

Puppet Therapy for Children with a Life Threatening illness

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This is a personal insight into the work with children suffering a life-threatening illness and does not claim to present a full picture.



„Mum, why are you crying?“

Suddenly, a serious diagnosis bursts into family life.

Shock – emergency – everything is falling apart – the rug is being pulled from under the feet – the world stands still – What now?

Puppet therapy supports parents and children in coming to terms with inconceivable family situations.

Situation of therapeutic practice with a house visit

Parents: parents are thrown back on themselves in a challenging, difficult or sad situation. Even parents with positive life experiences may face confusion as life is turned on its head, and everything is different. If self-awareness and a secure footing are missing, then pressure and fear build. Answers, solutions, support and someone to blame will then often be sought outside. When faced with the shock, the insecurity and a bewildering new situation, parents may find it hard to keep up their responsibilities towards their children. The parents may then not be emotionally available to their children and the child may find itself in a very fearful situation. Parents may react out of a place of feeling overwhelmed or powerless. Doctors' appointments and discussions around making decisions about different treatment methods can lead to further stress in the family. High costs of treatment may also cause existential fear.

The sick child and its siblings: The child with the life-threatening illness and its siblings need their parents to be emotional available and truly present. If the parents are emotionally unavailable, the child's sense of powerlessness is heightened as well as perhaps their sense of loneliness. The child will feel helpless and insecure. Feelings of security and feeling cared for are missing. The unconscious change in attitude of the parents annoys the child. The child wants everything to be the way it was. If children are

not supported in such situations, they may even take on a parenting role, a role that is too much for a child. Changes in behaviour and acting out may follow.

Assessing the family situation

Parents:

- How are the parents?
- Who is part of this family?
- How is the partner of the single parent involved?
- What role do grandparents play?
- What is the knowledge about the illness/current situation?
- How informed are the children about what is happening?
- What worldviews and views of humanity does this family have?
- Who is already involved for what type of support (helper system)?
- What does the family enjoy doing together (resources)?
- How do they experience their children?

Sick child and siblings:

- How is the sick child?
- How are the siblings?
- How does the sick child speak about itself? What does it say about itself and its illness?
- How do the siblings speak about the sick child? What do the siblings say about the sickness and what do they say and how do they speak about themselves?
- Where does the sick child/the siblings get information and a sense of security?
- What are the preferences and where are the entry points of the children for puppet play?
- How does the sick child/the siblings react to the therapist and the puppets?

Key points in the therapeutic process

Parents:

- The parents receive a translation of the messages from the child and will understand how the child experiences the challenging life situation.
- The parents receive strengthening and relaxing tools to work with
- The parents can reflect on and change their feelings, thoughts and beliefs
- The parents can work through ideas and solutions with the children. This brings relief and stability.
- In conversations with the parents the therapist will explain the child's behaviour and thinking in connection with their life situation and the consequences of the situation.
- The therapist will support the parents in their dealings and conversations with experts.

Sick child and siblings:

- The child will be able to create his/her own puppet.
- In puppet play the child will have a mental, emotional and bodily experience.
- The child will use its own ideas and resources to invent and play its stories and solutions.
- The child will be secure and confident enough to include the possibility of death in its play. This will support the child to overcome the crisis situation positively. Resources become visible and strengthened.



- The therapist puts a particular emphasis on helping the child have a positive internal experience, despite the challenging and sad circumstances - Focus on resources.
- The child will be able to experience challenging situations clearly. It will be able, with the help of puppets, painting or imagination, to engage the process and communicate. It may, for example, play out the looming operation or the 'transition from earth to heaven' from different perspectives with various helpers. Through this the child will discover connections between heaven and earth through play.
- The fate of the child has meaning and is something the child is able to engage with and work with.
- It will reduce the worry and insecurity of those left behind.
- Through the therapy, the child will be supported to make its own decisions and will find a way out of its sense of powerlessness.
- The child will learn helpful rituals.

Family:

- The fear and stress of the parents on the one hand and the behaviour and thoughts of the child on the other will be addressed and understood.
- Through the puppet play the child's experiences and its messages will be made understandable to the parents.
- With the help of puppet therapy and the accompanying family conversations tensions will be reduced and a sense of calm will be brought to the family.
- Despite the difficult situation in the family confidence can be built.
- Possible actions, new ways of seeing and sustainable solutions will be worked out together.
- New insights will lead to greater focus on what is important.
- The family will be better able to honestly face the unavoidable situation and find words for talking about it.
- Humour will be made visible and/or audible despite the difficult challenges.
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Challenges

- To be able to talk with the family about the theme of sickness and the life-changing emotional situation.
- To intuitively choose the suitable puppets and props for the child.
- The ability of the therapist to concentrate and remain focussed as the parents or carers will be limited due to the physical restrictions of the child.
- Children may be fearful towards unknown adults.
- Finding the right tone and opening for the meeting.

Challenging frameworks

- The parents may become exhausted from having many different people involved.
- Bringing therapy in at a later stage may make the work more difficult, as the family members may already be too exhausted to find new ways for dealing with the situation.
- Use existing means and possibilities for setting up the play on a house visit.
- Effort according to demand.

Reflections of the therapist

- What positive life experiences and sources of strength (resilience) do the parents bring with them?
- How open and solution focused are they in their thoughts and actions? (Views of the different family members)
- What are the fears and stress factors? (Views of the different family members)
- How sensitive are the parents towards the children and how much trust do they have in them?
- What is the atmosphere and mood of the parent-child relationship?
- What is the atmosphere and mood amongst the parents? (Difficult situations can challenge their relationship).
- What is the atmosphere and mood between the parents and grandparents?
- What is the atmosphere and mood between the family and its social environment?
- Which of the children is most in need of intervention?
- Does the family or any of its members have a capacity for humour?

Mental preparation of the therapist

- Be able to face their own fears and challenges in relation to sickness and death.
- To be able to consciously and impartially observe and communicate.
- Have a good resonance: to be able to exude quiet strength.
- Be able to offer constructive viewpoints: be able to formulate a ‚yes‘ attitude to life out of a ‚no‘.
- Be able to regulate stress in a focussed way through strong thoughts, actions, movements and meditation.
- Have healthy self-esteem, be attentive, self-loving and have a strong inner connection as well as healthy boundaries – so that intuition and knowledge can be drawn from within.
- Nurturing intuition: be open to different ways into a world that can be felt with widened senses.
- Supervision: regular reflection about own feelings and mental state.
- Be clear about own world view and view of humanity as well as being open to other perspectives.
- Continued education on the themes of sickness and death.
- Continued building of knowledge around grief and dream work.
- Be able to confidently approach the unexpected.

Puppet therapy is supportive in challenging situations. The incomprehensible, the sad, the difficult, the challenging ...become comprehensible through the words and actions of puppet play.

Being able to meet the child in its experiences leads to the easing of tension and to stability. Difficult everyday situations can be simplified and made easier through the use of puppets. Children find it easier to express their thoughts, feelings and sensations through the help of puppets. This improves the quality of life within the family despite the difficult circumstances.

