



**COMMON LANGUAGE for PSYCHOTHERAPY (clp) PROCEDURES**  
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**PUPPET PLAY PREPARING CHILDREN FOR SURGERY**

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Definition: Puppet play to prepare children for hospital and surgery by expressing feelings and learning what's involved.

Elements: The therapist first, in a semi-structured interview with mother (preferably alone) asks open-ended questions about: 1. *What do you feel about (child)'s operation, and what hospital and surgery experiences have you and relatives had?*; 2. *What emotional support do you and (child) get from father and other relatives?*; 3. *What have you and others told (child) about the operation, why it's being done, and how it will be done?*; 4. *What else troubles you and (child)?*. The therapist listens, contrasts mother's imagined dangers with real risks of the operation, and encourages her to talk to others about her fears and to share responsibility for the child's care in hospital and at home. Mother role-plays examples the therapist shows her of how to win trust by telling her child correctly about the hospital stay, surgery, and post-surgery pain.

Semi-structured puppet play of a hospital scenario then follows with mother observing if the child asks for this. The therapist role-plays a child patient while holding a puppet child-patient, and the child holds and role-plays a puppet doctor. The puppet child-patient (therapist) talks about the hospital stay, medical procedures, surgery, and anaesthesia induction and recovery, and encourages the real child to express feelings and ask about the hospital stay and surgery. The puppet-play session concerns 1. learning to do puppet play e.g. *Let's start with the puppet making a funny comment or sound (cough). Would you like to try it?*; 2. visiting the doctor, e.g. the therapist gives the child toy medical instruments and suggests that he use these as a puppet doctor to examine the puppet patient's throat, ears and chest.; 3. being in hospital e.g. *The puppet patient must go into hospital where he'll stay in a room with other children and perhaps his parents but he won't be able to go to school or see friends for a few days. This (puppet) patient says he misses his friends and he doesn't like doctors' examinations or injections. What can we tell him, doctor?*; and exploring of: 4. guilt e.g. *Am I in hospital away from my home and friends because I did something wrong?*, 5. separation anxiety e.g. *Will they take me away from my mother?*, 6. fantasies about the operation and recovery e.g. *Will it hurt? Will I see them cutting my tonsils? Will they take out only my tonsils? Will I wake up again?*

Related Procedures: Play therapy, reverse role play, role play.

Application: Children hospitalized for surgery.

1st use: Cassell S, Paul M (1967)

References:

1. Cassell S, Paul M (1967) The role of puppet therapy on the emotional responses of children hospitalized for cardiac catheterization. *Pediatrics*, 71: 233-9.
2. Linn S, Beardslee W, Patenaude A F (1986) Puppet therapy with pediatric bone marrow transplant patients. *J Pediatr Psychol*, 11: 1.

3. Abbott K (1990) Therapeutic use of play in the psychological preparation of preschool children undergoing cardiac surgery. *Issues Compreh Pediatr Nurs*, 13: 265-277.
4. Athanassiadou E, Tsiantis J, Christogiorgos S, Kolaitis G (2009). Evaluation of the effectiveness of psychological preparation of children for minor surgery by puppet play and brief mother counseling. *Psychother & Psychosom*, 78: 62-63.

Case Illustration (Athanassiadou, unpublished)

Nick aged 5 became hyperactive and anxious before admission for a tonsillectomy (his first time in a hospital). When Nick was admitted the day before operation a therapist asked if he'd like to play with puppets about his hospital stay and operation while mother looked on but did not participate. Nick held, and role-played being, a puppet doctor. The therapist held, and role-played being, a puppet child-patient: *"I'm here to have my tonsils out but don't know what will happen to me. I'm frightened and want to ask lots of questions. Will I have an injection?"* Nick took a play syringe from a doctor's play kit and began 'injecting' the puppet-child-patient held by the therapist while saying to himself repeatedly 'I'm afraid of injections - I don't want another one. Therapist (holding and speaking as the puppet-patient): *"Yes, I too am afraid of injections. They hurt a bit, but while having them I use tricks like counting to 10 and imagining I'm doing something else I really like such as swimming on a lovely beach . Doctor, why am I going to have an operation? What's wrong with me? Am I being punished for something?"* The therapist outside role play encouraged Nick to role-play the puppet doctor's replies: *"Tell him why he's having the operation - he seems worried"*. Nick seemed distracted and hyperactive, walking back and forth holding the play-syringe, and said 'I must have done something wrong. My mother often says if I'm not a good boy I'll go into hospital. I don't know what tonsils are and why mine must come out'. The therapist asked outside puppet play if Nick understood how tonsils are removed. Nick said his friend told him they would cut open his head and then close it. Resuming role play as puppet doctor, Nick became aggressive, hitting the puppet patient with the syringe as he thought doctors would do to him. The therapist reassured Nick outside puppet play that nothing like that would happen – the operation aimed to make him better and stop future pain. Therapist as puppet-patient: *"Are you sure they won't cut anything else off my body?"*, *"Will it hurt a lot, doctor?"* Outside role play the therapist prompted Nick to answer as the puppet doctor that nothing else would be cut off. - therapist as puppet patient: *"You can tell our little patient that he won't feel anything because he'll have medicine to sleep during the operation"*. Nick: *"Will he wake up afterwards?"* Therapist: *"Yes, of course. After the operation is over he'll wake up as he wakes from sleep every morning."*

Some days after surgery Nick appeared to be happier and calmer.