

The use of Puppets in Therapy

An exploration into play therapy and how different styles of puppetry can be used to convey different characters and feelings to aid the emotional needs of children.

Puppet Therapy: A modern twist on traditional therapeutic practices

“You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation” – Plato.

Most commonly used to aid the emotional communication of young children, puppet therapy highlights the idea of “Puppetry beyond Performance” (Passmore-Godfrey, 2020). Knowing that for my independent project I wanted to explore puppet making, this area seemed perfect for me to not only expand on my knowledge and making experience, but to also create something meaningful.

Puppet therapy falls under the bracket of play therapy - a practice that is fairly new, especially within the UK. First referenced as Play Therapy in the 20th Century by psychologists such as Anna Freud, Margaret Lowenfeld and Melanie Klein in the US, it only emerged within the UK in the 1980s, with the British Association of Play Therapists being established in 1992 (BAPT, 2013). On their website, they define the practice as “Helping children express their feelings and deal with their emotional problems, using play as the main communicative tool”.

In order for me to know where to start in terms of designing a puppet for therapeutic use, I wanted to first understand how they would be used, and their benefit.

How puppets can be used

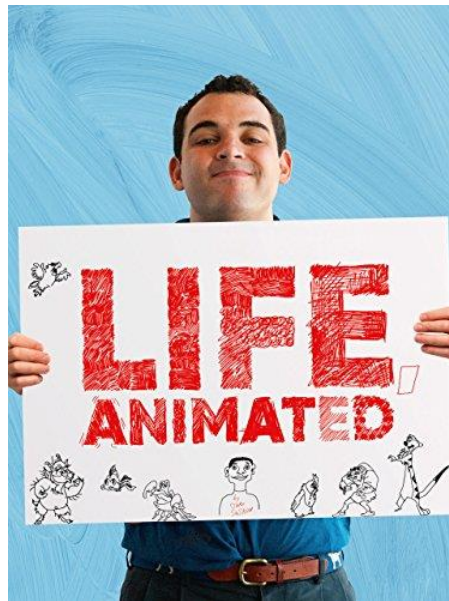
With younger children, understanding and communicating difficulties and trauma can be a complex thing for them to navigate. This can be due to limited vocabulary due to age or learning difficulties, an inability to process and realise the seriousness of lived experiences, or even just shyness. The puppet introduces a character that the child can “speak through”, alleviating the stresses of communicating their emotions to an adult (Cognitive Behavioral Play Therapy, 2020).

Children will often gravitate towards puppets that they feel represent them, or people that they know. In Nancy Boyd Webb’s book, *Play Therapy with Children in Crisis*, she talks about how children might role play with a puppet, projecting their own feelings onto it. This allows the child to introduce a feeling, memory, or scenario without needing to claim the experience as their own. This can help to give them a safe medium for reliving trauma or difficult experiences in a way that removes personal judgements and invents a “hypothetical” scenario that can then be discussed comfortably (p.59).

Another application of puppets within the play therapy setting is to simply observe the child’s solo use of puppets; instead of the therapist communicating with the child through the puppet, they simply watch to see how they react to certain characters, and how they treat them. For example, a child prone to aggression may select an “aggressive” or “bad” character toy and focus most of their play on it, using it to cause distress/destruction towards other characters or the environment. This can offer a massive insight into the reasonings behind a child’s behaviour, or what they might be experiencing at home, as children will act out what they know (West, J. p.6). West also details how it can be useful for the therapist to join in with the “game”, so long as they allow the child to direct the

action. She says “(Adults) Can more readily relate to the child via play activities than through an entirely verbal discussion” (p.13).

A really great example of the use of puppets and characters to aid children emotionally is found in the documentary *Life, Animated* (dir. R.R. Williams, 2016). It follows the real-life story of Owen Suskind, a man with Autism who regressed verbally at the age of three. His parents found that he was only receptive to animated Disney movies, and the significance of them to his emotional development became apparent when one day he saw his brother upset and spoke his first words in four years: “Walter doesn’t want to grow up - like Mowgli, or Peter Pan”. Realising that Owen was using these stories to interpret the world, his father grabbed his Iago puppet (from Aladdin) and began to speak to him as the character. Astonishingly, Owen responded. Not only as himself, but as the characters in the film; he had memorised the entire dialogue of Aladdin.



Documentary Poster from IMDB (2016)

Through the documentary, you can see how he uses these characters and films to approach his everyday life; with each challenge and scenario he faces, he turns to scenes from his favourite Disney classics. He even talks of the Hunchback of Notre Dame, and how the story resonates with him; an “outcast” who doesn’t necessarily get the typical happy ending but has heart and wants to find his place within society. His Father speaks about the connection Owen has with the characters; the big, exaggerated expressions of emotion in cartoons really helped him to recognise and identify different feelings, and how the films could always offer a constant safe space to return to when things became too much.

Owen’s story shows just how important it is to have these stories and characters that we can relate to, and how comfort can be found within a fictional world to help us feel more at home in real life. Seeing this personal perspective on puppetry bringing such positive change has not only given me insight into the beauty of puppet therapies but has also struck an emotional chord within me; I feel more connected to the impact of these creations, therefore I feel driven to create the most beneficial designs and tools that I can as I want to make an impact too.

How can characters approach difficult conversations?

Difficult emotions and scenarios have long been represented within children's media. One major example would be the stories of Winnie the Pooh. The author of the original tales, A.A. Milne, was a war veteran who suffered from PTSD. His stories served as a way of communicating and attempting to emotionally connect to his son, Christopher Robin, through his own personal struggles. As explored by Valentina Stoycheva, each character within the tales can be interpreted as a symptom of his PTSD (2019).

The examples given are characters such as Piglet, representing anxiety and hypervigilance, Eeyore as depressive, having self-deprecating episodes, and Owl as an emotionally exhausted character who struggles with intimacy. All of these "flaws" are never seen as irredeemable, and the characters are never entirely devoid of kindness (Stoycheva, 2019). It is also noted that this may just be an over-analysis of more simplified characters, but it is interesting to consider that these mental-health related characteristics are never represented as bad within the stories and offer a warm sense of relatability to those who suffer from similar problems.

Interestingly, beyond their personal characterisations, the animals from the 100 Acre Woods have been used to start difficult conversations with children outside of these books. In Disney's first utilisation of Winnie the Pooh on TV, *Welcome to Pooh Corner* began broadcasting in 1983 as a live-action show, full of moral messages and educational elements. Using full-body puppetry, the character designs were less than favourable and arguably creepy, but the intentions were good. Outside of their standard format episodes, they created a series of educational specials such as "Too smart for strangers", a 40-minute-long spin-off that tackled hypothetical "stranger danger" scenarios and role-played real-world examples. This aimed to communicate public safety to children through a safe and non-intimidating approach to the conversation (*Too Smart for Strangers with Winnie the Pooh*, 1985).



Too Smart for Strangers with Winnie the Pooh (1985)

The last 10 minutes of this episode take a slightly more serious turn, highlighting the issue of child abuse and how to recognise it. This concludes with Pooh singing a song about children protecting their "private parts" – certainly a bizarre and left-field segment that uncomfortably misses the mark (Defunctland, 2019). Although the episode was well intended, it placed a lot of serious and emotional weight on an otherwise innocent and fantastical franchise. It has also been infamously regarded as being painfully awkward to watch, with skewed and oftentimes unhelpful messages; a lot of the scenarios disregard the idea that most child abduction and abuse cases come from somebody already known, and the episode also encourages children to be paranoid that every stranger is a danger to them (TV Tropes). It is a messy attempt at simplifying the dangers of the world, which upon viewing is unfortunately more laughable than helpful.

On a more positive note, there are some examples of complex issues being tackled in a mature and subtler way on children's TV. Sesame Street is notorious for starting healthy conversations about complicated problems, such as racial and ableist discriminations. They have a whole website dedicated to delicately approaching circumstances such as grief, trauma, divorce, and even just tricky emotions. On each issue's dedicated page on the *Sesame Street in Communities* website, an accompanying video will play out a scenario. For example, under the grief information, there is a clip in which Elmo and his father look through a photo album and reminisce about their memories of "Uncle Jack". The video is only a minute long, but it demonstrates how ideas of grief can be communicated to children in a light way that not only acknowledges the sadness but also shows that there can be positive emotions found within the memories of people (Sesame Workshop).



"Grief" - Sesame Street in Communities (2016)

The difference between Pooh Corner's approach and the Sesame Street approach is that in the latter, they give the children an opportunity to interpret the scenario themselves and recognise feelings within it from their own experience. Pooh Corner is a little too in your face and is almost a mockery of real-world scenarios – the nature of the message being delivered via song is odd and undermines the weight of the problem, oversimplifying it and not allowing children to fully interpret what might be wrong in that instance.

Looking at the different examples, I wanted my puppets to be utilised more in the way of the Sesame Workshop; I would aim to create multifaceted characters capable of displaying a range of emotions, relationships, and scenarios that feel more realistic and closer to home. I think a main reason of Sesame Street working so well to represent different real-world issues is the variety of characters that in turn give opportunity for different types of relationships to be explored. Having a small cast of characters, like with Winnie the Pooh, that are so detached from the real world was probably not the best road for me to go down in terms of creating puppets that could be utilised to reflect real life.

Types of Puppets used in play therapy

After seeing some examples of puppetry in media being used to aid children's emotional development, I focused in on the tried and tested puppetry styles being used in play therapy already. A useful starting point for this was found within the book *Advanced Play Therapy* by Dee C Ray (2011). In it, several categories are listed for the most useful archetypes for self-expression and storytelling. These are:

- Nurturing puppets (family, familiar characters)
- Scary puppets (e.g., monsters)
- Aggressive characters (predatory animals like sharks, lions etc.)
- Expressive (Puppets that children can personalise)
- Pretend/Fantasy (heroes, fairy-tale characters)



"Beth Onufrak, PhD, uses puppets to interact with Owen Donsker (4) of Phoenix." (Raising Arizona Kids, 2009)

The variety here highlights the positive and negative archetypes that can often help the selection of toys during play therapies. For example, aggressive characters like dangerous animals may be used when a child wants to express their own anger or represent the anger of someone they know. These provide easily identifiable character types, without being too individually defined already (like pre-existing characters from media).

Family puppets are an idea backed up in Nancy Boyd Webb's book, *Play Therapy with Children in Crisis* (2007, p.59) whether these be finger puppets or a set of hand puppets to give children a feeling of familiarity that they can gravitate towards to prompt some self-expression. These are often "neutralised" using families of animals for example, to keep the set infinitely inclusive.

The variety of archetypes allow for children to be able to play out a multitude of scenarios and gives the therapist opportunity to observe how the child responds to each type of person – this can give a lot of insight into the child's personal life and experiences with certain people/attitudes. But it is also important to point out the idea of the "expressive" puppets – ones that children can personalise themselves, whether they be sock puppets or wooden spoons, to give a few examples.

It is also clear to me that these characters most commonly take form as hand, sock, and finger puppets. These are the main styles you will find on websites such as Play Therapy Supply and Child Therapy Toys, who also focus on sensory aspects of play; one of their puppets is a snake that is worn on the shoulders and is weighted to help those with autism and ADHD "improve attention". It is interesting to note that there are some variations to the "regular" puppets that make them more

accessible to children with sensory difficulties, mental health disorders and learning disabilities, as evidenced here.



The Snake Neck Wrap Puppet from Child Therapy Toys (2022)

Wanting some more personalised insight, I visited the subreddit r/PlayTherapy (A forum for play therapists to discuss practises) to ask a series of questions that I thought might be useful. I asked the following:

1. I want to understand what types of toys and characters resonate with children the most – for example, do children respond better to generic characters that they can “invent” personalities for (like animal puppets), or are they more receptive to pre-existing characters found within media that they already consume?
2. Would it be beneficial to have resources for them to “create” a puppet with – for example, providing socks for them to make a sock puppet out of and fully imagine their own characters, or is it best to introduce them to a fully realised puppet so that it is easier for the child to have a starting point?
3. Are there ways in which a child uses toys and puppets in therapy that are not often considered? I am factoring in when designing that children may put things in their mouths or may not always be gentle with them, but are there any other safety/structural elements that I should also be focusing on?
4. Where do you source your play resources from? Are there any specific creators/suppliers that I should look into for inspiration?
5. In general, are there any considerations that might be useful to know when approaching this? E.g. disabilities hindering play, textures (sensory stuff) that might put children off using these puppets, types of characters that might be useful etc.

I received several useful answers and perspectives on this topic, some of which contained information I had already found from the books I had read through. A user named u/frog_spawn (2021) offered the most useful advice, suggesting that generic characters were the way to go; although children may be more receptive to the characters they already know, they will feel more inclined to play *as* the character and you will get less personal response from them. In response to the children making their own puppets, I was told “For some kids you won't get any engagement out of making a puppet because it takes too long, it's too hard, the puppet they created doesn't match their idea, or they struggle with ideation or executive function to actually imagine and create the puppet. Other kids will have a blast and you'll learn a ton about this new character they created.” So, there was a sort of 50/50 consensus on that idea.

From their response, the most useful advice I revived was: “it's not a strategy that's gonna work for every kid.” Seeing this has probably been the most important thing for me to understand for this process. I won't be able to make a set of puppets that are inclusive for every single child. I can

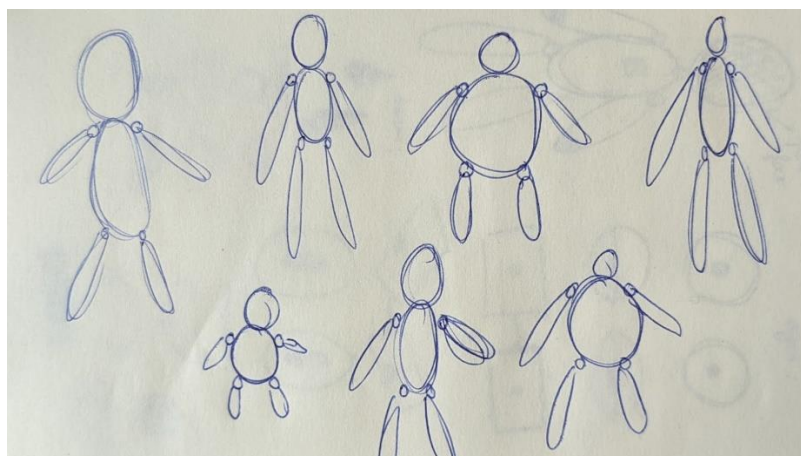
focus on trying to make them as accessible as possible, but if they don't have universal success, it doesn't mean I have failed.

Another very useful conversation I had was with Taisha Pratt, an assistant Psychologist who works with children. I asked her about the considerations one might need to make when tackling a project such as this. She supported the idea about having puppets that can be personalised, so that children find it easier to see themselves and people they know within the character – her suggestion was something as simple as Velcro letters that can be attached to different puppets so that they can easily represent different people. She highlighted how it can be comforting to some children to have these neutral, changeable puppets, as these can be more approachable for nonbinary and trans kids who feel they do not necessarily fit within stereotypical/archetypal representations (Pratt, 2021).

The conversation I had with Taisha was a big eye opener regarding my design process. Originally, I was trying to think of how I could make pre-existing archetypes customisable. But what if the puppets themselves were completely neutral – a blank slate? In this way, children could choose what types of characters they wanted to invent. They could combine different elements of existing archetypes to express themselves in a more personal way. They could choose the expressions, clothes, appearance. It seemed like the perfect way to be able to represent the feelings and individuality of children, with an infinite amount of opportunity for unique personalisation. The first step from here, was figuring out how to achieve this.

Before I could design my own puppets, it was important for me to establish the purpose of what I was working towards. It is clear from my research that you can build up a toolkit for play therapy using pre-existing toys and puppets that can be bought just about anywhere. I wanted to adapt what already exists into a more refined tool for emotional expression to understand how puppets can be helpful first-hand. In doing so, I am not just replicating an already established style or expectation but am challenging myself as a designer and creative practitioner to be innovative, as well as exploring how my creations can then be implemented.

Designing the Puppets



I started off with basic sketches, trying to convey a neutral but varied body shape for the puppets, and leaving the faces blank for further exploration. The freestanding ragdoll-like figure was inspired by the brown paper puppets demonstrated by Mervyn Millar in his book, *Puppetry: How to do it* (2018). They are a simplified bunraku puppet that is stripped back to a basic figure to

allow for more focus on expressing emotions; they are mainly used for storytelling as there is no aesthetic or predetermined characterisation. He credits Handspring for the design and defines it as a “simple approximation of a human, but the material and scale means he can be used to explore a very wide range of movement qualities” (p.185). These puppets are usually controlled by three or more puppeteers, so I experimented with more manageable smaller scale tissue paper versions.



The Paper Puppet on the cover of Millar's book (2018)



My experiments with the paper puppet model

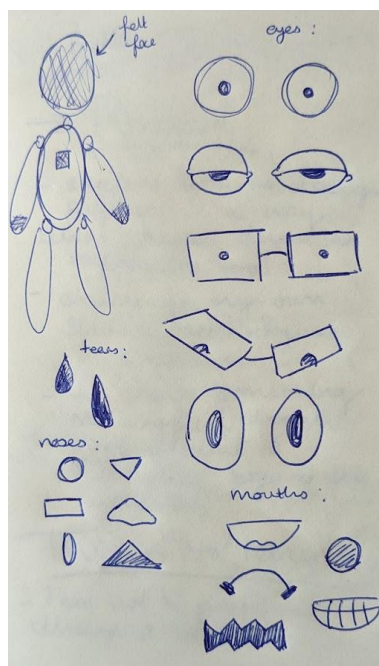
There was a versatility of expression with these figures; with no set expression or form, they were free in the way that they could be used for storytelling. There was something easily satisfying about the forms and the way they could be manipulated to create different statures, which made it simple to shift from one character to the next. With these puppets, you inherently need to focus on the body language and control over the movement. These factors seemed perfect for therapy puppets, as they are not dressed up as any recognisable character- they become a clean slate for self-

expression which can be somewhat personalised and redesigned. I was intrigued to see how I could use this style in a way that was engaging for younger children.

Although the faceless figures are interesting, I felt that children would find characters with a face far more approachable. I thought back to the film *Life, Animated* (2016) and how the most useful tool for Owen to understand his own emotions were the character's exaggerated expressions. I found a useful video from 1969 in which Jim Henson demonstrates how children can make and personalise their own puppets and give them personality and expression. He uses household items and sticks different things like eyes, hair, and hats to the materials he is using (Iowa PBS, 2009). I realised I could use this idea to create neutral, blank, faces with different features for children to also "stick" on and use to personalise the puppet. One quote of his from the video that stood out to me was "You can make puppets almost as permanent or temporary as you want to". I began to sketch up different eyes, mouths and noses that could potentially express different emotions and make the puppet interchangeable.



Jim Henson with a mock-up wooden spoon puppet (Iowa PBS, 2009)



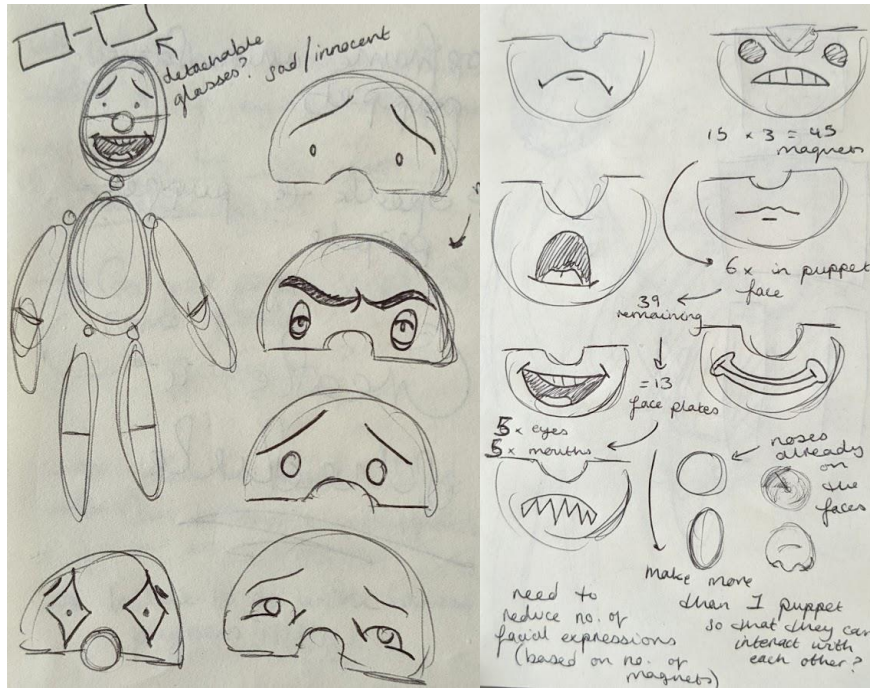
Although I initially liked the concept of having small individual features, I remembered a piece of advice I was given by the reddit user u/frog_spawn about how some children will struggle to engage with the personalisation. I began to think of a more simplified and accessible customisation method and turned towards the figures used in stop frame animation. These puppets need to have their expressions changed constantly to allow for dynamic movement between different frames. One example of this being used would be Paranorman; the artists at Laika studios 3D printed thousands of different faces that could be switched out between frames to allow seamless facial movement of their characters (Roper, 2012). Some of these face plates were in two halves: one for the upper face (eyebrow movement), and one for the lower face (mouth movements) in a technique known as “replacement animation” (eOneFilms, 2012). I thought it would be perfect to explore a similar concept for my puppet faces; if I made face plates for a series of chosen emotions, I would potentially be more limited than smaller features to mix and match, but it might improve the ease of use and accessibility for younger children.



Lower face plates 3D printed for Paranorman (Grunewald, 2014)



One of Norman's many possible expressions (eOneFilms, 2012)



In the sketches for these face plates, I tried to get a balance of positive and negative emotions. It was my plan to have sets of two that corresponded with one another to create a complete face but could also be changed to express deeper emotions – such as worry mixed with sadness, or shock mixed with happiness. I decided to mock up a couple of expressions using modelling clay before investing in materials. Being able to visualise the puppets in 3D was extremely useful; I could see that I would be able to achieve those exaggerated, cartoonish expressions that I had planned for, and so following these testers I moved onto creating the final faces.



I originally wanted the face pieces to be curved around a spherical head, like the mock sculpts, but the fimo I chose to carve with wasn't suitable for this without making the faces too thick. Plus, the clay can sometimes warp in the oven which would prevent the halves from sitting nicely on the heads or fitting together properly. To combat this, I adapted the planned structure slightly to correspond with my budget, and I was still very happy with the result of the sculpt and bake. The new, flat faces were sanded and then painted, using bright primary and secondary colours to help the expressions pop – especially for children with visual impairments as I chose colours commonly associated with the different moods and emotions to match accordingly.

The face designs were informed by the archetypes often used within play therapy, stripped back to the underlying emotions. I chose six expressions: shocked, sad, happy, neutral, and angry to be associated with any character type, and then angry to represent the aggressive archetype, and a clown face to represent the jester archetype. I hoped that by having emotions instead of characters I could make the puppets more easily interpretable and varied in what kind of person they might be used to portray.



Having finished the faces, I moved on to designing the bodies. Now that the front of the face was going to be flat, I couldn't have a full sphere head. I did however want there to be some structure so that the puppets were easy to hold and to give them cohesive proportions. One thing I tried to achieve this was using polystyrene half-spheres that matched the radius of the faces, which then had magnets glued to them. Upon experimenting, I found that it was difficult to line the magnets up with those glued to the face plates, and they just weren't strong enough through the test fabric to keep the face secure. I also figured that the polystyrene might be too fragile if handled by children too forcefully. I figured although it would perhaps be less aesthetically pleasing, I could use strips of

Velcro to attach the faces to the heads and use stuffing to pad the figures out instead. In hindsight, this was probably a far more child friendly option as it makes clear where the pieces go, and the idea of a stuffed toy is more approachable to be played with.



I decided to approach the bodies in the same way as the faces – cohesive, varied and somewhat neutral. Due to a low budget, I had narrower choice when selecting fabrics, but I tried to pick a variety of different textures – I wanted to incorporate senses into the puppets, such as dimpled materials for blind or visually impaired children to make the use of them more engaging. It would also potentially improve the experience of children who may have sensory difficulties, giving them more options if there is a particular fabric they don't like. The fabrics I chose were two different fleeces, velvet, corduroy, and a dimpled cotton. I was initially going to have a fluffy/furry fabric for one, but I was advised by Taisha (2021) that anything like cotton that can be torn away is the kind of thing that children might try to put in their mouths, so I decided against it. In terms of colours, I tried to choose neutrally; I didn't want to portray any race or gender in a bid to not exclude anyone who may want to identify personally with the puppets. This was the same for the structure.

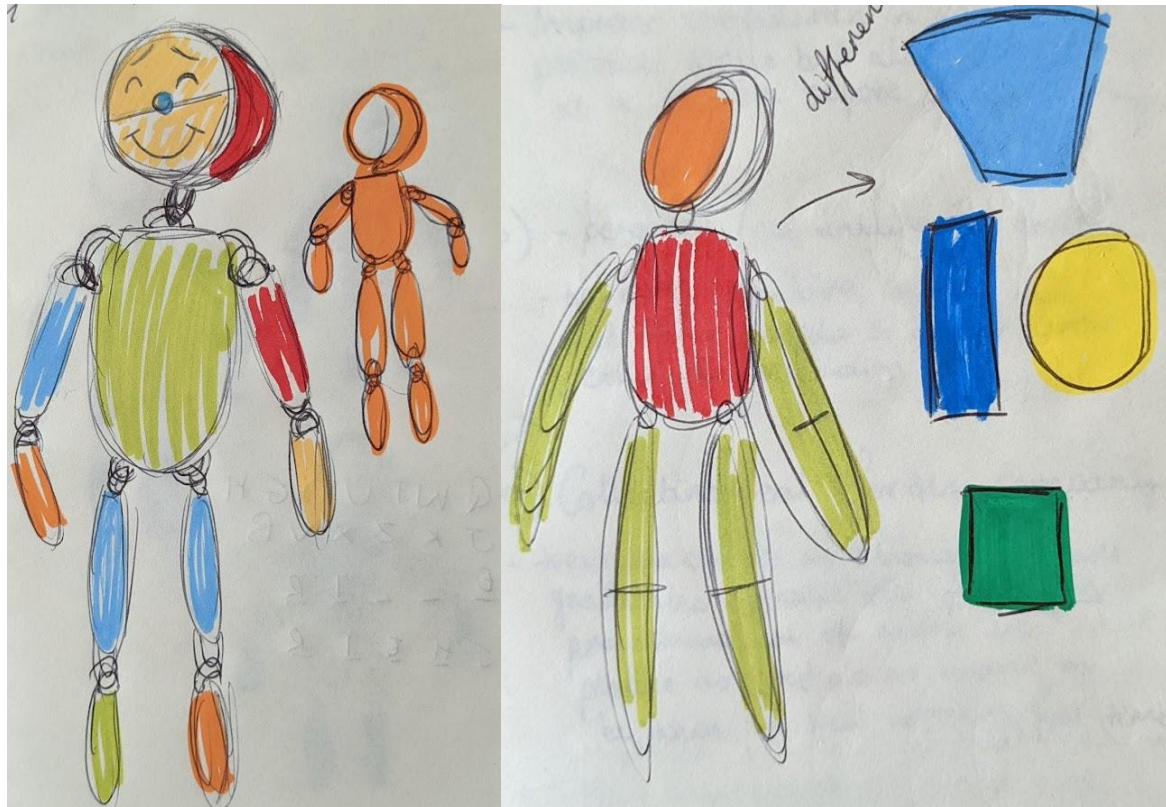


I chose different shapes and proportions to somewhat “neutralise” the forms of the puppets. There is nothing inherently realistic about the shapes I chose, instead opting for more squared off limbs and torsos. This was again to maintain gender neutrality and also removes any predetermined age, personality or characteristics about the puppets so that children have a blank slate to work from. The puppets are floppy, or ragdoll-like to make them easy to manipulate, and each head has a fabric “hook” so that they can be held up properly. I really wanted to instil a freedom into the children who use them to interpret them however they wish; by making them simple to use and customised I hoped to make their use relaxing and simple.



I did initially want to make the bodies and limbs interchangeable. This could have been achieved using joints secured by Velcro so that if the children do want to mix and match the limbs, torsos, and heads, they can in order to make the body type more “familiar”. These puppets could also come

with different outfits or costumes to help signify different archetypes, such as a cape for a superhero or wizard hat for a wise, nurturing character. This is just one of the many ways that could expand on how they might be used, but I wanted to make them simple and approachable. As I began building and contemplating more, I worried that this might overcomplicate their use, and detract from the priority of their function, which is to aid children in emotional expression.



Using the Puppets

Once the puppets had been built, it was my original intention to bring them to a class of children for a “storytelling workshop”. This would entail me reading a story to them and giving them different puppets to act out how certain characters were feeling. Afterwards, I would collect feedback and information to determine how effective the puppets were. However, this plan was put on hold after I tested positive for covid-19 and was unable to carry out practical testing for their use. This led me to think about how I could potentially test the puppets virtually.

I looked for ways in which puppets have been used in teaching and came across an article about two teachers, Ms. Ana Liriano and Ms. Gabiana Martinez. They both work for the Cardinal McCloskey Community Service and have been using hand puppets to teach remotely. In these videos, they act out different scenarios to help children identify different emotions. Ms. Ana explains that “the puppets are being used as an instrument to explain and to be at the kids’ level” and that using them is like “A TV show they would like and they can’t wait for the next episode”. They have found that these characters make the learning more engaging for their students. One useful quote for me especially comes from Ms. Gabi, as she says their use lets children “experience the feelings of other characters and subsequently learn important behaviours, social skills and how to use specific strategies to help manage big emotions.” (Bruno, 2020).



Ms. Gabi and Ms. Ana in one of their remote teaching videos (2020)

This method of acting feelings out and getting children to interpret them seemed like a perfect way for me to test my own puppets and how they could help aid the emotions of children. I came across an activity that was like theirs, which utilised a similar customisable face design that my own puppets have. Using paper plates, Soumya John talks about using different Velcro features to create a face – an emotion is presented to the child, and they are asked why the puppet might be feeling that way (2021). Using these examples as new inspiration, I drafted an idea for a series of short videos using my puppets.

Each puppet was given a name that was either non gender specific or potentially ambiguous. These names are Milo, Buttons, Bubbles, Frazzles and Angus. I would be referring to each puppet either by their name or with they/them pronouns. This was to remove any gender bias that could potentially stop a child from relating to the puppet or influencing their interpretations due to preconceived notions about “masculine” and “feminine” emotions. I then filmed a short series of videos with the puppets to put within a survey for children to engage with and answer certain questions about the puppets.



In order: Milo, Buttons, Bubbles



Frazzles and Angus

The Survey is titled “Using puppets to communicate emotions with children” and is found at <https://forms.gle/9j9Qn5mU5GSyxDSr5> . It begins with an explanation of how it works:

“Hi! This is a short video led survey created by me to gain a better understanding about how puppets can be used to create conversations about emotions with children. In the videos I will hold up puppets, explain what is going on and prompt the child to answer simple questions. There will be answers to select below each video, or a space to fill in a separate answer if their response is not listed. Multiple choices are also allowed. There are no right or wrong answers, I just want to see how they interpret the videos.

If your child doesn’t answer some/any of the questions, please leave them blank. Do not come up with an answer on their behalf - I want an honest response from their perspective and to see if they have engaged with the questions. Names are not required, and the feedback received will not be published – all information is for my dissertation only.” (Cleary, 2022).

The first video shows me introducing the scenarios the children are about to watch – I say that my friends sometimes have trouble working out how they are feeling, and that they need some help to figure it out. I then introduce Milo, who “Doesn’t think there is much going on in the Garden today”. Following this, I ask the question “How do we think Milo feels?”. I then explain that Milo has seen some friends playing together in the garden, and switch half of their expression, prompting them to answer how they think they feel now. I follow up with asking if they can think of a time they might have felt this way, to see if they have been able to identify with the character and emotion.



Milo’s first and second expression

Milo doesn't think there's a lot going on in the garden today - How do you think they feel?

☐ Bored

☐ Sad

☐ Happy

☐ Calm

☐ Other: _____

Milo has seen some of their friends playing in the garden - how do they feel now?

☐ Jealous

☐ Sad

☐ Grumpy

☐ Other: _____

Can you think of a time that you've felt like this before? (If no, leave blank)

Your answer _____

Milo has seen some of their friends playing in the garden - how do they feel now?

☐ Jealous

☐ Sad

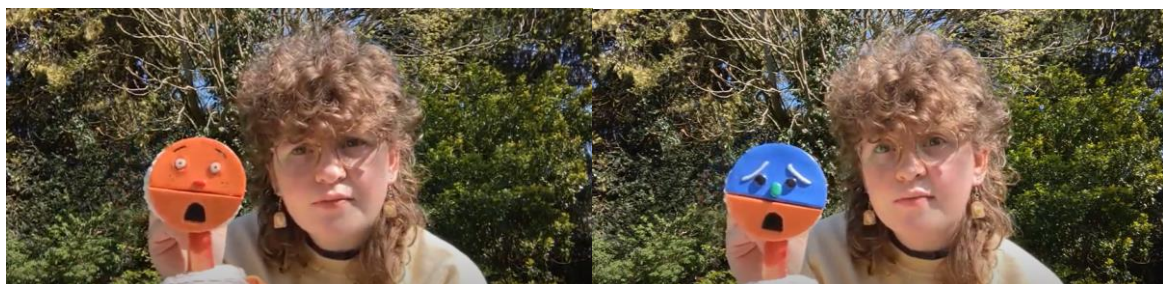
☐ Grumpy

☐ Other: _____

Can you think of a time that you've felt like this before? (If no, leave blank)

Your answer _____

In the second video, I introduce Buttons who has never been on camera before. They are shaky and nervous – something I do not explicitly state. I ask how we think Buttons might be feeling, and why. This is to further see if the child can understand and interpret the emotion in more depth. I then say that Buttons sometimes feels overwhelmed, and switch half of their face to imply this further. After introducing this new emotion, I ask if the child has ever felt this way before. In stating the emotion, I hope to make the exercise easier for children who might struggle to identify the expression, by putting both name and face together.



Buttons with their first and second expression

Puppet 2 - Buttons



Buttons has never been on camera before - How do you think Buttons is feeling?

☐ Shy
☐ Nervous
☐ Afraid
☐ Stressed
☐ Other: _____

Why do you think Buttons might be feeling this way?

Your answer _____

Can you think of a time that you've felt overwhelmed? (If no, leave blank)

Your answer _____

In the third video, I introduce a more positive emotion. This is one of the shorter videos, in which I say that Bubbles loves to be in the garden and ask how we think they are feeling. I then ask the child to answer when they have felt this way. I wanted every video to be relatable to the child, and in this one especially I didn't want to overcomplicate the emotion, as happiness is usually less complex to interpret than negative emotions.



Bubbles

Puppet 3 - Bubbles

Bubbles loves being outside in the garden - How do you think Bubbles is feeling?

☐ Happy
☐ Excited
☐ Calm
☐ Other: _____

Can you think of a time that you've felt like Bubbles? (If no, leave blank)

Your answer _____

In my fourth video, I introduce a scenario with two characters, Frazzles and Angus, who have had a bit of a falling out. I explain that Angus doesn't like loud noises, and that Frazzles has been very noisy today which has left Angus feeling like "this". I first ask how they think Angus might be feeling, followed up by a question of whether we think "this is the right way to respond". With this question, I am prompting the child to interpret the interaction and give their own opinion on somebody else's emotions, much like an activity that might be done within a play therapy session when tackling difficult subjects. To expand upon this understanding, I finish the video by asking "what would you do if somebody was getting on your nerves?", allowing them to interpret the situation and either relate to Angus, or give an alternative, independent suggestion.



Frazzles and Angus

Puppets 4 and 5 - Frazzles and Angus

Frazzles has been making too much noise - How do you think Angus is feeling?

☐ Angry
☐ Frustrated
☐ Sad
☐ Other: _____

Do you think that is the correct way for Angus to respond?

☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Maybe
☐ Other: _____

What would you do if somebody was getting on your nerves?

Your answer _____

The final video of the survey reintroduces each character and asks the child “who are you feeling most like today?”. I thought this would be a nice way to round off the survey and come back to the child and their own feelings.

Which puppet do you feel like today?

☐ Buttons

☐ Angus

☐ Frazzles

☐ Bubbles

☐ Milo

A few important things to bear in mind when sharing the survey was to remember that I am not able to test the use of these puppets, ethically or accurately, with the intention of psychological analysis. I

am not a psychologist, nor am I a trained counsellor or therapist and to claim I am qualified to use the puppets myself to therapize would be wrong and potentially harmful. Because of this, all surveys were anonymous, and I collected no personal data other than the age of the child. I have therefore created a series of criteria for myself to judge whether my puppets can be seen as successful in aiding the emotional needs of children.

1. Design – Have children looked at the expressions of the puppets and are they able to easily identify what emotion is being presented to them?

The simple questions, such as “how do you think they might be feeling?” and “Why do you think they feel this way?” will be used to see whether the children are able to identify the emotions based on the way I have designed and sculpted them. In two of the videos, I switch out one half of the face to question whether the child can interpret a new emotion that is being presented to them. Because I was not able to bring these puppets to children for them to experiment with, I figured this was the best way to test the customisation mechanic. If they can identify a new, custom emotion, then I can see that the customisable faces translate well and that they have a useful function in communicating emotions.

It is also important to remember that I have set no definitive correct answers to this question, but if the child’s answer is a positive emotion when the expression is more negative, then I will have to class the response as not having fully understood the emotion.

2. Connection to the puppets – Are the children able to relate to the puppets? Can they identify their own emotions when looking at the characters presented to them?

On top of getting the children to understand the initial emotion, I ask the questions such as “Can you think of a time you felt this way?”. These types of questions will be used to identify whether the child has been able to relate to the puppet. This is also tested with Frazzles and Angus, and the challenge to decide whether they would react in the same way, or what they would do differently themselves. If these questions have been answered, then I will be able to see how connected they have felt to the characters.

3. Engagement – Are the children interested in the puppets? Have they answered all of the questions?

In the survey, I have instructed whoever is answering on the child’s behalf to leave any question blank if the child does not answer; I would rather have no answer (an honest response) than something made up by a parent or guardian to fill the gaps. I have also added multiple choice answers to each question, with an extra option to input their own interpretation if what they want to respond with is not listed. This will allow me to assess the level of engagement that children have with the videos, as the more questions that are answered, the more engagement there has been with the video, and the more detail I receive may also suggest more interest.

Although puppets can be used in therapy beyond childhood, especially to treat things like grief and dementia, the GoodTherapy® website suggests that childhood is where people feel most comfortable expressing themselves through play (2015). They suggest “it is specifically designed to treat children under 12”. I decided it would be best for me to advertise my survey for children in

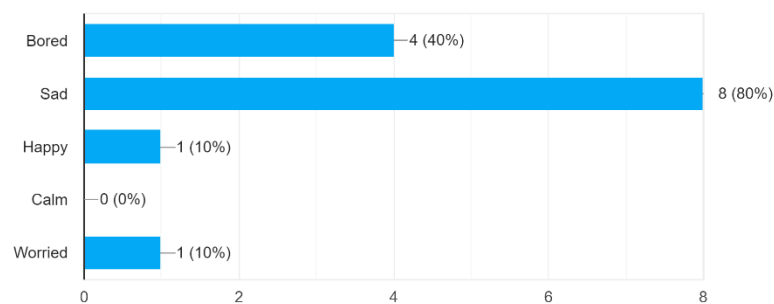
preschool and primary school (3-11). This survey was then shared in several facebook and reddit groups, and with people I know in order to reach my target audience.

Survey Results

As of writing this, I have received 11 responses to my survey, within the age range of 3-9. Four of which were 3 years old, one was 5, one 6, two 7, one 8 and one 9. I received an interesting mix of data from those who participated and revisited my evaluative criteria to further interpret it.

The design of the puppets translated well. 82% of those who participated could recognise the emotions being presented to them, with the other 12% either not fully understanding what they were shown or just not answering the question. Also, 55% were able to identify or select more than one emotion for each face; for example, one suggested that Angus was both angry and frustrated.

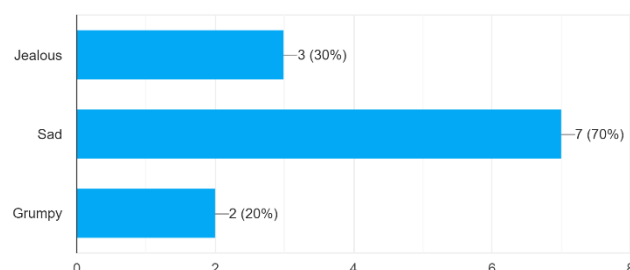
Milo doesn't think there's a lot going on in the garden today - How do you think he feels?
10 responses



Responses to Milo's first expression

The identification of the emotion changing (half face swap) for Milo was less successful, with only 64% selecting or suggesting a different emotion to what they had previously seen. This is not necessarily a failure of design however, as some of those who didn't notice a change still recognised an emotion. It is still useful for me to see that some children found the face customisation easy to understand.

Milo has seen some of their friends playing in the garden - how do they feel now?
10 responses



Responses to Milo's changed expression

In terms of the children identifying with the puppets, I received answers from 45% who related to Milo and Buttons' feelings, and 55% related to Bubbles. On top of this, 73% picked a character at the

end of the survey that they related to on that day. This shows to me that the puppets did resonate with most of the children in some way, highlighting that they could be used to help children understand their own emotions.

Can you think of a time that you've felt like Bubbles? (If no, leave blank)

6 responses

When it was Christmas and I got my presents

I feel happy now

A lot at school all the time

When she was laughing

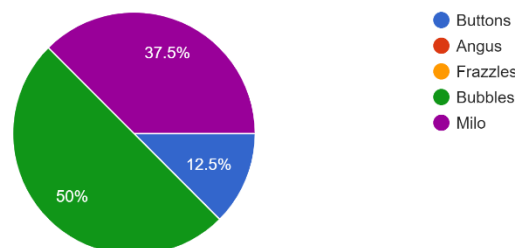
When I play with my friends.

When he was playing a dinosaur game

Some of the responses to the Bubbles video

Which puppet do you feel like today?

8 responses



Character choices for the final survey question

When looking at the engagement, only 27% answered every single question. This is not inherently bad; some may have simply not related to the puppets or could not think of their own examples, or perhaps some were too young to understand the questions – such as Buttons feeling overwhelmed, which might be a bit of a big word for a three-year-old. There was one participant who answered no questions, and one who stopped answering questions halfway through. This data takes me back again to the idea that the puppets will not work for everybody, and that is okay.

It is interesting looking at the age ranges; I wondered maybe whether the younger children, such as the three-year-olds, would be more engaged with the survey but there was a good amount of engagement from most of the participants. I suspect the simplicity of design and approachable questions made it quite accessible for the demographic I sent the survey to. If I had been able to receive a wider range of data perhaps I would have seen different results, but the most important part to see is that there was engagement, understanding and relatability with at least some of the children who partook in the activity.

Although I was not able to test the puppets in person and see how children reacted to operating them independently, I have been able to see their potential to start conversations about emotions. It really is fascinating to see how comfortable some of the children felt responding to these puppets. For example, one of the three-year-old participants said that they related to Milo being sad when

their grandma had died, which is probably a very tricky emotion to understand for someone so young. This example alone has shown me the benefits of puppetry and their role as a mediator to help children emotionally.

Can you think of a time that you've felt like this before? (If no, leave blank)

5 responses

Grandmas died

At school sometimes. People don't play with me a lot

Rose age 3: when her brother didn't play with her

When my friends choose to play without me.

When his sister wasn't letting him play

Personal responses to Milo's video

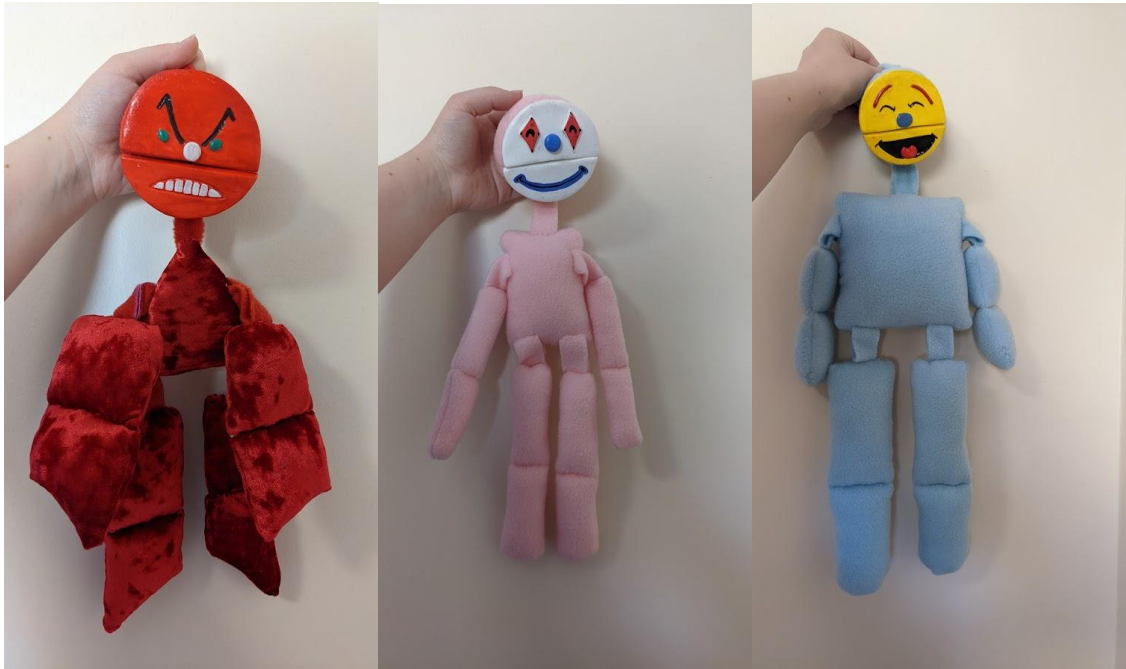
Some answers were straightforward; One of the children, when asked why they thought Buttons felt the way they did was "because the look on his face". Although this is a far simpler response and less emotionally connected, the fact that a child was able to look at the expression and understand the puppet's feelings shows me that these face designs can be used to communicate expressions and feelings in a way that is easy to digest.

Although my puppets aren't the typical hand or finger puppets commonly used within play therapy and emotional education, so long as they have the same fundamental elements to them, they will translate well; simple but clear archetypes, expressions and engaging design will keep children interested, and if they are interested in the puppets, they are far more likely to respond to them.

I also found that control and approach are key; in being able to present and act as the puppet characters myself, I was able to communicate in an approachable way. All my questions were asked gently, and I remained responsive to the characters such as reacting by saying "Oh no!" upon first seeing Buttons' scared expression or being more smiley when Bubbles was on screen. If the person controlling the puppets is engaged in the interaction, it will make the activity far more realistic and comfortable for the child. I could have just held up puppets and asked how the child thought they were feeling, but by putting the interactions into context, giving the puppets life and personality, you allow the child to feel like they are having a meaningful conversation.

This project has not only increased my confidence in performing and sharing my creations, but has caused me to have a much higher respect for the medium of puppetry; I have always admired the art of bringing these inanimate objects to life in a fun way, but never before have I considered how much positive impact they might be having on someone. As I grow and improve as a maker, I will certainly have a much higher consideration for who I am making the puppets for, and how important something that I deem as fun or silly just might be.

It has been an extremely educational project, not putting myself first and what I think would look good or be fun, but to think of others and design in a way that optimises the puppets for somebody else; I've worked with a new puppet style, new fabrics, and new concepts. I hope that through the survey and puppets I have created that I have been able to resonate with at least one child, and I hope to use these puppets again in the future to continue their educational use.



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