

Reflecting-puppet shows and thera

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In this article, each member of our under-fives family therapy team will talk about experiences of reflecting-puppet shows and also refer to a case example – the Roberts family – and our impressions of how we think puppets helped with the therapeutic process.

The under-fives CAMHS team provide an outreach service to children's centres, as well as a smaller service based in the CAMHS clinic. As long as there is at least one child under five, older referred children in the same family can be seen in the clinic.

Lilia

When I think about the first time I was asked to take part in a puppet show as a member of the reflecting team, I was nervous. I remember sitting behind the mirror with a colleague, preparing together a sort of short script for our show. Then 'show time' came and in we went to perform our script and reflections in front of the children and in front of adults who, until then, had always experienced us as serious professionals!

Sheep came in first, popping his head out of the door while also bleating. *Duck* followed *Sheep*, and then the show started! I still vividly remember how the eyes of the children (four and six) were glued to the puppets as we brought their characters to life.

I find that offering reflections through puppet shows is a truly child-focused practice in which the reflecting team use a child-centred way of communicating. Most important, puppet shows add the 'fun ingredient'. When I compare my experience as part of a regular reflecting-team to that in a reflecting-puppet-show team, there are similarities. The puppets' reflections are offered in the same tentative way. The child may identify with the characters and some of the things they talk about, or reject the ideas if they don't match their experience or emotions. The most important difference is the fact that, in the shows, there is a medium between adults and children's worlds. The puppets represent neutral figures with which the child can more easily identify and allow for a more balanced relationship in power differences. After the puppet show, the puppets often re-emerge and get placed under the photocopier and short comments in the form of speech bubbles are stuck to the picture.

This is a continuation of the shows: therapeutic messages from the puppets. The message is very concise and compliments the

child for something that stood out during the session. The children love the 'letters' and we hear they often attach them onto the fridge or somewhere else visible at home. They seem to develop a positive relationship with their favourite puppets who accompany them through their therapeutic journey.

Working with the Robert's family has been a great opportunity for me to experiment with this version of a reflecting team. This family also gave us the opportunity to deliver shows to children of different ages (three, five, seven and nine) and then to reflect on the impact on each child. The puppet shows seemed to help the children, because they could identify with a character that was playing out similar dilemmas. At the same time, the puppets offered extra ideas that might help them better understand their emotions, physical sensations, and other possible ways of managing their difficulties. We offered reflections to the older children at a different level of complexity in terms of language, but acted in a similar way. Sometimes, we would use the puppet shows to reach the adults as well. I tried to support the adults to access a different level of understanding of the children, at an emotional level, as they seemed to struggle to connect with the children at times.

Camilla

As a trained play therapist and family therapist, I have always been drawn to experimenting with more playful interactions with family members. Using the different hand puppets in the reflecting team with families with children, fits with the notion that play is a child's natural medium of communication. The puppet show enables children to understand and communicate their own concerns and difficulties more easily than having to engage in adult-led conversation. I enjoy the playfulness and ritual of the puppet show. Ideas such as initially waking the puppets from their sleep in the box or allowing the child to hold a puppet, helps to 'warm' the context (Burnham, 1986) by building a relationship and reducing the child's apprehension within the therapy room.

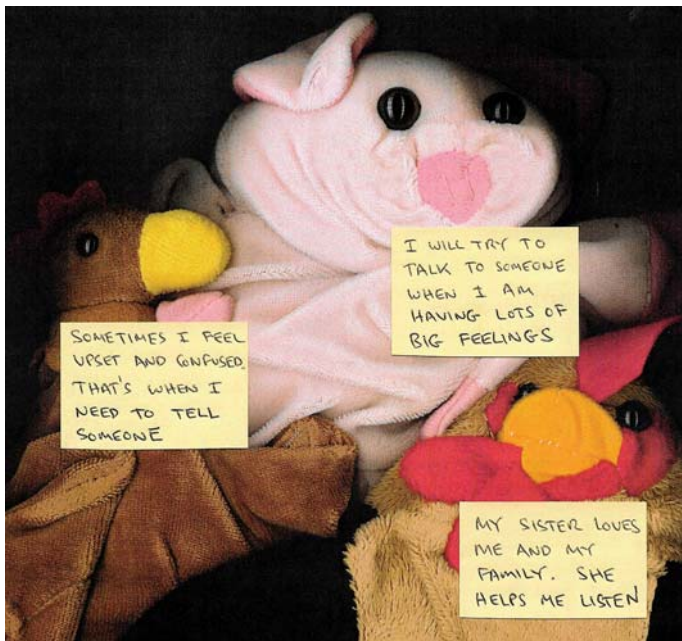
Similar to the techniques used in a regular reflecting team, the therapists are reflecting on each other's statements, creating a wide variety of perspectives. For example, *Sheepy* might talk about feeling shy in the playground, while the *Croc* suggests that *Sheepy* could try making a new friend by using kind language. *Ducky* might share an example of when she made a friend in her pond and is sharing this with *Sheepy* and *Croc*. Via the puppets, the therapist is able to communicate both supportive comments as well as stretching (more challenging) comments, providing simultaneous messages to the child and adults alike.

Moreover, using the puppets allows for an even more playful, interactive and narrative approach in the work that we do. The



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power of the story-telling aspect of the show can be used to help find solutions to dilemmas. For example, in the case of the Roberts family, the puppets performed a difficult social interaction between siblings. First, the puppets showed a competitive and antagonistic way of relating followed by a more positive and different way of interacting as they modelled a more cooperative way of relating as brothers and sisters.

The puppets' stories and reflections metaphorically represent the child's and families own experiences. Hearing the puppets emotions, thoughts and/or solutions can make the child feel validated and empowered to change their thoughts and behaviours. This aesthetic distance to the material presented by the puppets allows the child to process and receive ideas more readily than when taught face-to-face within normal conversations. I think the reflecting-puppet show is a creative and powerful technique to engage children in the therapeutic process. It takes a therapist who is willing to take risks with being playful and spontaneous. I would encourage all therapists, if the opportunity arises, to be curious and try this out.

Elaine

When I joined the under-fives team, I had no idea it was the very team where the puppet-reflecting team was developed and that I would be joining the person who had written about this approach a few years earlier (Brown, 2009). I was a trainee at that time and still learning about the mainstream approaches, so I looked upon this as an idea to add to my repertoire at some point in the future. I joined the team and, exactly one week later, I was recruited into my first reflecting-puppet team! It was a particularly difficult session to have been initiated into, as it was a session for a five-year-old boy we were seeing and there were a lot of other contextual factors that contributed to a difficult presentation that day.

I selected the duck. I can remember feeling nervous and unsure as to whether I should be speaking differently (how would a duck 'speak?') and these weren't questions I'd thought to ask in the pre-session. There were a few nervous giggles from me as the puppets introduced themselves to our audience but then it seemed to flow as *Ducky* commented on what she or he had seen and heard.

At first, the five-year-old boy spoke as the puppets spoke, drowning out their voices and not wanting to hear their views; but gradually, as they began to share their feelings and similar dilemmas, the boy's defiant behaviour began to quieten and he seemed a little more settled. It was interesting that, in this situation, the 'pre-show' settling period took as long as the show itself – about five minutes and then another five minutes. It was also a short and pithy show, in keeping with a young child's attention span.

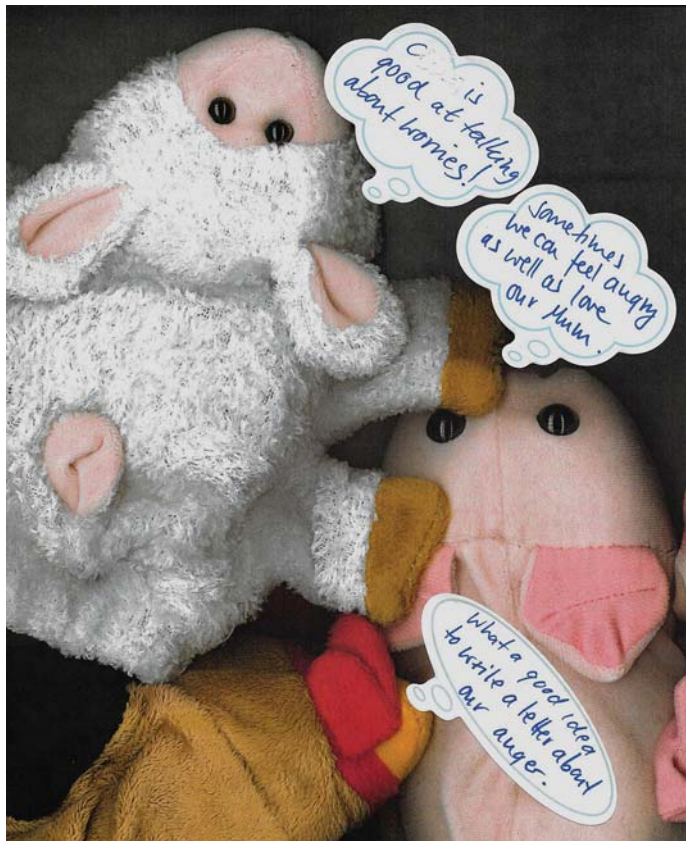
By contrast, my last show with the Roberts family several months on was, in my view, an example of how in the moment our creative juices were in full flow! The three of us in the reflecting team had spoken about how we could introduce some of the ideas from behind the screen into our reflections, but we did not go in with any ideas about how we would do this. The family decided to do a room swap and went to sit behind the screen to watch us. My puppet (*Piggy*), spoke about all the comings and goings in her family and how she finds it hard to know what to do and to find the words to describe her feelings. My colleagues acted as sibling advisors for *Piggy* and, apparently, behind the screen, the five-year-old boy asked, "Is their story real?" and "Are they stealing our story?" Our reflections provided an opportunity for us to comment on, from the third-person perspective, what has been happening in this boy's life and his comments suggest we did manage to use the puppets to echo something of his real-life experience.

Annmarie

I joined the team to work with the Roberts family and to help prevent the breakdown of the placement. This case has required much inter-agency working outside of the clinic, but inside the clinic we also had the additional support of our non-human colleagues – the puppets! At first, the puppet shows felt daunting and strange. I remember feeling quite silly; however, like all new things, the more you do it and understand the underpinning values, the easier and more rewarding it becomes.

As the children became familiar with the animal puppets, they began to request and often expect the same characters to be used. The children were encouraged to participate in greeting and saying goodbye to the puppets. The middle part of the puppet show would contain the more key messages. The show could be quite instinctive and delivered unrehearsed or, alternatively, just before joining the room, each team member would quickly note what they felt were the strongest points that they would like to pursue.

The shows were usually short. The puppets looked for cues from the children to bring in the gentle, playful approach. They could link similarities within their puppet family or offer different thoughts or ideas such as speaking about their problems, notice



positive changes, or show empathy and kindness within the puppet circle. The puppets offered different perspectives — mischievous, quiet, shy, being the eldest or youngest, showing kindness, listening, sharing, using kind hands and feet etc. To ensure the key messages were remembered and revisited by the family, the team would make a colour photocopy of each puppet for the children and add a few speech-bubble comments. This was given to the children to take home and display (acting as a therapeutic letter). One of the benefits to the family was my link role. I was able to see the children at school and gently remind them of some of the aspects of the session and point to their letters if they came to see me in my room. CAMHS supported the nine-year-old child in this family and me to write to her birth mother; something she wanted to do as a result of not feeling able to talk face-to-face. The puppets helped this process by talking about this in a puppet show. For the five-year-old child in the family, who was regularly hitting his grandmother, the puppets were able to discuss the use of ‘gentle hands’ and the physical hitting stopped.

It has been clear that the adult carers (grandparents) were regularly mentally and physically exhausted. The reflective therapeutic-puppet shows were a way for them to absorb messages and find ideas and sometimes a different viewpoint to show things were getting better, that tiny steps forward and improvements in behaviour were being observed, all adding to the much-needed relationship-building within the family.

Pete

I have been involved in reflecting-puppet shows for about 15 years. My inspiration came from an article I read back in 2000 (Johannesen *et al.*, 1998), but I can trace my interest further back to 25 years ago when I started to use puppets with children as a fledgling social worker.

As a supervisor in the clinic, when the shows are first introduced, I see my role as gently reminding clinicians about our unusual co-therapists because, in my experience, the default position tends to be “Let’s not use them today; maybe next time”. Once the puppets are brought to life in the puppet shows, there is usually no need for reminders because, once they have experienced them, children ask for them!

In the under-fives team, puppets representing familiar farm animals are generally used. As I have discussed elsewhere (Brown, 2009), animal representations offer a useful distance that can help children embrace the shows. Animal representations are also useful because they are not preset with regard to gender and ethnicity, which offers flexibility in working with each family.

The shows are a sort of story, often mirroring the family story. They are a performance of the story and they have a start, warming the context; a middle, positive connotation; then ‘stretching’ comments (Brown, 2013) and an ending, a gentle summarising. Then, it’s back into the box or bag for their nap. All are important ingredients. The start and end of the shows have a ‘set piece’ format. To help engage and encourage young children to settle into a listening position, the beginning is often as long as the middle section of the show – five minutes or more. The middle section includes planned comments but can, and often does, include improvisation. This can be quite scary. As Derek Jacobi recently pointed out, as an actor one delivers lines according to a script knowing what will happen next (BBC TV, 2015). With improvisation, however, what happens next is unknown in advance as it develops moment by moment.

I would like to draw a comparison between the creativity of the shows and the process of art and painting, using the artist John Constable. In a discussion of his work, Beard *et al.* (2012) suggest: “Through an apparently spontaneous use of colour and rapid brushstrokes he was able to capture the fleeting mood of a scene. Behind these speckled, flecked bits of paint however, lies a carefully composed structure”. The puppet shows also combine the elements of both improvisation and structure.

I try to encourage a warm supportive environment within the team where colleagues can take risks and not worry too much if they feel they have got it ‘wrong’. Some clinicians warm easily to this playful approach while others are more cautious to begin with. Both approaches are fine because the clinicians are not modelling perfection. Families seem to appreciate the effort clinicians put into the shows and they are often full of fumbings as the puppets are brought to life. It takes time to feel comfortable, and with practice this becomes easier. Using ideas from narrative practice, we have been experimenting with therapeutic messages sent by the puppets after the show. The reflecting puppets re-emerge and get placed under the photocopier and, in the team room, messages are quickly written onto the photos and then brought out for the children to take away. The messages are short and they emphasise strengths and often predict possible changes, so may be seen as “letters of prediction” (White & Epston, 1990). The therapeutic messages are important when working with younger children, to help keep ideas in mind between sessions.

As Marner (2000) points out; “Words in letters do not fade away. They can be read and re-read”. The messages are intended to subtly encourage “an alternative story that is emerging along with the therapy” (Freeman *et al.*, 1997).

Endnote

Since writing this article, we are sad to say that, after more than a decade of preventative work with very young children and their families, the CAMHS under-fives team has been disbanded, due to cuts in funding and a re-structuring process. The human team-members have either left or been redeployed. The puppets sleep in their box, hoping that one day they can re-emerge and become useful in helping young children once again.

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Video clips: You can see extracts of two reflecting-puppet shows from the DVD, *Therapeutic Responses to Families in Crisis*, at www.oxleas.nhs.uk/puppetshow



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Do you want to experiment with using reflecting-puppet shows in your team? If so, Pete is available for consultation by phone or in person. The shows are generally suitable for children in early and middle childhood (pre-school and primary school).

Contact: pete.brown@oxleas.nhs.uk



Left to right: Lilia, Elaine, Annmarie, Camilla and Pete