in to grown-ups than to small children. In systemic family therapy a session usually lasts for one and a half hour. Especially for smaller children, sitting quiet for that long merely listening to people, might feel uncomfortable, and even impossible. The topics that are shared might also be threatening to speak about because it is about conflicts or a difficult situation in the family. Children with any kind of restlessness, hyper activity or attention difficulties might find it hard to follow the conversation or to benefit from it. The child`s development stage also decides to what extend

the child is able to put their experiences and feelings into words, and to express their own opinion. I have thought a lot about how the voice of the child can be heard, listened to and understood in a world so much dominated by grown-up people's perspectives and levels of understanding. Whether the child's voice will come through is dependent on how the environment is able to facilitate the communication.

In situations where children have been traumatised by any kind of abuse or violence, or by the loss of a close relationship, it is of great value to create a non-threatening atmosphere to facilitate the communication in the family. Going through the child's imaginative world by the use of puppets, might be a way to reach difficult topics in the child's life that are otherwise hard to disclose and to put into words and share for the child. How to do this in different ways, is what this presentation is about.

### **Three theoretic perspectives: Systemic family therapy, Narrative approach and Child specific communication.**

#### **Systemic family therapy**

The systemic tradition is based on systemic thinking, which means that the family is regarded as a system, often visualized as a circle, where all the different parts in the system can influence each other. A change at any point in the circle can create a change of the whole circle. This as an alternative and opposite way of thinking, to a family where one in the family is regarded as "the problem" that has to be "done with". According to systemic thinking, by changing oneself, the world around might also change. I mentioned dialogue and meta-dialogue. In Systemic family therapy a team of two or three therapists are sitting at a distance, listening to the conversation between the family and their therapist. Then they bring forward reflections about the conversation they have just heard. In this way they can elicit valuable points the family members have made, and they can contribute with thoughts, and initiate new ideas. In this way the family might widen their understanding of their situation. A difference that makes a difference. A part of the method in systemic family therapy is to introduce a difference that makes a difference, and thereby initiate a change in the communication in the family. If one of the family members has a problem, the whole family is a part of the problem. A part of the ideology is that there are many ways to change the family for the better, and the family is able to find a solution. The therapist can only facilitate this to happen. One way to facilitate this is to do something else than the usual habit in the family. The

introduction of puppets can represent a new habit, a difference that makes a difference, and thereby a possible change in the family communication.

### **Narrative approach.**

I have used a lot of theories from Michael White's book, an Australian therapist who lived until 2008. He is regarded as the founder of narrative therapy. Narrative therapy is about the life stories we carry with us, and how we can fill in our own and the family's story and understand it in other ways by telling it to each other. Children and families with difficult relations is often dominated by negative stories that has led to a negative perception of themselves or the child. Narrative therapy seeks to challenge this dominating story, fill it in and bring forward other, alternative stories about exceptions and achieved actions, stories that are supportive of the family's perception of themselves or the child. Visions of the future is also a part of narrative therapy. White describes the narratives we tell as basic to create meaning in our existence. Narratives can be to describe reality the way the storyteller perceives it, or metaphoric stories. Metaphoric stories can be compared to parables (from the bible), fairytale-like stories, where the action or the participants in the story has a parallel to the storyteller or to the audience. Narrative approach also uses externalization, as a way to create distance to difficult topics. This is done to avoid internal accuses, scape-goat attitudes and feeling of guilt. *The problem* is the problem, it is not the person, meaning its identity, who is the problem. The family can connect and join their forces against the problem, who can be presented as "the beast" or be named by any wished name or visualizes, for example materialized in a puppet. Through narratives told by children through the actions of a puppet, we have the possibility to share their perception of reality and thereby bring forward their own voice.

### **Child specific communication.**

A challenge in communication with children is to meet them on their own communication channel. According to Mæhle communication channels can be sorted out at three levels: through speech, through emotions and through intuition. Awareness of these three communication channels are necessary to generate development supportive narratives. Mæhle points out how important it is to have a safe attachment with the parents, in order to bring forward the voice of the child. The play connects a person's inner, subjective imaginative world with the outside, objective world. The play is a transitional phenomenon, who creates meaning and coherence between dream and reality. If this coherence is broken, the human will be passive and ill, according to Winnicott. "As-if-play", meaning acting out different roles, is one of the most important factors for development and learning. By

taking part in roleplay, children can explore their nearest proximal development zone, meaning develop naturally in their own time. Making as-if-stories and roleplay with puppets with children, is a possibility to give developmental support to the child, according to the research by Russ & Kaugars. They found that children can increase their ability to problemsolving if they are allowed imagination and to express feelings through puppet play. Creative problem solving is about the ability to find meaning and to see connections, coherence. Children and families who have experienced traumas, might have restricted abilities to participate in play. Thus, it might be of crucial importance to elicit play as a possibility to communicate in a non-threatening environment.

### **Analysing the articles.**

Looking at the two articles by Both Bender & Woltman about the use of Casper theatre and Fossum & Mørch about the use of the Dinosaur School.

Although very different from each other, they both describe how a high degree of led therapy can create a high degree of engagement and participation from the children. Both ways of thinking might therefore contribute to bringing forward the voice of the child. Bender&Woltman invite the children through the emotional communication channel, by giving room for the children to freely express their feelings. Fossum&Mørch, on the other hand, invite the children both through the emotional and through the speech communication channel. The children in Fossum&Mørch identify emotionally with the puppets in the puppet play, and are allowed to bring forward suggestions and to try out new alternative ways of acting for the puppets. This means that the children are also included in the problem solving process. This might give the children the experience of taking good decisions and the experience of mastering.

Bender&Woltman`s article described how the therapists used the puppet play to allow the children freely to express their emotions in a secure setting, whether it is aggression, or affection and love. I consider this way of thinking as transferable to family therapy. It might facilitate the voice of the child to be heard in two ways. First, by the therapist modelling a tolerant and including attitude in conversation with the family. Secondly, by giving room and recognizing the child`s expression of feelings.

Looking at the two articles The Family Puppet Interview by Irwin and The Kvebæk Sculpture technique by Solum etc.:

Both methods are in use in family therapy. In the Family Puppet Interview, the participants become emotionally involved through the puppet play. In the Kvebæk Sculpture Interview, the child uses the puppets

to position them, telling of them in third person, and may function as externalization.

Both are developed as survey methods. In use, however, they affect the family, thereby may influence the relationship in the family. Family Puppet Interview, developed by Eleanor Irwin back in 1985, has become a pattern for later use of puppets in family therapy.

### **The six remaining articles.**

The six remaining articles all have elements that can resemble Irwin's Family Puppet Interview, although they do not specifically mention such relations. Dillen and Carlsson-Sabelli also uses principles from psychodrama, by giving room for playing out their emotions through the puppets. Recreating a traumatic event in the room, allow the children to reflect upon it and play it over again, changing their story by changing their action in the situation. The therapist communicates with the child by talking with the puppet, and later reflects by talking with the child. When this narrative method is used in systemic family therapy, (Johannesen, Rieber & Trana (1996)), where the family itself represent a "reflecting puppet team", the communication may be easier for the child to participate in than traditional family therapy session, because it is tuned in to the child's language channel, playchannel and inductive channel. This is therefore a possible way to bring forward the voice of the child.

The published master thesis (norwegian)

<https://oda.hioa.no/en/item/asset/dspace:10203/Fosheim.pdf>

<https://oda.hioa.no/en/dukkenes-helbredende-magi-bruk-av-dukker-i-familieterapi>

(english summary of the master thesis)

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