

Section 2: Practitioner's Corner

Puppets, Stuffed Animals, and Dolls Take Roles as “Furry Auxiliaries”

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Children and adults benefit from play as a genuine therapeutic intervention that not only fulfills opportunities to emotionally regulate but also builds the spontaneity and creativity that are so valued in the method of psychodrama. In this article, the authors demonstrate how puppets, stuffed animals, and dolls can serve not only as simple props but also as excellent “furry auxiliaries” in psychodramatic sessions, both one-on-one and in group. These props may be used to support fun and play as well as working through more serious themes, including trauma, pain, and loss.

KEYWORDS: Puppets; dolls; stuffed animals; psychodrama; play, auxiliaries; furry auxiliaries.

Play is typically considered suitable for children—until they grow older and “talk” about their problems and transition into the kind of psychotherapy that adults do. Psychodrama shows us that we can direct deep sessions that get to the heart of the matter with the classic techniques developed by Dr. J. L. Moreno and Zerka T. Moreno. With the addition of puppets, stuffed animals, and dolls, we have found these “stuffies” to be invaluable when working with children, teens, adults, and families.

Children and adults benefit from play as a genuine therapeutic intervention that not only fulfills opportunities to emotionally regulate but also builds the spontaneity and creativity that are so valued in the method of psychodrama. In psychodrama, we know that the *auxiliary* is the term for the person who plays a supporting role for the protagonist in the drama to assist the action in moving forward. Bernadette Hoey, in her 1997 book *Who Calls the Tune: A Psychodramatic Approach to Child Therapy*, briefly refers to therapy aids like puppets as “auxiliaries.” More recently, Linda Ciotola, MEd, TEP, has coined the phrase “furry auxiliaries,” suggesting that they are not simply inanimate props but rather helpers that actively

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take and play roles in a drama when human role players are not available or to supplement the presence of human role players (Carnabucci & Ciotola, 2013).

These furry auxiliaries may bring an abundance of play and laughter into a session, often needed for protagonists who struggle with the lighter parts of life. Yet these furry auxiliaries also can be surprisingly helpful in creatively working through more serious themes, including severe trauma, emotional pain, and significant loss.

Puppets and puppet shows have been used for decades in psychodrama (Bannister & Huntington, 2002; Dilien, 2009; Rojas-Bermúdez, 1970, 1985; Verhofstadt-Denève & Verhofstadt, 2021), drama therapy (Novy et al., 2010), and play therapy (Bromfield, 1995; Drewes & Schaefer, 2018), and with various populations, including pediatric units in hospitals (Aronoff, 1981) and dementia care centers (Marshall, 2013), and with children with mental and physical handicaps (Astell-Burt, 1981), and in family therapy (Gil & Smelser, 2018).

PROPS HELP CREATE THE “MAGIC”

Furry auxiliaries help create the magic that comes with *concretization*, the psychodramatic term for using props to make “concrete” a topic that is typically abstract. Practitioners of experiential psychotherapies often make use of chairs, scarves, pillows, mats, and other items, and Linda uses big, beautiful, plush puppets that easily become real to the people she is working with—and people become quickly engaged to tell the puppet or the animal their problems and feelings.

Once you have your auxiliaries, you will want to develop names and roles for at least some of them. This naming personalizes these characters and gives them specific therapeutic tasks for healing or learning—or both. For instance, when Linda is using puppets to educate people of any age about the functions of the brain parts, she brings out her golden retriever dog puppet, which she has named Tele. Tele plays the part of the amygdala that recognizes that connecting with others is safe. Tele might say, “Everything is OK! We can play and have fun.”

Conversely, Radar, the black and white border collie puppet, picks up signals from others and from the environment, acting as the auxiliary for the task of the amygdala, the part of the brain that watches for danger.

Other furry auxiliaries may not have names. Linda allows for people to name them, permitting empowerment and creativity. She has a pair of unnamed owl puppets that teach about the parts of the brain. The brown owl speaks up for the left frontal cortex, at which time Linda says in the double voice, “I’m thinking clearly and using my rational brain.” The white owl, speaking for the right frontal cortex, says, “I notice things even when I’m not thinking. I’m the part of the brain that can be fully present.”

A dinosaur or snake will represent the reptilian brain, the primitive part of the brain that focuses on survival. She prefers to use the dinosaur rather than the snake, especially when some people have aversion to snakes.

An eagle, butterfly, or bird perfectly takes the role of the observer. Here, Linda holds the auxiliary high over the scene, looking over the owls, dogs, or dinosaur. The high flying animal notices with accuracy and compassion what it sees and hears—without judgment.

NAMING THE ROLE OF THE FURRY AUXILIARY

It is helpful to note the role the furry auxiliary is taking. The role typically has an adjective and a noun. For example, the eagle takes the role of Big Picture Taker. The reptile—the one taking the role of the reptilian brain—is the Brain and Body Connector. Radar, the border collie, is the Danger Detector. Tele, the golden retriever, is the Safety Sniffer.

Karen Carnabucci, LCSW, TEP, tends to employ ordinary stuffed animals as her furry auxiliaries. She has a small, brown, plush puppy with floppy ears, a big black nose, and intent plastic bead eyes that she sometimes calls Friendly and at other times Skippy. When she brings out Friendly, she may say that the puppy is a good friend at listening and watching, and she uses the dog to demonstrate the role of the Observing Self, the part of self that is able to stand outside of the self and is able to observe feelings, behaviors, and actions in a neutral way, without criticism as defined in the Therapeutic Spiral Model (Hudgins & Toscani, 2013). Skippy, as its name implies, takes a slightly different role, that of a playmate who supports playfulness in a situation or scene.

A large and beautiful black and white cat puppet, which Linda calls Mittens, helped an inconsolable 9-year-old Ada, who couldn't stop crying because she was missing her lost cat. For years, her cat had been a comforting companion and a source of soothing for going to sleep and during times of distress. When Linda saw Ada's heartbroken sobbing, she went to the shelf to fetch Mittens.

Fitting the puppet into her hand, Linda gently moved it closer to the crying Ada, but she did not touch her.

The puppet began to speak. "Hi, Ada. My name is Mittens. I heard you crying when I was sitting on the shelf."

After a pause, Mittens added:

I hear that you are so sad about your lost kitty. I know I could never take the place of your lost kitty, but I would love to be your friend. As your friend, I can be with you whenever you want. You can hold me, you can play with me, you can sleep with me, and I will be your friend as long as you like.

Ada took a deep breath, appearing to hear Mittens' message. After a minute or two, she reached out, took Mittens into her arms, stopped her crying, and started playing with the puppet, moving its paws.

Ada finally said, "It's good that Mittens came."

WORKING WITH SURVIVORS OF TRAUMA WITH FURRY AUXILIARIES

Using furry auxiliaries with survivors of trauma can help bypass reluctance to share one's story and its painful details.

Here is an example about how a dog puppet became an important ally in the healing of Brandon, an Army veteran who had been bullied as a child because of his weight. Although Brandon trimmed his weight during boot camp training,

after discharge Brandon remained highly vigilant about his body appearance and obsessed with exercise while turning to former habits of medicating his feelings with food.

Brandon came to Linda's lifestyle counseling practice at the age of 35 seeking help with practical aspects of self-care and healthy exercise. A recovering alcoholic, Brandon had several years of sobriety and a stable job and marriage. However, he suffered with nightmares and flashbacks resulting from the neighborhood bullying and service experiences. He had never revealed this abuse to any professional. Linda referred Brandon to a colleague for in-depth psychotherapy and later to an acupuncturist for a team approach while she offered periodic adjunctive psychodramatic sessions.

One of Brandon's strengths was his positive relationship with his three dogs. However, he was flooded with shame about his body and his overeating, which made it difficult to talk about feelings and behaviors. Linda decided to use a furry auxiliary after Brandon shared photographs of his pets on his phone. Linda chose a soft dog puppet, which resembled one of Brandon's favorite dogs. He had earlier talked about this pet, calling the dog his buddy, who was constantly at his side at home.

Linda placed the puppet on the back of the sofa in her office. When Brandon arrived for his appointment, he immediately picked up the puppet and started to pet it, calling it by his dog's name, Bandit. This evidence of spontaneity affirmed that bringing Bandit into the session would help bypass defenses and enable Brandon to open up about his hidden life.

Linda began to interview Bandit, asking how long he knew Brandon, what life was like for him at Brandon's house, what were his favorite activities with Brandon, and what he loved best about his human. These questions helped Brandon take the role of Bandit. As Brandon warmed up, Linda gradually turned to more probing questions like, "Is there anything that you notice Brandon doing that concerns you?"

The answer, close to the conclusion of the 1-hour interview of Bandit, revealed Bandit's concern about Brandon's alternating episodes of binge eating, restricting food, and intense daily exercise to near injury. Once the behavior was spoken, Linda periodically interviewed Bandit at later sessions; the dog puppet became a kind of ongoing "team member," playing an essential role in the next steps of Brandon's recovery process.

DOLL AUXILIARY AS "BABY"

When working with women and girls whose pregnancies have ended with miscarriage, abortion, stillbirth, or infant death, Karen has employed a life-sized doll wrapped in scarf or small blanket. The woman is first given the opportunity to simply hold the doll quietly, having the experience of connecting to what Karen calls a "baby spirit." Often the holding evolves into spontaneously speaking to the doll about the woman's hopes, dreams, regrets, or other feelings about the pregnancy and the would-be child, as well as her own feelings about the loss of the anticipated mother role. At prompting, the woman may agree to gently place the baby spirit close to her heart,

promising to hold the memory of the baby lovingly in her heart. Similarly, men and family members may also be offered a doll to explore their feelings about an event, which may be similar to or different from the female's experience. If a doll is not immediately available, Karen will take a stuffed animal or small pillow and wrap it up completely with a scarf or small blanket to give the "feel" of a doll.

FURRY AUXILIARIES IN GROUP SESSIONS

In group sessions, the furry auxiliaries become an additional group member, providing support to forward the action. They may especially benefit the group in warm-up roles that can connect participants and build cohesion. For instance, during in-person groups, Karen may bring out a stuffed animal and give it to a participant, asking participants to introduce themselves from the voice of the animal before passing it to the next participant. For another warm-up, Karen may direct all of the group members to her shelves, inviting participants to choose the animal, puppet or doll that most represents what they are coming in with on that day.

As a group member, Friendly the dog may sit on a chair in the circle, playing the role of the observer self, with the chair turned into the group, looking at the group as part of the circle of chairs. Or the chair may be turned to focus on the dramatic vignette, and the stuffed dog may be called on to offer observations about the protagonist or the dramatic vignette itself, perhaps from the director, a volunteering group member, or the protagonist. And, if needed, the stuffed dog can play the silent role of an actual dog in the drama.

At the end of group, puppets or stuffies may show up again. For instance, a butterfly finger puppet may fly out, with each participant trying on the puppet, moving their hand through the air and telling the group what has transformed within each of them during group.

During online sessions, people may be invited to bring their favorite stuffed animal or other object to the video screen, taking their own roles and telling about their day or something else about themselves.

Karen has found that furry auxiliaries provide excellent doubles, allowing the inner voice of the protagonist to speak, often in a playful way. The protagonist may act as his, her, or their own double, or group members or the director may take the furry auxiliary in hand to provide the double voice.

These furry auxiliaries may also be combined with other creative arts interventions. Rebecca Walters, TEP, teaching in a 3-hour online workshop as part of the 2021 annual conference of the American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama, discussed how psychodramatic work might start with a puppet activity for warm-up, then followed by giving the protagonist a chunk of clay to physically work out emotions, having the protagonist vigorously pound, stretch, roll, or wind the clay. After the feelings are expressed in this nonverbal way, the director could bring in the empty chair to allow the protagonist to speak to an important person, telling what could not have been said or expressed earlier.

CONCRETIZING DEFENSES

Whether online or in person, furry auxiliaries are useful in concretizing the defenses of the group members or the protagonist. Defenses—such as denial, compartmentalization, intellectualization, rationalization, and similar behaviors—are unconscious attempts to distract from disturbing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and maintain homeostasis. The “rhythmic rupture” that occurs from trauma creates instability in the body in general and particularly the nervous system. Being able to identify defenses allows the protagonist to become conscious of these behaviors, which are also roles, and begin to change them.

During in-person sessions, Linda places a large variety of furry auxiliaries around the room—for example, an ostrich, turtle, owl, stegosaurus, tiger, bear, woolly mammoth, unicorn, gorilla, and many others. The names and the definitions of the defenses are written in large block letters on posterboard in the middle of the circle. Participants are given time to read these and then asked to choose a furry auxiliary that exemplifies the defense they identify as the one they most often use. For example, the unicorn is often selected for “magical thinking,” the ostrich for denial, and the owl for intellectualization.

Next, each member gets a turn to role reverse with the furry auxiliary, which is placed in an empty chair, and to have a dialogue with the defense about how helpful it has been and yet how perhaps it needs a role transformation better suited to the protagonist’s current needs. For example, the ostrich who has had its head in the sand, so to speak, can now look all around and be transformed into The Compassionate Witness who can notice and accurately label the protagonist’s thoughts, feelings, and hungers with accuracy and compassion and without judgment.

In online sessions, a slide show can be created that names and defines a list of the defenses; and additional ones of a variety of “furry auxiliaries” to be selected as representatives of the various defenses. Each participant then selects one and names the defense and auxiliary on an index card and places the card in a chair next to the chosen auxiliary. Alternatively, participants can choose an object from their own space that best suits the role of a particular defense. Next, the director facilitates role reversal between a participant and their defenses until role transformation is reached.

WHERE TO FIND PUPPETS, STUFFED ANIMALS, DOLLS

If you have not yet added puppets, stuffed animals, and dolls to your repertoire of psychodrama and stage supplies, look no further than a child’s outgrown toys, where you can pick from a variety of soft and hard dolls, stuffed animals of various sizes, and hand and finger puppets. You also can find items at brick and mortar and online toy stores, hobby shops, and craft and specialty stores.

However, you can easily make or convert puppets, dolls, and animals from other items typically found around the house, or supply materials for your people to make their own auxiliaries so that the art making becomes part of the therapeutic task. Here are examples of places to look and items to collect:

- Orphan mittens, gloves, or socks—sew or glue on buttons or plastic “googly” eyes from craft stores with thread, regular glue, or hot glue.
- Baby items from department stores, such as spit-up towels that have cute heads of animals and flowers on them.
- Brown paper bags embellished with yarn, pieces of construction paper, plastic eyes, and other items.
- Paper plates or manila envelopes that are embellished with yarn, etc., to make human or animal faces and attached to a stick.
- Washcloths can be sewn together to make wonderful puppets; directions may be easily found online.

You may start with just one or two items or collect a variety of items that allow for each person to project an important role or need on to the furry auxiliary. For instance, a bear may be cuddly and cute, allowing for hugs and comfort, or have a fierce face that hints of a protector in times of fear and distress. You will want to include dolls with various skin colors, sad and happy faces, genders, and sizes.

You also may wish to additionally embellish your furry auxiliaries in ways that hint at more therapeutic possibilities. For instance, you may take a typical stuffed bear and wrap a bandage around its head, punctuated with a larger-than-life Band-Aid. You may put the bear’s arm in a sling, or top its head with a silly hat, or a hat or head band that says something like, “Hope” or “Love.” Karen has pinned on buttons that say “I give hugs” or “I’m a stranger here myself” that allow for additional therapeutic identification.

CONCLUSIONS

As you create these embellishments for your “stuffies,” identify roles and structures that are suitable for your population, and as you practice with your furry auxiliaries, you will find many more ideas for experimentation, play, and drama that are applicable to individuals and groups and children, teens, and adults. Keep in mind that these furry auxiliaries are useful not only in psychotherapy sessions, but also in coaching sessions and educational programs. You may experiment with role reversing, as we have done, with a certain furry auxiliary to discover how that furry auxiliary can assist you in inventing a new application.

The epitaph of Dr. J. L. Moreno’s tombstone in Vienna, Austria, famously says, “The man who brought joy and laughter to psychiatry” (Johnson & Emunah, 2009), and we have found these furry auxiliaries to ignite spontaneity and creativity, which J. L. and Zerka T. Moreno habitually described as the curative factors in and for all humankind. We have found that puppets, stuffed animals, and dolls truly bring this philosophy to life.

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