

# ANIMATED TREATMENT: THE METHOD OF ART THERAPY USED WITH CHILDREN HAVING COMMUNICATION PROBLEMS

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## **Abstract**

This article considers the author's original technique of studying positive and negative aspects of social communication of children having selective communication problems. The art-technique presented in this article can be referred to as 'expressive projective art-therapy'. The author's specialized art-technique, utilizing self-made "finger-puppets" as the basis in a creative art-therapeutic session, are called "doll-therapeutic" sessions.

**Key words:** *projective drawing, children having selective communication problems, emotional perception, family situation, family relationship, expressive projective art-therapy ("doll-therapy"), art-technique.*

## **Introduction**

"The best way to help children is to help their parents" (Tomas A. Harris). The first years of education are known to be the most significant periods in the development of children's personality. The youngest function of mentality – speech – is formed in this period. Therefore, younger schoolchildren (aged 6 – 12) can have difficulties for different reasons, in communicative activity, verbalization of feelings and of ideas. However, they eagerly "speak" in non-verbal manners by means of visual and plastic expressions, gestures, etc. Yet Jung (1931, 1946) asserted that graphic activity (painting, drawing) is the internal need of every human being, being a kind of instinct. He assumed that the symbolical language of the fine arts was the most adequate, more exact and capacious, than the words. It is also emphasized in the works of well-known art-therapists (Goodman, 1998; Naumburg, 1966) that the most important ideas and experiences of each person, as unconscious generation, appear initially in the form of images.

The above idea is proven in numerous researches of Russian psychologists and teachers, who consider the pictures of children to be the original analogue of speech. In particular, Vygotsky (1968) called children's drawing "graphic speech". In Russia the national pedagogical (teacher training) science has long-term experience of using graphic creativity in working with children. However, various forms of art-therapeutic work appeared in Russia only some years ago.

Various art-therapeutic techniques are effective in the correction of selective communicative problems. One of them deals with self-made finger dolls and can be symbolically called "doll-therapy". It can be viewed as expressive projective art-therapy.

The advantages of this technique are simplicity and accessibility, the free choice of images, personages and ideas in the "here and now". It should be noted that dolls and stories told by their creators arise spontaneously during the session.

### **Relevance of the problem**

#### Professional identity of Russian art therapists

A person who works with children in the sessions is named "the art-therapist" in this article. Although, it should be noted here that the name "art-therapist" is conventional (symbolic). These professionals cannot be called "art-therapists" because they lack a specialist education. They simply try to reveal some problems in the development of personality of children, and ease their emotional state.

There are no professional educational art-therapeutic programs in Russia, and therefore there are no qualified specialists in that field. But there is a growing interest in art-therapy throughout Russia. Many psychologists, social workers and teachers of psychology learn about various art-therapeutic techniques from the published literature of foreign authors and from educational sessions held by visiting foreign art-therapists.

As psycho-physiologists affirm, it is the spontaneous drawing that activates the projection mechanism, which is very important in achieving the therapeutic effect (Bekhterev, 1910; Мухина, 1981). Creative activity (drawing, work with plaster and other materials) is known to be an important means of non-verbal communication, self-expression of deep emotional experience, problems and excitement for a child. For an art-therapist, it is a humane, non-intrusive diagnostic method of evaluating/measuring the psychical developmental peculiarities of each child.

Children in class, who are too shy and timid, even when well prepared for the lesson, may find it difficult to answer their teachers' questions. These communicative problems negatively influence their educational success.

In order to make diagnostics of the emotional state of children, Lusher's Colour Test (Lusher, 1997) is used in its simplified form, according to which, eight colors – red, yellow, blue, green, violet, brown, black and grey – chosen by the children, correspond to their emotional state during the session. The choice of material reflects the condition of emotional state of the children during the session. Sometimes children desire to touch smooth materials (silk, for example) pile or napped ones.

Eventually, it is easy for an art therapist to understand the values, interests and feelings of the children, and to see their creative and imaginative abilities. Factors such as dolls' images, sizes, prevailing colors, facial features and essence of the children's story are taken into account.

The doll's face also reveals important information to the art therapist. Each doll is the creator's self-portrait. According to Russian psychologists (Leontiev, 1972; Мухина, 1992) children see the world in two ways. They borrow a rational idea about the world from adults, but deep in their hearts they consider it to be magic and mysterious. Very often children take

fairy-tales as reality and their personages as real living-beings, which they are afraid to admit openly to adults. Sessions in art-therapy help to overcome this obstacle through self-made dolls' stories.

The art-therapeutic technique represented in the article can be applied in all cases of selective communicative problems. Although it can often be of palliative rather than of therapeutic nature, it is obvious that one or two sessions are not enough for solving such problems. Long-term systematic corrective work is required.

**Object of the research** – emotional treatment of children having communication problems in the process of projective Art Therapy.

**Aim of the research** – The authors' specialized technique, utilizing self-made "finger-puppets" as the basis in a creative art-therapeutic session.

**Hypothesis of the research** – As distinct from projective drawings, working with paper or fabric self-made dolls involves the following sensory systems: visual, audible and kinesthetic. Art-therapeutic treatment helps to establish mutual understanding and friendly relationships between children, in order to resolve different educational and communication problems.

The main idea of this art-technique is in the creation and use of finger-dolls; its aim is to develop the communicative activity of children. This article is an example of personal experience.

**Method and methodology of the research** – Description of the author's art-technique. Schoolchildren draw a doll on a small rectangular sheet of paper, glue the paper together in the form of a cylinder and put "the doll" on a finger as if a thimble. Then the art-therapist asks them to tell a story about the doll. A child, using a self-made doll and often speaking from the third person singular, reveals his/her own sufferings, problems and experiences. Indeed, a paper doll is considered to be extension of a child's hand and it activates psychological projective mechanism (Lebedeva, 1991; Medvedeva, Shyshova, 1996).

So, on the one hand, a doll is a part of a person, and can reveal different positive features, ways of behavior, etc. On the other hand, a doll serves as a psychological defense, as some kind of a curtain behind which one can hide if necessary. A doll could be made from a triangular shred of plain fabric and fixed on a finger with a rubber ring, looking as if the doll is wearing a kerchief on its head. In this case, such factors as the choice of fabric color and its quality are important for the diagnostic evaluation.

A friendly and trusting atmosphere, known to positively influence the child's psychical health, (Brett, 1996; Мухина, 1992; Poluyanov, 2000) can be easily reached during such sessions. An art-therapist working with children during the session needs a lot of imagination and tolerance. For example, to ease the inner state of a child and to help him/her verbalize, it is useful to start this method with the words: "Once upon a time, there lived a boy (girl), looking like me, who wanted to tell about..." (Brett, 1996).

The basic idea is the manufacture and manipulation of paper dolls. During the session the children draw a doll on a small rectangular sheet of paper and then stick it together in the form of a cylinder. The self-made doll, which is put on a child's finger, helps to "tell" a story using artistic images and personal imagination. In this case the paper doll, becoming the continuation of a hand, activates the psychological mechanism of projection. It can be seen in aspiration to give one's own problems to another person.

It is not difficult to observe the values and interests of the children; their relations with associates; about what and in what manner they tell their stories; whom they condemn, sympathize or admire. Each participant of the session makes his/her own paper doll and thinks up a story which he/she would like to share with others. The story, beginning with the words "Once there lived a girl (a boy, a person, etc.), similar to me..." strengthens the projection

effect and facilitates the verbalization of the participant's inner state. Not realizing it, the person identifies himself/herself with the image of his/her doll, allocating it with special features, regarded as parameters of his/her own properties.

The themes of stories can be chosen spontaneously or according to the problems, which are for correction. For example: "When I was a little girl/boy...", "When I grow up...", "I saw a dream...", "Once at school...", "My doll was so afraid...", "Once upon a time, there lived a restless boy/girl, who was always told off (criticized)..."

It is possible to play with self-made paper dolls in different ways:

- to walk on a table surface;
- to put them on like thimbles and to show them from behind a screen (curtain);
- to manipulate them in the air.

It is important that the dolls are the continuation of the child's hand.

The characters created by the children are not only their partners in the communications, but also the original form of psychological protection allowing them to hide behind the created dolls. The processes of transformation, projection and identification allow the art-therapist to obtain the important diagnostic data from within the child's private world about his/her problems, habitual ways of behavior and communication, peculiarities of their families, relationship with adults and other children of their age. The experiences embodied in the graphic productions, are accessible to perception (recognition) and analysis.

#### **Participants of research**

Stories spontaneously "told" by eight-year-old twin brothers during one session using paper finger-dolls.

#### **A Lonely Doll (Dima's story)**

Once upon a time, there lived a doll on an island of the Blue Sea. It had no name. It lived alone in a two stored house made of sticks. The doll lived on the second floor.

One day, the wind from the sea blew. The house was demolished, and the doll was taken by the wind far to the sea. The water was black and terrible. Some years passed and the doll returned home. But its family didn't recognize it and they rejected it. Since then it has been alone, with no family, no parents...

#### **Father Frost and a Family (Roman's story)**

Once upon a time, there lived a boy-doll named Roma. He lived with his family. One day, Roma was staying at his grandmother's. When the boy returned home there was nobody in. The Grey Wolf had eaten his family. How did he know about it? – There were bones all around the house. The boy was very much upset and went to Father Frost to help him to return the family. Father Frost made his dream come true and the family returned. There was one more thing Roma wanted to happen – he wished there were no more wolves in the world.

#### **Analysis of the results**

At first sight, the family where Dima and Roman live looks like a successful one. The boys have got responsible, careful parents and a senior sister. However, it is clear from the pictures and stories that both twin-brothers suffer from high unease, vulnerability and fear, demonstrating a need for emotional support. These features of the psychological condition of the children were clearly shown in the doll-therapeutic session. The "revelations" turned out unexpected for both adults and boys, who had not dared to speak to the parents about their experiences.

The twins' revealed problems also proved to be true at the performance of the projective test "The picture of my family" (Hulse, 1951). It is known that this technique can reveal the child's subjective evaluation of the parental family, her/his place in it and the nature of the member's interactions.

In drawing the family, **Roman** imaged two rooms with no people in them. To the question, 'Why is nobody there?' he answered that he had depicted only the corridor and the kitchen – the rooms where usually nobody lives. The lamp and the walls of the corridor were drawn, but not colored. The blue window was painted at the last moment. **Dima** drew all members of the family, except himself. Thus, the emotional conflict of both boys and their discontent with the family situation were revealed clearly in the pictures. These given facts became the basis for referral to family therapy.

**In conclusion**, the finger-doll technique allows the participants to reveal their feelings, to share their original experiences, to tell about themselves and their problems. It is clear that the child becomes more successful, feels protected and becomes sure that he/she is understood and loved.

It should be emphasized that such art-therapeutic sessions facilitate the process of school adaptation for timid, "closed" and worried children. They are effective in correcting various deviant behaviors, including rejection through selective mutism.

Description of an art-therapeutic session with children having difficulties in communication.

#### **General notes**

This art-technique is intended for group work. The script is not planned beforehand, and is made up by the participants during the spontaneous game, using self-made thimble-like finger-dolls.

The stages of the session are:

- 1) graphic (representational) game techniques, to enter the mood for creative activity;
- 2) manufacturing of one or several thimble-like finger-dolls, made from paper and/or shreds of fabric;
- 3) planning the stories and staging an improvised performance;
- 4) discussion (the reflective analysis).

Such ordering of stages provides the art-therapeutic sessions with some directives. However, the art-therapeutic work is child centered. The art-therapeutic space includes a circle with chairs and personal workplaces (a school desk and a chair) for individual creativity.

#### **Materials**

Pieces of fabric (shreds) in the form of an equilateral triangle (each side is about 8 cm), varied in texture, structure and colour.

Rubber rings for fixing the shreds on a finger (when fixed on a finger it resembles a human head with a kerchief on). Thick paper for drawing, pencils, felt-tip pens, paints, eraser/rubber, glue, scissors.

Each participant receives a set of 8 shreds of eight colours: blue, green, red, yellow, violet, brown, black and grey.

#### **The basic procedures**

Instructions for participants are in italicized lettering.

1 stage. Adjustment ("warming up").

Children come to the table with the materials for drawing.

- *Take a pencil (a felt-tip pen, etc., at will), close your eyes and try to draw any lines,*

*geometrical figures and signs on a sheet of paper. Do not limit movements of your hand. Simply draw everything you like, without any restrictions* (usually, this part of work lasts up to 10 min, although, some children finish it earlier).

- *Examine your painting. If you want to finish the drawing or to explain something in words, please, do it.*
- *Take another sheet of paper and choose a pencil of a different colour, which at the moment, corresponds (meets) to your mood. Again, draw anything you like, but this time with your eyes open. Take your drawing and come to one of the participants of the group and ask him/her to finish your drawing as he/she likes.*

At this stage ask the children to draw thematic individual tasks, for example, a silent man and a talkative man, being opposites, and then to draw themselves or persons similar. Such figures, according to psychologists (Betensky, 1995), can be related to projective tests of high diagnostic potential. In particular, repeating elements and colours in all three images of the person are compared. It is easy to see, with which character (negative or positive) the child identifies himself/herself, and how he/she estimates his/her problems. In this respect, the creative work on such themes as: “Silence”, “Loneliness”, “Kindness”, etc. are of great value.

### **2 stage. Activation of communication.**

The group of the participants sits in a circle and put their works on a floor so that the rest of the group could see them. Then the children speak about the idea, the plot, the created pictures, the feelings, the mood, etc.

Taciturn children, who had refused to ask somebody to participate in the joint creativity, are usually more talkative after that stage of the session.

It is desirable to finish this stage of the session presenting the paintings to other participants of the session with kind words – wishes for memory (this direction is an educational element, for positive psychological programming. It is one more way to motivate children’s conversation).

### **3 stage. Individual work.**

At this stage each child chooses one of eight shreds of fabric. The children fix them as kerchiefs on a finger of the left hand with the help of a rubber ring.

- *Examine the amusing doll carefully, imagine its expression and think of its character. What is it like?*
- *Draw a face suitable (matching) in size to your doll, cut it out with the scissors and insert into the oval formed by the kerchief. It is possible to draw and cut out clothes for the doll if you wish.*

There are situations, when in spite of the therapist’s efforts, the children go on being persistently silent. In this case, the psychologist (art-therapist) can take a shred and make his/her own doll of a bigger size and ask children to think up an unusual face for it. The creation of the big doll’s face is a method of group work encouraging the children to communicate; it is like a photo-robot. Transference issues are not relevant here, as each child makes only a part of the doll’s face. The main task is the discussion, because the children’s problem is mutism.

Each participant of the session is to draw some variants of one and the same detail (eyes of various form and size, eyebrows, etc). Then, during the collective discussion the complete image is created. The chosen parts of the face of the big doll are attached on a piece of paper with glue. The choice of the name for the doll stimulates verbal activity of the children.



#### 4 stage. Verbalization and staging.

- *Think up a story that the doll would like to tell about itself. If other characters are necessary for this performance, it is possible to make one more or several more dolls.*
- *Address the participants of the group requesting that their dolls participate in your performance and play their roles.*

Thus, the children can choose a comfortable or suitable portion of communicative participation for themselves to experience. The self-made doll, which is put on a finger, is the original portrait (self-portrait) of the “artist”. It helps to tell a story using artistic (graphic) images and personal imagination, and to inform the rest of the group about the significant problems and experiences. In this case the paper doll becomes the continuation of a hand, what activates the mechanisms of projection and identification. Not realizing that, the child imbues the created doll with his/her own character features.

The choice of fabric color for the kerchief, some peculiarities of interaction between the children during the session, the way they express themselves, the image and the plot of the story are all diagnostic indicators of the emotional state of the children.

#### 5 stage. Final.

Again, each participant of the group is to choose a shred of fabric of any color and to fix it on a finger (the choice of the certain color can be considered as the indicator of mood and emotional state of the child at this moment).

The child can thank (if he/she wants to) all the participants of the group, share his/her own impressions with them, and ask different questions, on behalf of the doll. Children are happy to listen to kind words and hear the words of praise.

The children may be told that the dolls usually speak in special “doll” voices; therefore their own voice should be transformed beyond recognition to sound like dolls’. Such offer stimulates interest, even among the most timid participants of the session, who then willingly participate in the conversation. It may even so be helpful to speak from behind a screen (curtain, box, etc.) or to put on a mask.

#### Conclusion

Thus, various methods to encourage the children to verbalize are used at the final stage of the session. It develops necessary communicative skills, increases self-confidence and respect for other people’s feelings and experiences.

It is obvious, that for the correction of such complex and difficult problem in a child as selective communication problems, long-term art-therapeutic work is required. The author has given only one example of such sessions, which are very interesting for children and, of course, helpful in getting positive communicative experience, and in building harmonious relationships with their peer group and adults.

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