

# Unmasking our Grief

**Mickey Aronoff** explains how puppets can help children to express their grief for their own and others' illness or impending death.

If you look up 'bereavement' in the dictionary you'll find a definition such as 'loss by death of a relative or friend'. Bereavement can begin *before* death however. It can be the unsettling realisation that you will outlive the dog you've loved since it was a puppy, or it can be the harsh and empty reality of the foreseeable loss of a loved one who is ill. Bereavement can be about any irredeemable loss that holds meaning: loss of bodily limb or function, loss of your grandmother's wedding ring, loss of a home through fire.

In some cultures death is treated as an integral part of the cycle of life. In the west the subject is taboo as are the feelings engendered by it. It's viewed as a frightening topic and 'quiet respect' may be our only sanctioned, protective response.

Keeping death at arm's length denies feeling, which means denying living. Emotional health is strengthened when we can say our unsaid goodbyes, apologies, avowals of love. The social expression of grief and joy is our universal connection. When someone we love is nearing death or is even at the point of death, we need a language in which to express our loss, whether that takes the form of keening or highly controlled and organised state funerals.

Puppets offer all of us a lost language. For thousands of years they've been used across many cultures as a spiritual guides, as storytellers, as mediators between gods and people.

Today in the west psychologists speak of a puppet acting as a 'transitional object', which means serving as a symbolic plaything or as a toy which can act out for us some of our deepest feelings in a safe non-threatening way. Puppets release the voice that tells the stories children need to tell in order to share the pain of their loss. They are transitional objects *in a time of transition*.

Puppets can express anger, sorrow and need for attention, just as humans can - through text and through movement. They can cower, hit, yell, bite, whimper and run. They can also express joy. With puppets children can rehearse feelings, paving the way for the choice to 'own' and express them directly.

When no other avenues exist to express grief, what can children do but play? Play is the natural language of the child. Puppets allow children - normally excluded at the time of death - to participate in the business of grieving and to grow with the experience.

Children as well as adults need the laughter that is a part of life, the release and relief from tension, from sadness, from anger. Child-centred approaches, with non-judgemental acceptance of feelings, elicit those feelings and give scope for reflection of them.

For children with life-threatening illnesses, issues may arise with puppets that relate to fears about hospitalisation, such as mutilation or death. Brothers and sisters may also need to work out the guilt of ambivalent feelings or magical thinking (the fear that wishing death upon a brother or a sister has caused that death). Working with puppets in groups helps to share the pain.

I have used puppets to prepare children with cancer for loss of limbs. These children have used my puppets to speak about their friends who had died before them ("If only she could give us a sign", said one child's puppet). I have seen 'mini-rehearsals' of death with puppets: one child liked to be buried under my entire collection of soft puppets.

13 year-old Diane was facing the thirteenth shunt revision to her head.



Pic. Mickey Aronoff

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During pre-operative puppet play her doctor puppet informed my patient puppet that it would die - soon! My puppet quickly tumbled through feelings of denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and finally, acceptance. Her puppet told me, "When I have patients who are dying I can't eat. I have four patients dying now and I'm starving!" She attacked her fears through the life-affirming approach of humour.

Puppets work well in tandem with other expressive art therapies. An 11 year-old boy with leukaemia, deserted by his non-coping family two weeks before he died, had earlier opened up emotionally with puppets used in preparation for invasive, diagnostic procedures. When Ted's family returned with friends and a ritual that would help them bear his death - three days before the event - the boy was ready.

Using puppets cross-culturally is wonderful with people whose traditions include this art form, although it is essential to respect taboos in puppet characterisation and to beware of racial stereotypes. The body language of the puppet also provides a good vehicle of expression for children for whom English is not their first language.

It may be that the only way to deal with death is to deal with life. These seeming opposites are really a part of a continuum and are inextricably intertwined. If there is ever to be hope for an emotionally healthy society, stories of sorrow must not be buried but should be told alongside stories of joy. ■

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