

## **The Helping Hands of Puppets in Therapy Sessions**

**By Marjorie Rehbach**

For over 50 years I have been involved with Anthroposophically inspired education: in Camphill Communities, class teaching, teaching puppetry to middle school students, substituting, and administration in Waldorf Schools, and finally as an after school Education Support Teacher, specializing in reflex and sensory integration for individual students and parents. In every one of those situations, I have experienced the magical helpfulness of bringing in puppetry, but for this article, I will focus on how puppets can be helpful in the oh-so-tender therapeutic situation. After many years of class teaching, I realized that I certainly needed something new in my “bag of tricks” and I was so fortunate to be able to take a wonderful puppetry training with Suzanne Down <https://junipertreepuppets.com/> Over the ensuing years, I have been expanding that to learn from many others through the World Association of Puppetry and Storytelling Arts [www.puppetryandstorytelling.org](http://www.puppetryandstorytelling.org) in-person conferences and online trainings.

### **Building a Bridge With a Rod Puppet**

In my training with Suzanne Down, I learned to make a very expressive rod puppet called Wee Willie Winkie. He has been a marvelous helper. When he appears, the children can speak to him as if I am not even there! Often, when a child comes to me to receive extra support for building foundational systems, they do not know why they are there. It is a perfect “Mr. Rogers” moment to let the puppet talk about important things in a way the child can accept. After our initial greeting, I invite everyone to sit on the floor. Before I begin, I ask the child if they like puppets and then I tell them I have my puppet in the basket. He sleeps a lot but loves to meet children. He has very delicate ears and will not wake up if we are too loud. So using our nicest voices, we can say, “Wake up Wee Willie Winkie,” and then we must listen for the tinkling of the tiny bell on his cap which will tell us if he is waking up or not. He usually begins to wake and then goes back to sleep a few times, which tends to bring giggles, smiles and some relief to the children. Finally we sing the Wee Willie Winkie song and sure enough he wakes up and can meet and greet everyone and conversations can happen. Before he goes back to sleep, he asks the children what they want to work on that day, or if they are ready for an adventure. Then he yawns, we say good bye in fun ways and he goes to rest while we go to work. Sometimes he gives the children something (like a balloon, etc.) before he goes to rest. This is a nice transition because who doesn’t like a balloon?

### **Getting to Focus, Practicing Speaking, Singing, Listening, Boundaries, Laughing, and Breathing**

Once this ritual of waking and greeting the puppet is established, I adjust parts of it as needed for different children. Some cannot begin to say all those w’s in Wee Willie Winkie for several weeks, but oh they are so willing to try! Some want to sit too close, they want to touch the puppet, etc. and we try to get it just right so that Wee Willie Winkie feels safe. And what a relief when he does something unexpected and silly so we can all laugh and breathe out in a good

way. It is also an opportune moment to focus on very specific and consciously created gestures: slow, quick, loving, humorous, silly, large, small, detailed, and delicate, etc. I try to keep this ritual short and sweet and then move into the lesson quickly afterwards. Some timid children have been very relieved to get to see Wee Willie Winkie again at the end of the session to say good bye, but usually I keep it just at the beginning.

### **Practice With Different Styles of Puppets - Getting Into Our Fingers and Toes!**

Many children today have a difficult time penetrating their limbs, especially their fingers and toes. Through imagination and something the children can be interested and excited about, this can be overcome! Enter the puppets again! Because I am part of a puppetry troupe which also performs for school festivals, most of the children know that I love puppets. One child, who was very shy about participating, had a tremendous fascination with spiders. When I asked her if she would like to make a spider puppet, she was all in! We work on this marionette spider, bit by bit, at the end of each lesson. When her 6 year old sister, who was also coming to sessions, found out, she wanted to make a puppet too. Her favorite animal was a penguin, so she got to make a penguin finger puppet. Once word got out, each child I work with got interested in making a puppet! Wee Willie Winkie helps me with demonstrating the different elements of careful puppetry gesture when he introduces his friends at the beginning of a session. The penguin finger puppet, placed carefully on a blue ocean cloth, moves very carefully each way until he splashes into the ocean. The children watch this and sing along for weeks before their own puppet is finished and they get to try. As Nancy Mellon, the storyteller points out, puppets can even be used carefully on toes, but I haven't tried this yet! In addition to the marionette spider and the penguin finger puppets, we are also making chipmunk and snow leopard hand puppets!

### **Further Benefits From Therapeutic Puppetry**

Eventually, many children express interest in doing more with puppetry. Some have joined our regular puppetry troupe as special helpers in a show. In these cases, it is very moving to see how all of these children who have suffered from postural or attention challenges, overcome these hurdles in the service to the puppets! Imagination creates the bridge!

In the past, I have held week long summer camps where children come for half days to learn a story, move the story, make the puppets and perform the story for friends and family by the end of the week. One summer, someone brought her 14 year old cousin, from Chicago, to join us. While walking up the stairs I overheard a conversation: 14 year old: "My mother asked me if I like this camp." Younger cousin: "What did you say?" (I thought, oh dear, here it comes...) 14 year old: "I said, NO! I don't like this camp, I LOVE this camp!"

Another benefit to doing this kind of larger puppetry project for older children is the social learning and growth that can take place as they work together in a small space while the spotlight is not on them, but on the puppets. The cooperation of the puppeteers shines through the performance and the magic that is created is unforgettable.