

A Finger Puppet Family: Puppet Friends to Direct, Soothe, and Encourage

～ Maddigan Stavenger

A cast of characters with their own stories and purposes can come out into the classroom at times when their interaction with the children will be more effective than the teacher's direction. A child in need of tender, imaginative support is one possible situation. Another is if the class needs direction as a group. These characters would act as soothing, inspiring, encouraging guides, assisting the teacher with these challenges. Each of the characters carries a different mood and purpose that the teacher develops over time. The characters appear only occasionally, to allow their magic and effect among the children to be meaningful.

When teachers feel they could use the support of another loving presence, it is a good opportunity to bring a puppet friend that speaks to the children's needs into the room. As a child, I had dolls and animals

that were hugely comforting to me. In times of distress, my toys, which were imbued with life, would speak to me, and console me. This was hugely effective in soothing me.

One puppet friend is Mighty Ant, a keen observer. They help to keep the classroom tidy and notice when things are out of place. They are very caring and helpful, but they know what their job is.

They are black and small and made of hard felted wool. They come out to help when there are things in the classroom that need to be put away during the end of tidy up time. They emerge from the teacher's apron pocket as she looks around the room for toys that need attention. They might also assist a child who needs to focus on cleanup time rather than continuing to play or talk with friends. Mighty Ant might crawl

from teacher's apron with a humming tune to get the children's attention and say aloud in a voice specific to them "I am small, and I am mighty. Now we work together to tidy." Or, "Hmmmmm, these fine children have worked together to tidy their nest but have forgotten this block. Who is strong and able to help me carry this back to its place?"

Cleanup transition can take some time. Some children are already sitting on the rug for the next thing, and some are still working or playing with one another. Usually there are a few things left behind that Mighty Ant can assist with. The ant crawls out and helps the child and then the child crawls the ant back to the teacher so they can return to their favorite apron pocket. The ant can ride in the child's hand or perch on their shoulder to continue the engagement. Mighty Ant may also come to assist if a child needs help dressing for outside time. Mighty Ant may crawl up the leg of a child who needs to put their leg into their rain pants, or crawl to a glove or hat that needs to be put on. Mighty Ant says encouraging things, and may even sing a short song about how to help with dressing before crawling back to the teacher.

The assisting teacher may also carry an ant in her pocket, and the two ants may come out at the same time as helpful siblings.

Another puppet friend, Silver Snail, is gentle and slow and firm. They ride on the heavy smooth palm-shaped river stone. They whisper in a slow, low and calming voice. Silver Snail comes out to help when a child needs to slow and ground themselves. After asking the child to lay belly down on the ground, they slowly crawl on their rock (so there is pressure) from the child's toes up to the head. They hum while they do this and can do it as many times as necessary until the child is ready to move on. They can also appear in order to sit with a child who might need a quiet moment away from the group. They stay in the teacher's hands and crawl gently across the child on their heavy stone, humming a tune.

These helper creatures will not be play toys for the children to use. They will appear when called upon and then go back into the apron pocket after they have assisted. This will allow the puppets to preserve their magic for the desired use and allow the children to wonder about them after they have gone or before they appear. More puppet characters can join these two good friends as will suit the needs of each individual class.

At the beginning of the year, as the teacher is getting to know the group and their needs, the teacher can present two stories before the puppets ever emerge. One story will be of a courageous and vigilant ant who works to help the community in times of need. The story will speak about Mighty Ant's experience with overcoming difficult things. The community will appreciate and honor the help that the ant provides. The virtues of Silver Snail can also be introduced through a story picturing what they contribute. Bringing these stories at the beginning of the school year will set a precedent for the togetherness and love that we would want to see embodied throughout the year in the group.

Once the stories have been told verbally a few times, the characters will appear in a puppet play in their helping roles. From then on, the puppets will be regular classroom helpers and friends to the children. ♦

Maddigan Stavenger is an assisting teacher at the Philadelphia Waldorf school and will graduate from Sunbridge Early Childhood training this coming summer. From being a Waldorf student in her early years, she went on to study liberal arts with a focus on Early Childhood Education. Maddigan is passionate about sustainable living and bringing her care for the environment to children. She is excitedly looking forward to bringing characters and stories like these to children to encourage building healthy, joyful relationships with their peers, themselves, and the world.