

# Puppets help families explore grief

By Mary Ann Schwenk

*Mary Ann Schwenk, play therapist counselor, uses puppet therapy to assist families dealing with their grief. During puppetry, she helps each person explore important emotions, facts, and decisions. Puppets enable family members to work through their tough feelings, allowing them to share with each other and look at their realities. While in her graduate program for clinical psychotherapy, specializing in children and traumas, Mary Ann had the opportunity to meet and observe a psychologist who enjoyed working with puppets with his clients. She fell in love with the idea and its concept. Puppetry humanizes grief and traumas and greatly enables families to work together to learn and understand their grief.*

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I am notified that a family is seeking a play therapist counselor to work with their two daughters. The younger child is at home with hospice staff and needs someone to help her. The older girl, 12, is trying to be strong but needs support, too. The parents are beside themselves in how to deal with grief and loss. On the first day's session, their mother walks me to the door and from there I am alone with the girls.

**Session 1:** I find Jamie in her hospital bed in the living room and Sarah is sitting on the bed holding Jamie's hand. The sisters watch as I carry in four colorful boxes and set them next to me.

"Hello, Jamie and Sarah, I am Anna. I am here to share my puppets with both of you. Can either of you give me a high-five? I so very much need one today." Jamie is quick to do so. Sarah, following Jamie, responds in kind. Sarah is cautiously studying my words and actions. She keeps her eyes on Jamie, too, acting like a loving, protective older sister.

"Sarah, I wonder if you or Jamie have ever played together with puppets?" Heads shake "no." OK, I tell them. I very slowly pull out an 18-inch puppet from each box, which I set on its box but next to me. Each puppet is facing the girls.

I begin: "OK ... I just love playing with puppets and would love to have you join in with me today. Let's see, I brought Mini, who just happens to be 5 years old, and Mikayla, who is 12 years old." I bring out Nurse Megan and Dr. Martin. I tell them that they have mouths, arms, and legs that move. So I demonstrate with Mini. Then I say, "Gee, they all have one thing in common ... can you guess what that may be?" Jamie cheerfully says, "They are all puppets." Sarah, who is quite astute, says, "Their names all begin with M." I smile and say, "Absolutely wonderful ... you are the first person who has given me that answer this entire month!" Sarah's eyes light up and I note that she is starting to relax. Jamie smiles at her big sister and squeezes her hand.



I tell them we are going to use puppets in our time together today. They smile and even giggle together. I let them touch and try each puppet first. Then I ask which one they would choose to use in our story. Jamie takes RN Megan and Sarah takes 5-year-old Mini. So I get 12-year-old Mikayla and Dr. Martin. Jamie squeals with delight and Sarah is happy to see her sister's reactions.



I start: "Our story is about a child of 5 who is quite sick and her health is not very good. So we need to pretend to be the puppets and be the voice for the puppets, too." They nod their heads. I start off with Dr. Martin and give him a gentle kind voice with a sense of humor. He introduces Nurse Megan to the girls; I allow Jamie to have RN Megan talk to us. Dr. Martin, says, "Each one of us must give a response to the nurse." Dr. Martin speaks to Mini, whom Sarah holds. "Mini, you have pretty hair, soft stuffed animals, and a beautiful doll." Then he takes his colorful stethoscope to listen to Mini's doll's heart and lungs. The girls giggle some. He repeats it with Mini, too. RN Megan takes the doll's temp and blood pressure and repeats this with Mini ... all the while Sarah is watching intently. Dr. Martin uses this time to ask Mini, "How are you feeling today?" Mini provides her responses. Dr. Martin asks, "Mini, do you have any questions for me?" Depending on Sarah's response through Mini, I am getting a small sampling of Sarah's concerns about Jamie. Children will usually easily share fears and concerns through puppets; it is easier for them to freely ask their questions and then listen to the answer with less apprehension. We continue going through Mini to learn more about Sarah's feelings about her sister. There could be tears with this. Jamie continues being the nurse as she listens to her big sister's thoughts and fears. I would not be surprised if Nurse Megan tries to console her big sister, possibly puppet to puppet and/or sister to sister. The sessions last about an hour ... if something truly revealing arises, we might go an extra 15 minutes only. I do not want to wear out Jamie by continuing any longer.

**Session 2:** I ask Jamie to take Mikayla and Sarah to take Dr. Martin, and I have Mini and Nurse Megan. Again, questions start with Dr. Martin speaking, "Hello, I am so very happy to be here again." Once again I ask for a high-five ... and this time both girls respond quickly and somewhat more vigorously while laughing. Today, Nurse Megan asks Mikayla, "How are you? And what can you tell me about you sister, Mini, today?" Depending again on Jamie's responses, I learn what she feels and possibly knows about her older sister, Mikayla. I watch Sarah's face as she listens. I ask Nurse Megan for her thoughts about Mikayla ... and Dr. Martin speaks with Mikayla about Mini, who says, "I am not feeling so good today, not at all." Our discussions help each sister to learn about the other. In each situation, I observe their reactions. Sarah uses Dr. Martin to find out why Mini is feeling so poorly. This is a time for Nurse Megan to help the doctor with the symptoms; even decide if the session should continue or the parents should notify the hospice nurse. If not, then the session continues.

**Session 3:** Similar beginning ... consistency is helpful to reestablish our connections. This round, I ask Jamie to be Dr. Martin and Sarah to be Mini. I am Nurse Megan and Mikayla. Nurse Megan asks Dr. Martin questions for him to ask Mini. This may be the true beginning of Jamie revealing her relationship with the doctor as well as her hearing her sister's concerns for her ... answers that enable me as her sister, Mikayla, to ask questions of the doctor about her sister's health. Nurse Megan responds with questions for Dr. Martin about Mini's health. In this round Jamie shares even more understandings or lack of what is happening to her and how she feels about her hospice staff's help. Nurse Megan tries to share about hospice care and allows the girls to respond with thoughts, fears, or questions ... name the staff, what they do, and for what reason.

**Session 4:** Both girls have an opportunity to ask questions of Dr. Martin about their concerns about their parents during hospice care. Jamie is Mini and Sarah is Mikayla. Each girl takes the puppet who represents them, which enables them to share as much as each would like and to ask as much as they still need to ask. Tears could flow. I ask them if for the next session they would allow Dr. Martin to ask their parents to come in.

**Session 5:** Dr. Martin brings in the girls' parents. This could be a tough session. Dr. Martin sets the tone and "purpose" of the meeting. He asks the sisters, with their puppets speaking for them, to share with their parents. I have shared this concept with the parents after Session 4. The parents speak to the puppets. There could be more frequent tears ... and even hugs. I expect more grief concerns from the family will come out. I expect that Sarah's prognosis will be brought up. Tissues are available. Dr. Martin and Nurse Megan act as moderators and counselors. Somewhere closer to midway, I ask to put the puppets away in their boxes and then speak to everyone. Also depending on the needs of individuals or the group, we could have a concluding session in no more than two days. Time is of the essence and therefore I focus on the needs of each family member. I am available if the family wants me to be at any time pre- and post- Jamie passing on.



The family's relationships and the questions about hospice care and Jamie's prognosis flow while the puppets allow each child to voice her feelings and thoughts about the illness and eventually the associated grief. Each child uses each puppet to see the perspective of each of the players and their own feelings become revealed and worked through. Time is a key factor when a child is in hospice care ... scheduling appointments and the types of interventions during each session are geared appropriately. However, the parents are always educated pre- and post-. I eventually act like a moderator to help enable each one to accept the process of grief and the final outcome for Jamie is explored openly with all emotions revealed.