

## Group play therapy with puppets

« The roof's on fire ! »

With this typically Swiss expression which implies: it is high time to find a solution to an urgent problem, I would like to sincerely welcome you to my presentation.

I work in very different fields such as teaching religion to children grades 3 to 8, doing social work in the church, heading the Academy of Puppet Play Therapy, and having my own practice of Puppet Play Therapy. Since some years, a special need has surfaced, namely: working with groups which have difficulties getting along with each other and cannot find a solution to their problems.

When I am called to such a group, usually the „roof is already on fire“. Which means the groups – for instance neighbour children, school classes, church groups or employees of a company – have serious disputes and can no longer deal with each other in a peaceful way. Mostly, various means of finding a solution to the problem have already been explored without success. My task is to find new ways of helping these people to deal with each other.

Besides the original type of puppet play therapy with individual clients, there are now many new types such as working with groups. While it differs in some points distinctly from the one working with individual clients, the basic principle remains the same :

The puppet is the carrier of action, not the therapist. The puppet as medium is the decisive factor not the therapy method. According to my experience the trust in the puppet is even more important when working with groups. I have to be confident that the puppet will be able to cope with the situation, otherwise I am lost.

I have started to use puppets very early in my professional activities.

When I would use a puppet to tell stories I could experience the magic effect this created : all were spellbound and focused ! How much the children loved this puppet! How they could hardly wait for the next appearance of the puppet – and how trustful they would tell the puppet things which I neither wanted to hear nor could deal with!

But then it became clear to me that there is more ! More knowledge about the role of the puppets, more possibilities to work with them. This was the reason why I started my education as a therapist with Hansjürgen and Gudrun Gauda.

This of course meant that I had to write a final paper. The topic I chose was group therapy – because at that time I was teaching to a very difficult grade 5 schoolclass. My goal was – quite naively – to bring this completely disrupted class back to a peaceful cooperation.

Looking back I must say : fortunately I was so naive to tackle this task because it led to the development of a concept for group therapy which basically can be applied for all types of groups – children, teenagers, adults.

Some very basic aspects have become very important to me:

- I never address the problems. We create puppets and play with them, but we never talk directly about the problems. For adults this is hard to understand – as their prime desire is to talk about the problems – which usually are other people’s problems anyway. For children it is a relief because usually they already had to discuss the problems within their class on various occasions and were sick and tired of it.
- I always clearly point out that we are using unusual paths. To children I explain that **«IN THE PLAY THERE IS NO RIGHT OR WRONG, THERE IS ONLY YOUR WAY, YOUR PUPPET, YOUR PLAY »**. To adults I emphasize that I expect them to be prepared to work according to my method, to trust in and work with puppets. When these conditions are clear the puppets can start their work – and there are bound to be changes !
- As my method of working is rather unusual to group participants I choose simple games and stories in order to get them used to it and put them more at ease. For instance, with children I enter into the story world by climbing through a hula-hoop. With adults I use sociometric arrangements or similar.
- Then I let the participants – whether children or adult – choose the puppets they do NOT like. Children are already in Kindergarten subject to serious group pressure, therefore the „non-liked“ puppets are important.  
When children choose or create puppets I tell them that they are allowed to take or create a „non-liked“ puppet, and all of a sudden anything is possible:  
The boisterous, mischievous boy of the class chooses with great pleasure the princess – he has chosen a „non-liked“ character and therefore can act out her character as much as he likes. And the shy girl may choose the brave thief and thus can live out hidden possibilities.  
For adults it is even more important ! The manager does not have to show strength and power but may choose the small sheep .... these „non-liked“ puppets very often turned out to become a key.
- These puppets should then be presented – in order to find out why they are so „non-liked“. Often the specific puppet reflects a big part of the participant’s own life.
- And then, I do something which is not at all new – I just didn’t know until recently that this type of work has already existed for some time. Prof. Dr. Petzold mentioned in his book « Puppets and Puppets Play in Psychotherapy » an article written by Lauretta Bender & Adolf Woltmann who

have already worked with puppets and groups in the 30ies – very similar to what I am doing today.

I predefine a play setting or subject for the participants of a small group and then let them play and find out how the story could proceed. Spontaneously, without planning on my side. With the « non-liked » puppets and, as contrast, later also with the really « liked » ones. This leads to really interesting and suspenseful games! Surprising how many solutions for the actual problems can often be found! Many participants are surprised that there is more than ONE solution to a problem ! If there is enough time, I let the group create puppets : both « non-liked » and « liked » ones. So much heart and soul is put into these puppets – there is so much individuation of bright and dark sides.

- The final goal is always that the individual small groups get together and combine their plays in one common puppet play. I have never encountered a group which was not able to do that. This helps to achieve acting together in a playful manner.
- Then there is the end with goodbyes. The created puppets say goodbye to each other and leave with their creators. If the puppets were chosen from my stock, the participants say goodbye to the puppets – which is sometimes quite hard – and we leave the puppet world with a little ceremony that I will arrange.

Let us now return to the first group of schoolchildren I worked with. 21 pupils in grade 5 with whom I created puppets, one each of „liked“ and „non-liked“, which means 42 puppets! We sent the „non-liked“ puppets to a far-off planet and then played various scenarios in small groups. On the foreign planet a new way of getting along with each other had to be found! All of a sudden rules of living together were developed which were surprisingly similar to the ones applied in school and which now turned out to be right and necessary for getting along. The „liked“ puppets played boring plays in which everyone was always nice to each other. Imagine a football game in which nobody fights for the ball but lets the opponent have it in order to be nice. The opponent then returns it right away because he also wants to be nice..... Soon the children wanted to have the „non-liked“ puppets back, they realised how much the dark sides belong to us. Now letters were sent into the orbit in order to bring the „non-liked“ puppets back. But there were big discussions: do we really want to return or not? Finally, they built a rocket and flew back. I had reached my goal which was to unite all 22 children in a play in which they could all participate and make an input. 4 months of work – during whole days or individual hours – brought the hoped for result: the class was again able to get along and go to school peacefully. The result was very sustainable as the class never had any difficulties with each other anymore until they entered higher grades.

As side effects of my therapy, a girl with selective mutism started to talk during my work with the class; a severe vision deficiency of a boy was discovered and could be treated which helped the boy to change his aggressive behaviour; and another boy could stop taking Ritalin. His enthusiasm for making puppets showed his parents possibilities for a fulfilling occupation. Thus, regular visits to a hobby workshop helped him to progress so much that Ritalin was no longer necessary to follow schoolwork. Since then I worked with many groups applying this basic concept which I adapt to actual situations and the time available.

Here are two more examples which illustrate my way of working :

1.

A woman teacher called me in. Her grade 3 pupils had gotten out of hand, there were fights and beatings every day, sometimes with resulting injuries. All attempts of the in-school social worker to change this situation had failed. Expelling several children from school was taken into consideration.

I observed the class during a whole day. Yes, it was really serious!

When I told the children that we would do something special that was not going to be assessed or marked – and that they would NOT have to talk about it! – there was a noticeable change of mood. In fact, they went along with the idea! At first there was murder and fighting with the puppets – which I allowed to happen, but then: the toughest rowdie of the class played with the good fairy and three of the worst ruffians played with mouse, baby and rabbit.

Most interesting was one sequence in which I asked them to organise a birthday party: how many close-to-heart wishes were uttered! How much evil the good fairy was able to dispel by magic! How happy the ruffian was when he with his good fairy puppet was able to fulfil a special wish! And finally the whole class played a wedding celebration, several weddings were celebrated, it was a huge party in which everyone played along. It was hard for the children to say goodbye to their puppets because they had come to love them and identified themselves with the characters. I gave each child a photo of his favourite puppet. The children put the photo on top of their school desk – no child was expelled from school, there was no more violence and injuries. Of course, some fighting occasionally occurred and still occurs but never with extreme violence.

2.

A friend asked me some years ago whether I would also work with adults. Again, I agreed somewhat naively. The church board members of a community had serious quarrels and I should try to find a way out of this situation.

Luckily, the members were more nervous than I. I had planned a beginning with a puppet, and I had very carefully prepared what the puppet would say, I had even memorized the words in order to make sure that it was suitable for adults..... but the puppet developed its own life. It said things which I hadn't

planned! Much later the participants reported back to me that it was this start which helped them to go along with this type of work. Thanks to my Linus!

After these initial words and several simple games, I also asked these people to choose a „non-liked“ puppet. When they introduced them, a lot of hidden frustration about their own inadequacy was revealed. Later, I let them organise a grill party with their puppets. There was a lot of arguing about whether gas or charcoal should be used. Or disposable dishes or porcelain. - There was arguing, shouting and swearing! I had to bear this out ! But in the end they found a solution and agreement, the grill party was played, peacefully and merrily!

I only had to work one day with the group – one day in which a group of people found again a way of talking to each other, to work with each other and to go forward with each other. To achieve so much in such a short time: only puppets are able to do that!

So I am on my way with a suitcase full of puppets and props in order to accompany groups for a short period of time. Sometimes it may also be difficult for me. I need to make sure that I can let go because I know that I only accompany them for a short time and afterwards have to leave these people. It is especially hard because sometimes I see and recognize many individual fates – yet I have to leave them knowing that my job is to work with the group. I always have to focus on the group's goal and sometimes purposely disregard individual needs. Of course I can make recommendations : that one child or another should receive a therapy, that the family of one child or another should be looked at more closely, or that the personal problems of one adult or another should be treated in more depth. But what happens afterwards I have to leave up to them. I inquire after 3 months, after half an year and after one year how the group gets along since I want to check the sustainability of the therapy results. Usually, I receive very positive feedbacks and this encourages me to continue my work and to help people as much as I can to extinguish the fire on the roof before it explodes. It is quite tiring and time intensive work but it lets me share the magic of the puppets !