

“Dear Pritni, come to me sometime”

— Drama, literary art and bibliotherapy in early childhood education

Faculty of Education, University of Oulu

Suvilehto, Pirjo (Ed.)

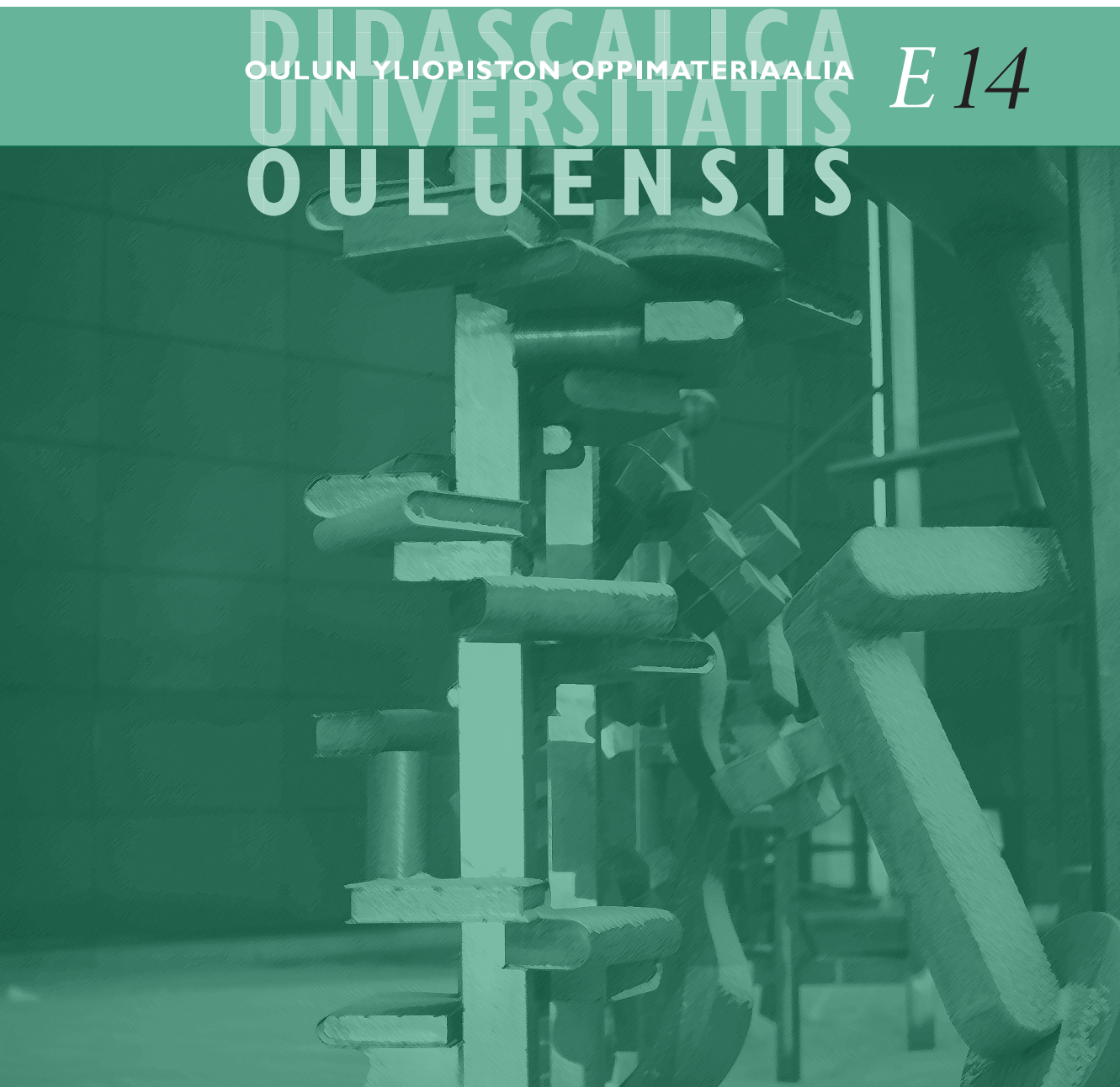
K A S V A T U S T I E T E E T

OULU 2020

OULUN YLIOPISTON OPPIMATERIAALIA

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Kasvatustiede E 14

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in early childhood education***

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ISBN 978-952-62-2776-4
ISBN 978-952-62-2777-1 (PDF)
ISSN 1457-3555

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PunaMusta
VANTAA 2020

Suvilehto, Pirjo (Ed.), “Dear Pritni, come to me sometime” – Drama, literary art and bibliotherapy in early childhood education

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Abstract

Children’s drama and picture books are taken into account in children’s daily activities to support their emotional expressions and emotion regulation skills in day care. Emotion-related actions in challenging learning situations are studied with the aid of a pony hand puppet called Pritney. Pritney-method is further developed during the four-month ethnographic field research.

Children’s social-emotional skills are supported through the multidisciplinary art experiences and bibliotherapeutic literature education. Eight (8) different themes offer openings by considering the suitability of a pedagogical hand puppet and bibliotherapeutic approach to support a child’s growth and development in different situations of day care. The theoretical background includes the puppet as a means of expression, the four-step model of bibliotherapy and social-emotional competence.

This handbook provides ideas and models for students and teachers in early childhood education to use drama and literature education in daily activities among little children. There are also ideas of, how children’s literature can be an aid in day care to support discussions in challenging themes, like grief and death. This may be approached with the aid of developmental bibliotherapy. The book is also considering the role of non-humans in early childhood education – what and where is the role and a place of a pony, or another animal in the field of early childhood education.

Keywords: children's literature, drama, emotions, literature therapy, Pritney method

Suvilehto, Pirjo (toim.), ”Rakas Pritni, tule joskus mulle kylään” – Draama, sanataide ja kirjallisuusterapia varhaiskasvatuksessa

Oulun yliopisto, Kasvatustieteiden tiedekunta

Tiivistelmä

Lasten draama ja kuvakirjat otetaan lasten päivittäiseen toimintaan tukemaan heidän emotionaalisia ilmaisujaan ja tunteiden säätelytaitojaan päivähoidossa. Tunteisiin liittyviä toimia haastavissa oppimistilanteissa tutkitaan Pritney ponikäsinuken avulla. Pritney-menetelmää kehitetään edelleen neljän kuukauden etnografisen kenttätutkimuksen aikana.

Lasten sosiaalisemotionaalisia taitoja tuetaan monitieteisillä taidekokemuksilla ja kirjallisuusterapeuttisella kirjallisuuskoulutuksella. Kahdeksan (8) erilaista teemaa tarjoaa avauksia pedagogisen käsinuken ja kirjallisuusterapeuttisen lähestymistavan soveltuvuuteen tukea lapsen kasvua ja kehitystä päiväkodin arjen tilanteissa. Teoreettiseen taustaan sisältyy nukke ilmaisun välineenä, kirjallisuusterapian neliportainen malli ja sosiaalisemotionaalinen osaaminen.

Tämä käsikirja tarjoaa ideoita ja malleja varhaiskasvatuksen opiskelijoille ja opettajille draaman ja kirjallisuuskasvatuksen toteuttamiseksi pienten lasten päivittäisessä toiminnassa. Teos tarjoaa myös ideoita siitä, kuinka lastenkirjallisuus voi olla apuna päivähoidossa: se voi tukea keskusteluja haastavissa aiheissa, kuten surun ja kuoleman sanoittamisessa. Tätä voidaan lähestyä kehityksellisen kirjallisuusterapian avulla. Kirjassa pohditaan myös muiden kuin ihmisten roolia varhaiskasvatuksessa – mikä ja missä on ponin tai muun ei-ihmisen so. eläimen rooli ja paikka varhaiskasvatuksen kentällä.

Asiasanat: draama, emotiot, kirjallisuusterapia, lastenkirjallisuus, Pritney-menetelmä

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1 Foreword

Pirjo Suvilehto

The goal of the Side by Side project was to develop and study ways in which methods based on art and narratives can be utilised in day care centres to enhance children's emotional and interaction skills. This book illustrates the experiences gained from the Pritney™ method (hereinafter referred to as the Pritney method), a subproject conducted in Oulu, Finland, and the related bibliotherapeutic work, and describes some of the findings from the field studies. In their article, researcher mentors Suvilehto and Keränen will first discuss the practical aspects of using the Pritney method in a child group. During the Pritney method project, they carried out children's drama and bibliotherapeutic activities through the medium of a hand puppet and related multidisciplinary art activities. After that, Suvilehto and Nyfors will discuss the opportunities afforded by bibliotherapy when used during activities connected to children's picture books at day care centres. Furthermore, their article studies, among other things, the use of metaphors in children's picture books and in processing grief and death.

A total of 38 mentoring days were spent with two day care centres' child groups within a period of four months to introduce them to the Pritney method. Each group was visited by two researcher mentors for just over one hour at a time, and the number of groups was eight. The number of children taking part in Pritney's visits was 134, while the number of adults was 28. During the eight visits and theme activity sessions, a pedagogical Pritney hand puppet was used to carry out various forms of children's drama, multi-arts and emotional skill work linked to the themes of children's drama. A teaching experiment in the form of mentoring was used as the research framework in the Pritney method, which means that a day care centre's adults take part in the themes created and implemented by the researcher mentors. The aim was to encourage the use of drama and literary art in the children's daily activities and to enhance the staff's professional skills in this regard. The article (Suvilehto & Keränen) includes quotes from the research diary and the day care centres' children and adults about their participation experiences.

Research permits and other practicalities

The research permit application submitted to a northern Finnish municipality's early childhood education and care department pledges, on behalf of Oulu's Side by Side subproject, to generate information in accordance with the research plan and project agreement pertaining to the Side by Side project of the Finnish National Agency for Education. The study will not focus on any individual children or child group, and, instead, the interviews and literary work conducted as part of the mentoring will revolve around social-emotional phenomena. Notes and photographs will be taken in the child groups and a book will be written about the methods. The children's well-being will be promoted, and the anonymity of all the participants will be protected. The work will not be filmed, and no children will be identifiable in any pictures, i.e. no faces will show in any photographs. The study will be conducted from 15 December 2018 to 30 June 2020 (the project coincided with the day care centres' autumn term of 2019). Permissions from the children and their parents were applied for with a form (see Appendix 1).

The aim is to assess, study and evaluate the value of the methods used in the project in promoting social-emotional skills and to test out a continuing education model, relevant to the daily work conducted by early childhood education and care providers.

- The Side by Side project focuses on the artistic experiences defined in the 2018 Early Childhood Education Plan.
- It also focuses on the ability of literary art, bibliotherapy, arts education and music to promote social and interaction skills and a positive self-image.

The project will be mainly conducted amongst day care groups and staff members, and the mentors and researchers will take part in the daily routines of the children and adults through active involvement, observation, talking and listening. All this will be done in accordance with what is best for the children and the day care centres' routines, and each group will have one Side by Side session once a week before noon.



Image 1. At the Upea Eläin ('Amazing Animal') exhibition, the children studied an oil painting brought into the room, depicting a pony (painting by Pirjo Suvilehto).

2 Insights into the Pritney method: Promoting emotional and social skills with a hand puppet and children's literature

Pirjo Suvilehto and Jaana Keränen

Abstract

The Pritney method's multidisciplinary artistic experiences promote children's social-emotional skills. The research method consists of an ethnographic field study and a combination of a research diary and a theoretic framework. The themes (8) will be described to analyse the suitability of a pedagogical hand puppet, bibliotherapy that promotes children's growth and development, and various types of children's drama for day care centres. The theoretical framework includes a puppet as a medium of expression, a four-stage bibliotherapeutic model and socioemotional skills. The article will answer the following questions: a) What is the Pritney method and how was it received in the day care centres' child groups? b) What were the social-emotional and mentoring-related findings regarding the Pritney sessions? The article will discuss literary art and drama education, both part of the method, in early childhood education and care (ECEC) environments.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, children's literature, drama, emotions, Pritney method

2.1 Introduction

We have come to the Amazing Animal exhibition. There is an oil painting of a pony at the front of the room. The children are holding soft toys they have brought with them from home, and some of the toys have already had a chance to give Pritney a 'hug'. Some of the children are wearing animal-print shirts or dresses. The children want to introduce their toys: amongst them are a bunny, a dog, a cow, a turtle, a cat, a rainbow bird, a T-rex and many others. Animals are inspiring. I explain the procedure and the idea behind the session to the children: Pritney has visited an art exhibition and is now inviting the day care centre's children to see it as well. We place the toys on their tummies on the floor and gently stroke their backs. We learn the word 'oxytocin'. Oxytocin is released when you stroke an animal or even a cuddly toy. The children also stroke their toys' tummies, ears and tails, and

everyone whispers something nice in their toy's ear. (RD, K4–6, 18 November 2019)

The quote above is from the research diary (RD) and illustrates a morning's activity and shared playtime at a day care centre and our visit to an exhibition organised by Pritney the hand puppet. The quotation describes one of the themes included in the method. There were eight themes in total used over a four-month period, and each entailed emotions and pedagogics in addition to artistic activities. As researcher mentors, we had naturally also drawn up a hidden curriculum. During this session (Amazing Animal, theme IV), we cared for our soft toys, read a picture book about a puppy's first year of life and performed a medical examination on our toys and each other: we took the temperature, injected medicines and vitamins with a syringe, listened to the heart with a stethoscope and checked the ears and nails. During the one-hour session, we implemented several instructed activities, and the children's imagination – the state of playing – complemented the whole. Many emotions were experienced, including nervousness, but we found the courage to immerse ourselves. 'At the end of the session, a little girl comes to me – we lack a mutual language – and hugs me.' (RD, K4–6, 18 November 2019) As researcher mentors, we feel that even if just one child gets joy out of our visit, it will be enough.

This article describes the Pritney method sessions held at the day care centres, but the quotes and episodes collected from 1–6-year-old children and the staff members of eight day care centre groups used in the article naturally constitute only a small part of the whole material compiled by two Pritney researcher mentors over four months. The article explains the Pritney method: what it is and what sort of findings are we able to make as mentors and researchers when the method is being used. The purpose of the article is to activate the readers, to provide them with new experiences and to inspire questions.

In a nutshell, Pritney is about children's drama, literary art activities, reading experiences with developmental bibliotherapy and multi-artform inspiration. In accordance with the principles of the Side by Side project, the article focuses on practical ways of promoting children's narrative and social-emotional skills. It also includes real-time observations that the

researcher mentors made during the daily activities at the day care centres, and the theoretical background consists of a framework of drama and bibliotherapy.

The research material includes the researcher mentors' experiences gained during their visits to the day care centres. The examples from the research diary (RD) are based on a number of themes, in accordance with the principles of qualitative research, and on personal choices, as is typical in newer childhood studies. The central role of an animal, a pony, in the method speaks of the study's post-humanistic principles. You could also ask what sort of a role can a pony – albeit mostly a pony hand puppet – play in ECEC.

The research findings are described in the spirit of childhood studies and post-human studies in a non-quantitative way without the use of statistics. Instead, the focus is on a dialogue between individual expression (bibliotherapy), theory and real-life examples. During the process and analysis, the researcher mentors must keep in mind the Pritney method's key idea and focal point, which is the child and their well-being. The names of the children, adults and groups have been changed, thereby making it impossible to identify any of them based on a research article.

2.2 The theoretical framework

This chapter looks at the theory of childhood studies and the use of drama education amongst children under school age. The multi-arts approach of the field study, integral to the Pritney method, was mainly implemented through the use of a hand puppet and by focusing on work on emotional skills.

The principles of childhood studies and drama involved in the Pritney method

In this article, young children refers to 1–6-year-old children in a day care setting. Some children within this age bracket cannot yet talk and instead express themselves with their body language, for example. For that reason, it was necessary for us to consider our research ethics throughout the entire

material collection process during the autumn term of 2019. This includes the researchers' way of reacting to children's facial expressions, gestures, movements, voices, drawings, singing, playing with dolls, interaction and other emotional responses caused by the drama sessions. New childhood studies (see Rutanen & Vehkalahti 2019, 9) and the related ethical considerations mean, among other things, that children participating in a study are considered to be active agents, which simultaneously allows the research settings and methods to be reformed. The aim is for the research process to genuinely focus on the children's experiences and agency. The children are seen as informants (see Kiili & Moilanen 2019, 35).

In the Pritney method, the aim is to promote children's participation in the drama activities, and their experiences are respected. The voluntary nature of this drama-based method is key, and children are not forced to behave in any specific way. After all, the method is all about encouraging them to take part and experience the freedom of expression. A researcher's ability to create a safe atmosphere for the children is an important factor in qualitative research, where children are encountered face to face in the field. Research ideas used by Rutanen and Vehkalahti (see 2019, 164) amongst adolescents can also be applied to young children, and they match the research idea behind the Side by Side project's Pritney sessions too. As researcher mentors, we listen to the children, we talk to them and above all we aim to create a safe environment. We want the children to feel that they are being seen and heard in order to gather high-quality qualitative material. Being present and showing genuine interest in a child subject's narrative and expression forms a foundation for more in-depth research data. We are interested in the implementation of the method, its reception by child groups and the adults' ability to receive ideas created during the sessions. Even though we are not studying the children, their experience of the meaningfulness of their participation is a valid by-product of the study. Ethnographical research literature talks about entering a field and justifying your own presence in a new group (such as a day care group) and about how challenging this can be in terms of relationships (see Palmu 2008).



Image 1. During a Pritney session, hand puppets Turre and Pritney encourage children to produce sounds with a harmonica (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).

The same research ethical norms apply to childhood studies as to any other type of research (see Rutanen & Vehkalahti 2019, 8), and the ethically sustainable daily routines were designed case-specifically for our study as well, because the themes of education, exercise of power and control are also present in the study of childhood and adolescence. These make the ethical aspects rather complex, requiring specific skills (see Rutanen & Vehkalahti 2019, 8), because the children's participation is supposed to be voluntary, but in practice the power and control exercised by the adults at day care centres can limit the children's self-determination during these research encounters.

As researcher mentors, we and the children are in an imaginary world created by the Pritney puppet, and this world is both real and fantasy at the same time. A phenomenon (see Tast 2004) may occur during the project in which the children in a group get to know the story characters by name. This allows them to know what sort of elements the story world consists of and how these elements can be discussed with peers. For example, in Tast's

(2004, 122) drama project, schoolchildren created a community of puppets by inventing all the characters and stories and making the puppets themselves. In the Pritney project, a relationship was formed between a group of children and a puppet, which already had a history, but this history was complemented with stories introduced by each new child group. Similarly to Tast's project, the participants were able to comment on stories told by others. In other words, the children were able to add their own elements to Pritney's story during every storytelling session. For example, one child said that Pritney probably needed to pee, because she had drunk so much water, and soon the pony was handed a potty from the children's medical play set. A puppet world can also serve as a platform for children to invent their own stories and share them with peers. This way, the whole group can take part in creating a fantasy world and its constituent stories.

'Telling your own story, listening to others, and sharing are all interaction skills that can be learnt. The development of these skills will inevitably have an effect on the learning environment's atmosphere, the motivation level of the class and an individual's positive image of themselves as a member of a group.' (Tast 2004, 124.)

Socioemotional skills

Social skills are practised and learnt through interaction with other people from childhood onwards. Socioemotional competence can be seen as a five-part construction. It is divided into 1) self-knowledge and self-awareness, 2) self-regulation, 3) social awareness, 4) relationship skills and 5) responsible decision-making. (Weissberg et al. 2015, 6–7.) These five areas put together create a comprehensive illustration of human behaviour in social situations.

1. **Self-knowledge and self-awareness** reflect a person's ability to identify their own emotions and thoughts and to understand how these affect their behaviour. The person is able to recognise their strengths and limitations while maintaining a healthy level of self-esteem and an optimistic outlook on life.

2. **Self-regulation** refers to a person's ability to regulate their emotions, thoughts, and behaviour in different situations. Self-regulation is influenced by the person's ability to cope with stress, their impulse control and self-motivation skills, a systematic way of operating and the ability to set long-term goals and to work towards these goals in a dedicated fashion.
3. **Social awareness** is a person's ability to be empathetic and put themselves in the shoes of someone with a different ethical and cultural background. They are able to understand social norms and the value of family, school and others in their community as institutions that promote mutual well-being.
4. **Relationship skills** mean a person's ability to form and maintain balanced and rewarding relationships with different types of people and groups. They are able to express themselves, listen to and work with others. They are also able to maintain their independence under social pressure, know how to negotiate, and have the ability to accept and provide help.
5. Someone who is able to take **responsible decisions** knows how to make constructive choices when it comes to their own behaviour. These choices are based on highly ethical values that take into account the prevailing social norms, general safety, the person's own well-being and that of others, and the potentially long-term consequences of their decisions. (Weissberg et al. 2015, 6–7.)

In our article, we will answer the following research questions:

1. What is the Pritney method and how was it received in the day care centres' child groups?
2. What were the social-emotional and mentoring-related findings regarding the Pritney sessions?

2.3 The material and the method's implementation – Insights into the Pritney method

Research permits and an ethically solid foundation are integral parts of any research where the material is gathered through work with children. The following section describes the collection of the field study material, the way in which the study was carried out and the elements included in the method. Practical examples are given to illustrate the structures of Pritney sessions. These examples include quotes from the research diary, photographs taken during the field work and a table providing a concise description of the four-month process.

The material and research permits

Our research group consisted of the children of eight groups in two day care centres, as well as the children's education and care providers. The children's ages varied from less 12 months to the preschool age. We visited each group at their own group facilities eight times during the autumn term. Each group had 10–22 children, and the total number of children was 134. In addition to that, there were 3–5 adults in each day care group, making the total number of education and care providers 28.

We gathered the material by making observations, recording brief moments in pictures and on video and talking to the children and the adults. After the sessions, we immediately wrote down our observations and interpretations in our research diaries. In our study, we refer to the groups' education and care givers as *day care centres' adults*, regardless of their professional titles. We asked them to write down their observations in their own diaries, which people often find challenging. To conclude, we created questionnaires for every session, and the day care centres' adults filled them in with short, free-form comments during the drama sessions.

We got research permission from the children and their parents before the start of our study. The children provided us with oral feedback both during and immediately after the sessions. Furthermore, they drew pictures and wrote letters and postcards to the puppet theatre characters.

The Pritney method

Background

The Pritney method, created by Pirjo Suvilehto, entails children's literature, children's drama and multi-arts activities inspired and introduced by a pedagogical puppet called Pritney. A bibliotherapeutic approach plays an essential role in the method, which is based on interaction through immersive literature and storytelling and inspiration sparked by multiple sensory experiences. Therefore, the method resembles its maker: the Pritney method has been developed for over five years, initially by early childhood education university students and later during the Side by Side project at day care centres. The pony hand puppet and her puppet master have visited libraries and day care centres, and the puppet has also been used as a pedagogical puppet at the university. The method was named after a Shetland pony called¹ Pritney. The pony was part of the project as its method, and it also took part in children's daily lives through video greetings and as a hand puppet. The link between puppets and children is old, but puppets and dolls have retained their value, because more can be achieved through metaphors.

Background theories

The Pritney method utilises some ideas regarding integrative arts education included in the latest early childhood education curriculum (VASU 2018). Perspectives into the social-emotional phenomena, in particular, are sought with the help of a puppet's symbolic power (Astles 2012; Lintunen 2009), puppet theatre (Scheel 2012) and the theories of bibliotherapy (see Suvilehto 2019). As a concept, the method involves interactive bibliotherapy (McCarty Hynes & Hynes-Berry 1994) and the related individual and group processes. The developmental bibliotherapy in the

¹ Pritney is a real-life Shetland pony who has had encounters with children at the local pony club and with adults through research, art-based bibliotherapeutic activities (the AHA™ method) and animal bibliotherapy™. The pony has provided inspiration to early childhood education and care students at the University of Oulu in horse-related projects during pedagogical training. Pritney also served as a sponsor pony to a preschool group through video links as part of a 2017 project organised by the Finnish Riders' Federation. Pritney the Pony features in the Finnish children's book *Pepi ja eläinpuiston Pritney* (Suvilehto & Russo 2016), a guide to literary art called *Leikki vuoden jokaiselle päivälle* (Suvilehto 2016) and the *Pritneyn laulukirja* song book (2020).

method refers to an instructor's ability to choose suitable children's books for each child and child group and to read these books according to a plan. After a reading session, a variety of literary art activities inspired by the book can be carried out. This allows storytelling and drama to be used to support children with their growth and development challenges.

Constituent elements

Because the Pritney method is based on interactive activities, in which hand puppets, children's literature, music, dance and other artforms are integrated into the children's daily routines and mental landscapes as emotional stimuli, a pedagogical puppet and an adult's awareness of the opportunities afforded by it are required. In addition to the Pritney puppet, the method includes any available children's books and good-quality materials (colours, brushes, paper, musical instruments and other such things) that can be used under the instruction of an adult during the sessions. The method also includes in-built models, i.e. activity suggestions for the sessions. These are available in Finnish in the guidebook *Leikki vuoden jokaiselle päivälle* (Suvilehto 2016). Watching, listening to, telling and reflecting on a narrative or a story are vital parts of the models, which all allow children to practise participation in an art session both alone and together with others and under instruction by an adult. The children are helped to learn to concentrate on what other people are saying: what does someone close to me want to tell me and how can I show respect towards their thoughts by focusing on what they are saying? The children are guided and encouraged to practise their self-expression skills, to contemplate their own views and to identify the emotions, thoughts, memories, and experiences that a story evokes. Each session carried out with a child or a group is pre-planned by an adult.



Image 2. The Shetland pony Pritney also takes part in the method through video greetings (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).

The structure of the Pritney sessions

An induction session takes place when a group first begins their work, for example at the start of a school term: the group members get to know each other, find their place in the group, begin to feel part of a community and receive an introduction to what will follow. Connecting repeatedly to a small space like this will also teach the participants to expect specific activities to follow shortly after. A standing bell is one of the concrete tools that can be used, and it signals to the children when Pritney has something to say, focusing their attention.

A drama agreement is made together with the children, allowing them to determine for themselves whether they feel ready to share this moment with others. It also serves as a reminder that we give ourselves and the other members of our group the freedom to participate. Everyone participates in

the activities according to their individual skills and views, and there is no wrong way of doing so.

1. Introductions. The first session can begin with physical exercises, songs or some other physical activity that invites the body and mind to join in.
2. The session's topic is introduced through Pritney's thoughts and an example. This may be a little thing that the instructor helps the children realise, piquing their curiosity and willingness to delve deeper into the theme.
3. Hands-on observations, activities.
4. Reflection. How did I feel? What thoughts and experiences did I have?
5. Thank you. The instructor gives encouraging feedback, and the experiences are verbalised. Farewells.

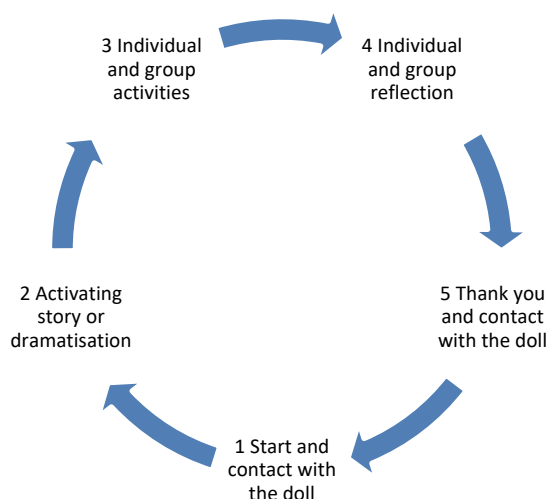


Figure 1. The Pritney method's five stages during a session illustrated as a circular motion.

A session's duration always depends on how the group is feeling. How much time is spent is determined by the group's needs and composition, and also the physical space and the time allocated to group activities have an impact. A session may therefore last a few minutes or 20–30 minutes, and

some groups may even work on a single theme for an entire week. The approach depends on the group's size, age distribution and energy level. Group compositions and levels of receptiveness vary, and that is why the duration of the activities also varies from short to long. Sometimes, the activities might even be carried out for several consecutive days as a process. The activities and transfers may be quite intensive, but the aim is not to wear the children out during the work. After such intensive sessions, the Pritney activities may become included in the children's own games – continued and reshaped by these games – and, if possible, the adults can encourage this for several weeks after the sessions.

Pritney sessions and quotations from the first visit's theme recorded in the research diary

The children are finishing a meal when we enter the room. Some are sitting on potties. The children are being dropped off at the day care centre. Her father and grandfather are dropping off Anna (name changed), who cannot yet walk. We introduce ourselves to the staff and go stand by the toilet (hallway) to read First Books, because there is a queue for the potties! (RD, S1–3, 19 August 2019)

The quote above describes the atmosphere at a day care centre at the start of our mentoring study. The staff members were instructed to reflect in writing on the researcher mentors' visits, and a post box was given to the children for them to send post to Pritney. The visits by the hand puppet taught the children that interaction feels good and can also be done with letters or postcards. The theme of the first session is Friendship and Happiness, and as part of this theme the children become familiar with the Shetland pony Pritney and the Karelian Bear Dog Turre. Both animal puppets have their roots outside of Finland: the pony comes from the Shetland islands and the dog from Karelia in Russia. The ponies' hooves were cared for with the Trimming the Hoof nursery rhyme and some feet massage, as this is a fun and safe form of touching. The children painted a hand-print horse with Pritney and Turre, and at the end of the mentoring programme, they said goodbye to the pony. In a short time, even children as young as this – some of whom were not yet able to walk and were using a dummy – managed to focus. Contact with Pritney was established by

looking the pony in the eye, as is typical in any interaction. One of the researcher mentors' thoughts about a visit and successful contact made with the pony were described in the research diary as follows: 'We felt like we were just the facilitators of Pritney's visit.' (RD, S1–3, 19 August 2019)

A grown-up makes the visit by a puppet possible, but the children listen to the puppet. The secret to using a puppet is in the eye contact. It is the puppet's gaze that the viewer sees during the act. A child might sing to the pony. When a child hears Pritney introduce herself, the child will also want to share something of themselves. Introductions like this are important for future activities. What were a person's first impressions and what sort of emotions and emotional contacts took place? These will determine the level of trust and whether it is worth getting to know the other party.

One after the other, the children found the courage to talk about the things that they like. After the session, one of the day care centre's adults said that 'the children listened to Pritney and not so much to us and that even the shyer ones found the courage and warmed up to Pritney during the first session' (RD, V3–5, 20 August 2019). A child may approach the pony to whisper their name to it, give her strokes and cuddle her. Children have a need to express and talk about themselves. The example set by the pony encouraged the children to talk about themselves to her in return. One child raised their hand and said that their grandpa had gone to Heaven. Another one said that they know how to fish and a third talked about their grandparents' house. 'They reveal things to the pony: "I like blackcurrants, tanker lorries, etc."' The children also notice that the pony is accompanied by a puppet master who can help with additional questions.' (RD, K3–5, 20 August 2019.) This allows the two parties to become familiar with one another, but the process requires the participation of an adult who will listen to the exchange and serve as an instructor.

After a morning's mentoring visit, one child ran across the yard to the researcher mentors and showed them a sand shovel. The child wanted the pony to see a treasure, three pebbles. The researcher mentors documented what they have seen, heard and experienced. 'We will keep records of our mentoring from the very start: we will take pictures, make video clips and write down our thoughts after each session. We will also read theories about

puppets and social-emotional research.’ (RD, V3–5, 20 August 2019.) A gift can also be non-material, such as a song: ‘The day care centre’s yard is filled with action and sounds. The children spot us and run to us asking where Pritney is. We tell them that Pritney is hiding because she is feeling nervous. A child volunteers to sing a song to the pony.’ (RD, K3–5, 20 August 2019.) The child began to sing to the pony in order to encourage her. Soon, the entire group was singing, coaxing the pony to show herself. Interaction with a hand puppet is a game to 3–5-year-olds, a game that they can simply immerse themselves in.

However, the pony activities naturally vary with different groups. The pony may feel a bit tired in the morning and find it hard to emerge from her safe hat. In one group, the children proposed a children’s song about a horse called *Ihahaa* to encourage Pritney. It was a success. This made them realise that their actions can have an influence. The children wanted to support someone who is smaller than them, something that a puppet is in relation to a child. The children were able to encourage the pony to interact with them and to take certain actions, which also worked the other way around. The pony taught the children a song called *I am Pritney*, which the children enjoyed. Many of them talked about the games they like and said that the pony could come and play with them. There were also a number of games that Pritney could join: Starwars, Minecraft, Lego games and other animations are a big part of the lives of some of the children. Pritney also knows how to get the children excited and how to calm down afterwards. After the session, one of the day care centre’s adults said that today they had realised what a happy and even a little wild character Pritney was and how well the children had been able to be present and become immersed in the world of fantasy and imagination. With the pony you can never tell where the participants will end up, which is good. All sessions are carefully planned in advance, including their materials, activation games and songs, but you never know for sure what the atmosphere of a session will be like and what type of stories the children will come up with.

‘The emotions this morning included happiness and silliness, and feeling a bit wild and tingling on the inside was perfectly acceptable’ (RD, K4–6, 21 August 2019). A child approached the pony and whispered in her ear ‘We could sing the Pritney song really wildly so that it would make us giggle’

(RD, K4–6, 21 August 2019). The researcher mentor thought it was important for a child to want to feel happy in this way, but there is not always room for it during the instructed activities of a day care centre. As researcher mentors, we also believe that being happy together is different to being happy by yourself. When more than a dozen children and as many as five adults are sharing a small room, plenty of sound and action is inevitable. The significance of structures is obvious: what is done and how, for how long and involving which activities? Children have a lot to say and they require adults who will listen to them. Day care centres often believe that it is important for children to learn to take turns in talking and listening. As researcher mentors, we think that the same applies to the adults, and us grown-ups definitely have room for improvement when it comes to listening (RD, K4–5, 21 August 2019).

‘In a young (1–2) children’s group, singing is a good method of becoming familiar with one another and it relaxes the participants. We and the children sing songs that the children already know and also Pritney’s own song. Together we sing every child’s name. A person’s name is important to them, and using it makes them feel that they are noticed. A few of the children come and make physical contact with the hand puppet.’ (RD, P1–2, 22 August 2019.)

‘After the session, one of the day care centre’s adults talks about their observations of “how surprised Masa and Enska were to find how relaxing the pony’s presence was” and “how Kerkko does not always accept new adults but came to sit on the puppet master’s lap several times.”’ (RD, P1–2, 22 August 2019.) Another observation was recorded in the research diary: ‘The children were not afraid to make contact with us, a group of unfamiliar adults, which tells us that they find the group a safe place to be’ (RD, P1–2, 22 August 2019).

The researcher mentors noticed how much the children in the preschool education group needed to talk and have someone listen to them, which was also evident in the way they sought contact:

‘The children believe that Pritney is real and give her hugs, one after the other, finding it natural to stroke and caress her. Sometimes when

emotional, a child may also require a safe object. The pony comforted Milla by showing her empathy.’ (RD, HE6, K4–6, 22 August 2019.)

The names of both the child and their friends are important to a child, in addition to which children enjoy talking about the things they like. Furthermore, playing is important, and many fun activities were available. When a child found a certain topic interesting, they also had the patience to sit, focus and listen to things and thoughts shared with Pritney.

‘The staff give us feedback saying that we have put together a great package. One of the day care centre’s adults says that the children’s interaction with Pritney was meaningful. One child who requires special support wants to teach the pony to do a puzzle, because Pritney had said that she finds jigsaw puzzles difficult. That makes it obvious that the children want to extend their empathy to a toy pony as well. The pony is both real and a game that we play together.’ (RD, J3–4-year-olds, 23 August 2019.)

According to Frans de Waal (2018, 137), human understanding has its roots in childhood:

‘A human child’s understanding about other people’s needs and wishes develops years before the child is able to understand what others know. A child will learn to read people’s hearts long before their minds. This seems to indicate that trying to describe this with theories that pertain to things that require abstract thinking would not work. At a young age, children are able to recognise that a child looking for their bunny will become happy when the bunny is found, while a child looking for a dog is not interested in the bunny. In other words, children can understand what others want.’ (de Waal 2018, 137.)

This is exactly the sort of empathy that we practised with the hand puppet at the day care centres. Sometimes contact could not be successfully established during the first meeting, especially in groups where multiple languages were spoken. However, the children talked about animals, such as cats, allowing the game to be shared.

‘They show Pritney how the singing game called the *Pharaoh’s Cat* goes. Pritney does get some hugs even though some children remain reserved. It is therefore important to allow the children to be the ones with the knowledge and skills. We saw some happy faces, and the children made an attempt to approach us.’ (RD, ES4–6, 23 August 2019.)

‘The children sit on their floor cushions looking expectant. We have our equipment at the ready. We begin by striking a standing bell and tell the children that Pritney visited Nepal and has brought back the instrument. The children observe the sound when the researcher mentor circles around the standing bell’s rim with a mallet. The sound is new to the children, and they find it fascinating. The day’s theme, post, is explained to the children through a dialogue between the pony and the puppet master. Next, Turre enters the scene, and through the means of puppet theatre and drama the children are shown how Pritney delivers letters but has never received any herself. Matti responds to the pony’s unhappy news from his seat by saying that he has some post at home for Pritney. The others join in and say that they can send post to Pritney. We give the group a post box for Pritney. We sing a song about the pony’s express post. Then we talk about the history of postal services and how in the past in America, before there were trains, small ponies would carry saddle bags full of mail, allowing letters and postcards to be taken across vast distances. We also talk about how good it felt to receive mail. We play hoof trimming, and Turre moves around according to the nursery rhyme cards. The lively group is able to concentrate well, and at the end we instruct the children to work in groups of four to create their postcards. We spread paint on our hands and press them onto some cardstock. The colours we are using include brown and white, and prints made with five fingers create ponies with four legs and a tail. Matti has formed a rapid attachment to Pritney, whom he wants sitting next to him during the painting. During the dramatized instructions by Pritney and Turre, the staff are able to monitor the children’s facial expressions and immersion in the game. Already at this point it is clear that the pony’s visit has been highly anticipated. Emotions have been invested in the pony, forming an invisible bond. During a reflective discussion, the staff ask us to work on the theme of hurting during one of our sessions, because there have

been some incidents of that in the group. My thoughts are that a kick from a pony hurts, meaning that concrete things are the most tangible ones, and that this theme can be successfully incorporated into the pony world' (RD, theme I Pony Post, V3–5, 2 September 2019.)

'The children greet us happily, they have been expecting us and they ask us about Pritney. Any strict structures go straight out the window (such as the use of a standing bell at the beginning), because after all a method will be quite different on paper compared to what it will be in a real-life group of 20 children. The children want to tell stories, to take part intensively in creating the tale, too impatient to wait for their turn to talk and contribute – this will require more practice. They are showing an emotional response to Pritney's problems with post. The painting session is a success. According to the children and staff, things went well, and the duration of the session was "'good". The children became so thoroughly involved in Pritney's wish to receive mail that one child went immediately to find a letter to give to the pony. Other methods of comforting the pony included offering a feeding bottle and suggesting a shopping trip and some food. The staff told us that the timing of our visit had been perfect. That morning, a tearful child in their father's arms had been comforted in their separation anxiety by a picture of Pritney.' (RD, theme I Pony Post, K3–5, 3 September 2019.)



Image 3. Turre and a standing bell are included in the method's induction session at a day care centre before the start of a daytrip (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).

Table 1. Examples of the four-month theme activities.

The theme and work on emotions	Contents	Reference, source example
1 INTRODUCTIONS nervousness and trust	A drama agreement with a child group and staff, i.e. procedure. Pritney introduces herself and gets to know the group. What is a child interested in?	'Preschool children have vivid imaginations. They are learning to listen to and tell stories. Groupwork skills are important, as people with different types of personalities must adjust to the changing situations and one another in a small room. They must take on board a lot of information and express themselves.' (HE6, 22 August 2019)
2 PONY POST happiness, expectancy, disappointment	Turre introduces himself. Friendship, letters, and postcard work Colouring: a Pritney paper doll	'A child observes trustingly everything we do ... It is a completely different experience to be in a group like this where adults have no urge to regulate or control things.' (RD, ES4–6, 5 November 2019)
3 A DAYTRIP AND AN EXHIBITION emotions involved in encouragement and achievement	Joy from physical exercise A daytrip, hobby horses, horseshoe toss, snacks, Sibelius boxes for treasures Colouring: Pritney and Turre jumping over obstacles	'The atmosphere remained lively and active. It is wonderful to see the children (and adults) smiling. The children seem to be enjoying this.' (RD, J3–4, 18 September 2019)
4 AMAZING ANIMAL AND CARING gentle feelings and care, attachment	A health check-up Massaging soft toys and playing doctors The book <i>Pepi ja eläinpuiston Pritney</i> , caring for Pritney and Turre, a card from Pritney Colouring: Pritney's equipment	'We take the temperature, inject medicine with a syringe, listen to the heart, check the ears and nails ... The atmosphere is inspired and elated. The animals were cared for, they were talked about, the children used their imagination a lot, and there were plenty of emotions.' (RD, K4–6, 18 November 2019)

The theme and work on emotions	Contents	Reference, source example
5 ANIMAL FRIENDS positive verbalisation	Soft toys as reading companions I read and tell stories The book <i>Anni ja ihana pentu</i> , children have brought their own toys, reading a book to the soft toys, performing a health check- up on an animal Colouring: Pritney's animal friends	'M immersed themselves deeply in the activities and J concentrated with their soft toy reading companion. A child who would hardly even look at us initially (language barrier) wanted to take part in all the activities. And the important hugs at the end.' (RD, ES4–6, 19 November 2019)
6 OPERA loneliness, longing, feelings of love	Music evokes emotions and The Love Cards Opera, tickets, a heart (a drawing on cardstock) for my love Colouring: I love my friend	'We shared an emotional moment with Pritney. We hugged. Pritney told A: "You are lovely, I have missed you." A replied: "I have missed you." T approached and said that the opera music had made them emotional and that it had brought tears to some people's eyes.' (P1–2, 26 November 2020)
7 BALLET I concentrate and I can humour	A dance ball and forms of drama In a ballet class, marionettes, musical exercise Colouring: Pritney is doing ballet and Turre is ice skating	'The children were very active. Some formed groups of three and made up a story about a ball. Some became immediately interested in puppets describing different jobs.' (HE6, 2 December 2019)
8 CHRISTMAS farewell and preparing for Christmas longing and yearning	A decision The Christmas story <i>Lumipuu</i> , colourful baubles for Pritney's Christmas tree Colouring: Turre and Pritney's Christmas tree	'I will miss Pritney.' 'Yes, we will take good care of Pritney's cousin. We could build a stall for her.' 'Let's make a home for her from a cardboard box.' (RD, 9 December 2019)

2.4 Findings

This chapter describes the experiences gained over four months of research and the findings from the Side by Side project by two researcher mentors during their field study amongst eight child groups at two day care centres. The suitability of the Pritney method for early childhood education and care (ECEC) is evaluated based on the children's experiences, the researcher mentors' observations and the day care centres' adults' views and notes. Particular sources of interest are the social-emotional moments and the related expression facilitated by the puppet activities and multi-arts. Some of the findings regarding mentoring are discussed at the end.

About the suitability of the Pritney method in ECEC

A total of 38 mentoring days were spent with two day care centres' child groups within a period of four months to introduce them to the Pritney method. Each group was visited by two researcher mentors for just over one hour at a time, and the number of groups was eight. The number of children taking part in Pritney's visits was 134, while the number of adults was 28. During the eight visits and theme activity sessions, a pedagogical Pritney hand puppet was used to carry out various forms of children's drama, multi-arts and emotional skill work linked to the themes of children's drama.

The puppet activated the children and became part of their thoughts and games. The children also began talking about the pony at home. They wanted to give the pony gifts, bring her stickers, drawings, letters, biscuits, and small objects from home. During the mentoring visits, Pritney also encouraged the children to tell stories and read to their pony reading companion. The children talked to the puppet, enquired about her home life, cared for her, and read books to her.

Descriptions about the children's experiences

A child's joy and excitement

Giggling and enthusiasm

‘The children were happy and laughed a lot.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, K4–6, 2 December 2019)

‘Amusement: giggling over a pair of ballet shoes and tights. Enthusiasm for trying out the marionettes.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, K4–6, 2 December 2019).



Image 4. During the ballet theme, the children learnt about marionettes and puppets by taking part in a ball (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).

‘Curiosity, joy.’ (RD, HE6, 2 December 2019)

‘The children were excited.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, J3–4, 11 September 2019)

‘The children were quiet and showed interest. Their facial expressions were marvellous.’ (Notebook feedback, J3–4, 25 September 2019)

Emotions, empathy, participation

Compassion and caring for a friend while playing doctors

Crying, anger, longing, and nervousness

‘The session caused the children to feel emotional.’ (Final feedback, V3–5)

‘The shyest children became more open and braver. More gentleness and sensitivity in the air.’ (Final feedback, V3–5)

‘Some of the children have opened up about surprisingly deep things.’ (Notebook feedback, V3–5, 23 September 2019)

‘The children were gentle with Pritney and gave her hugs and kisses.’ (Notebook feedback, V3–5, 23 September 2019)

‘The children were mesmerised. They moved to the rhythm of some of the songs (swaying), and repeated the lyrics, meaning they had been listening.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, P1–2, 26 November 2019)

‘Music conveys and stirs up emotions even in the very young who might not yet know a single word.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, P1–2, 26 November 2019)

A puppet as a channel of emotional expression

Whispers in the ears, as well as written and drawn messages; the need to hug and find comfort when crying

‘The children loved the puppets. Some are a little bit nervous when the mentors come for a visit, and in the opera performance a puppet was scary.’ (Final feedback, S1–3)

‘The children are fascinated by the hand puppets, characters. They talk about them at home.’ (Final feedback, V3–5)

‘The use of a hand puppet has made communication easier and naming emotions has been valuable.’ (Final feedback, HE6)

‘Compassion towards the characters.’ (Final feedback, J3–4)

‘Pritney has become part of the games of some of the children.’ (Final feedback, K3–5)

‘The children talked a lot about Pritney at home, and on some mornings it has made it easier for some of them to come to day care when we have looked at Pritney’s card on the wall in the group’s room.’ (Notebook feedback, V3–5, September 2019)

‘The opera was horrible when it sang oooooo-ooooooo.’ (A child’s comment, notebook feedback, V3–5, September 2019)

‘The soft toys have come to life and become part of the children’s games.’ (Final feedback, P1–2)

‘The children remember Pritney well and they still talk about her often.’ (Final feedback, SE4–6)

‘The use of a hand puppet has made communication easier. Naming emotions has been valuable.’ (Final feedback, HE6)

‘Happiness and excitement when caring for an animal. All the children felt excited, and even the shiest ones found the courage to care for them.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, K4–6, 4 November 2019)

‘Grooming the animals calmed down even the more restless children.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, HE, 6 November 2019)

‘Even the toughest kids become soft when interacting with a furry friend.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, HE, 6 November 2019)

Fear

‘The puppet theatre was too scary for some of the children.’ (Final feedback S1–3)



Image 5. Postcards and letters are sent as part of the Pritney method. The child groups love pony post (picture by Jaana Keränen).

Bibliotherapy, a story about the procedures at a day care centre

Bibliotherapy is an interesting field and books are important, but they are not necessarily always utilised in accordance with the goals of developmental bibliotherapy. The reading sessions were enjoyable, but with some groups they were considered a challenge due to the group's large size.

‘The children were able to concentrate on listening to the story. The hand puppets and other props made the storytelling session fascinating for them ... The storytelling session was diverse and enchanting for the children.’ (A day care centre's adult's written reflection, K, 2 December 2019)

“I will miss Pritney,” a girl repeats several times. “Yes, we will take good care of Pritney’s cousin. We could build a stall for her.” “And give her hay,” L continues. “Let’s make a home for her from a cardboard box.” (RD, theme VIII Christmas, 9 December 2019)

‘I am also interested in bibliotherapy, which is one of the project’s methods, and I am always happy to learn more about it.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s final feedback, S1–3)

Mentoring

Some of the researcher mentors’ thoughts and experiences from the mentoring

‘A large number of new experiences in a short span of time. We find that a child said to require special attention turns out to be empathetic, clever in their reactions and skilled at following the story. During the painting session, one of the day care centre’s adults tries to restrict the way a child is painting, but one of the researcher mentors says gently that the children can paint any way they want.’ (J3–4, 6 September 2019)

An excerpt from the research diary illustrates the thoughts and emotions of a researcher mentor:

‘An adult’s interference, pointing out what is right and what is wrong, “you did not listen to the instructions”, does not sound good when it comes to creative expression. Some of the children have more developed fine motor skills, while others are still learning, and they must be allowed to practise freely without an adult criticising them, let alone dismissing their efforts. A child may simply enjoy using the paints and brushes, which makes them true artists. I share moments of intimacy with the children when I crouch down to listen to something they want to tell me. I often find it difficult to understand what they are saying, but I listen, regardless. This is a union of art and emotion facilitated by Pritney. In my notes from our first theme visit, I reflect on how such moments could create positive engrams if repeated regularly. A day care centre’s adult’s need to say “no, not like that, you did not

listen” during a children’s art experiment begins to form a poor memory trace if repeated time and again. These traces will become permanently embedded in the subconscious. It is therefore important to be aware of our actions as education and care providers and the ideas we want to carry out with children. Freedom of art is pivotal – being allowed to make a mess, immerse yourself in the creative process and do things in your own way. We cannot know what goes on in a child’s head. Experiences and invisible beings fill the room that Pritney and we are visiting.’ (RD, theme I Pony Post, J3–4, 6 September 2019.)

In early childhood education and care, the education and care providers must form a mental connection with the children in order to guide and interact with them. The adults must earn the children’s permission to instruct and educate them. According to Jalango (2014), interaction with other people and animals helps a child’s brain development, as the neurons and synapses are developed through experiences. Feelings of kindness and fear will leave their marks on us (Jalango 2014). Early interaction has a huge impact on our lives. According to Pohjamo (2016, 78–79), our early experiences have an effect on the dynamics of our emotions, even though we will forget the actual experiences over time. Our emotional dynamics dictate how we experience and create art (Pohjamo 2016, 78–79). Early childhood education is particularly significant, because a small child’s experiences will mould their life-long beliefs, values, and attitudes (Jalango 2014, 7).

Numerous positive mentoring experiences are jotted down in the research diary:

‘We sing a morning song, shake hands, blow kisses, caress, hug and sing another song. The children join in well. The staff welcome us mentors with open arms, joining in the activities, and at the end of the visit, Pritney receives her first pieces of post in the letter box. The children immediately understand that sending a friend some post means that you acknowledge them.’ (RD, theme I Pony Post, K4–6, 28 October 2019.)

‘Without any forced activities, restrictions or prohibitions, the atmosphere is relaxed and focused ... [T]he children suggest several things we could do as part of the singing game ... It feels fantastic that the hour-long visit is a success, and we are rewarded with joy and engagement by the children.’ (RD, ES4–6, 30 October 2019.)

In the best case scenario, a child feels safe, they are understood and they feel like they are being heard. The small size of the group is a key factor, as it allows the time and opportunity to stop to talk with individual children about the small details.

‘At the end of the session, I talk to a child about their painting, which is called *The Big Tree*. At first glance, it looks like the paper is covered in brown paint, but when I talk to the child it becomes clear that it is of course the tree’s trunk. Another painting depicts a mother and a baby who are both wearing hair clips, the child explains.’ (RD, ES4–6, 30 October 2019.)

The description about the first week’s mentoring, recorded in the research diary, speaks of the intensity with which we approached this ethnographic mentoring study:

‘It has been a hard but a rewarding week. As a mentor, you experience a range of emotions and spend a lot of energy encountering new situations and people. However, working with a skilled colleague provides significant support. The Side by Side project is a massive undertaking with its huge content volume. It is therefore important to know your personal limits, the scope of your abilities and level of commitment.’ (RD, about the mentoring after the first week, 7 September 2019.)

In mentoring, an employee creates and maintains interpretations about their professional integrity, level of skill and work conducted in the day care sector (Välijärvi 2019, 51). Processing these actively in daily life also means that there is an ability to effect change. Professional requirements keep changing according to the needs of society, and an early education and care provider must try to adjust their professional approach to match these

expectations. In practice, this may entail voluntary training to further improve professional skills.

As a pair of mentors, we see tangible examples of the vast range of skills required in our work:

- a) designing session content suitable for all age groups;
- b) implementing the plan, adjusting to the conditions, and maintaining focus in a large group while still listening to each individual and supporting their expression;
- c) encountering the adults: some of the operating models and views at day care centres are deep rooted and seem rather old-fashioned, and it takes time to provide and receive appropriate and gentle feedback regarding these;
- d) transferring the mentoring concept to the day care centre's staff, so that it can be applied in practice, and promoting art and storytelling methods;
- e) simultaneously gathering research material and reflecting on the work.

According to Rajala et al. (2017), the development and improvement of the operating cultures of ECEC environments requires old approaches to be re-evaluated and analysed and new models tested and implemented. It will be easier for a new model to become routine if the ECEC community is committed to a change (Rajala et al. 2017, 179). Changing old habits takes time, willingness to commit, courage and critical self-assessment. Short-term mentoring through the Pritney method cannot bring about these changes, but it may prompt new ideas and future plans amongst the staff.

Over the course of a four-month period, we made some thought-provoking findings about certain views. A child's proposal may be dismissed based on an adult's prejudice about the associations linked to certain animals. A child may find donkeys interesting as a species, while an adult associates donkeys – or *asses* – with dumbness. A 3–4-year-old does not yet assign values to different animals, and it is the adult who generates prejudice and assigns

characteristics to them. A donkey is a sensitive and fine member of the animal kingdom, the same as a snake, a pig, a butterfly, or a fly.

Furthermore, the purpose of Pritney's visits is to allow children and child groups to experience success. 'One of the children in the group is very good at becoming immersed in the story, so engaged and quick to communicate. This is exactly the kind of child we want to work with.' However, more than one of the day care centre's adults asked us to limit the child's communication, which did not seem right, especially since our approach was based on drama and free expression. 'After the first week, I feel tired, contemplative and thankful for all the contacts with the children. I have found lots of inspiration, and my mentoring colleague has been an invaluable support to me' (RD, 7 September 2019.)

When an adult tells the mentors that a certain child will not have the necessary concentration, that a child must stay in certain place and learn to be quiet so that other children can speak or something else along these lines, it is all about control, founded on preconceptions about a child's interests or abilities to focus on group activities.

“A bit of a despot”, was the name given by one of the day care centre's adults to children whose way of participating denies the quieter ones the chance to express themselves. Who these “despots” were in this preschool group I was never able to tell, as all the children took part in the songs, games, painting and the Pritney and Turre episodes really well. The children got overwhelmingly excited about the postal theme and responded with a huge amount of post and hugs. One message said “Dearest Pritney”. Pritney made the children feel they needed to protect her. They wanted to give the pony encouragements and listened to her speak. Initially, the adults were full of preconceptions, and I think I even detected some opposition.’ (RD, theme I Pony Post, HE6, 28 October 2019.)

The challenges connected to large group size are evident in the day care centres' routines, their activity sessions in particular. However, the children were encouraged to have freedom of expression during creative activities, such as theatre games, singing, nursey rhymes and dancing. It is therefore a

case of mixed messages if, on the one hand, Pritney encourages children to communicate during the drama sessions while the staff on the other hand repeatedly try to make a specific child stay quiet on the pretence that the child must learn to concentrate. According to a report by Karvi (the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre), staff members believe that challenges in implementing early education and care curricula are caused by the heterogeneity of groups and lack of interest shown by the children, among other things (Repo et al. 2019, 161), but the report also says that ‘the lack of skills amongst the staff is at least part of the reason. In their responses, the staff members stated that they did not possess the skills required to implement certain ECEC content or the ECEC curriculum.’ (Repo et al. 2019, 161.)



Image 6. Each child group received their own post box where they put their letters and cards for Pritney (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).

Both the adults and the children exhibited a wide range of emotions during the mentoring visits, and a child's crying or expressions of anxiety, in particular, gave us pause. We understand that being separated from the parents, the target of their affection, may cause a child to feel anxious. After all, affection is strongly linked to a need for safety, well-being and comforting (Hughes 2011, 19, 43). Therefore, day care centres must try to meet these needs in a positive way. Mentioning the word 'bed', for example, makes Mikko feel homesick (RD, K4–6, 19 November 2019).

The staff can meet a child's special needs in a way that supports the child: 'Mikko had a lot to say and he was constantly very active. At the end, when the others went out, Mikko was lying on the floor, tired. The early childhood special teacher stayed with him the whole time.' (RD, K4–6, 18 November 2019.) As researchers and mentors, we discover how fabulous it is when a child is able to focus all their attention on the session's activities even if they struggle with self-regulation. The early childhood special teacher is there to provide the child with support, allowing them to be part of the group and find inspiration. Another teacher's experience of the same situation may be different:

'I was bothered by the huge amount of attention given to Mikko and Leevi and other children being left somewhere in the background. Sometimes, Mikko is highly strung and throwing his toys around, and then calms down when reading a book or sitting on the early education special teacher's lap being stroked.' (A day care centre's adult's written reflection, K4–6, 18 November 2019.)

An adult's emotional presence is needed to promote a child's self-regulation, benevolent social interaction, ability to work in a group and mental well-being. A child should be able to feel that an adult is available to provide them with support (see Hämäläinen 2019). Responding to a child's needs may take place in another way as well:

'When it came time to hug Pritney at the door, one of the day care centre's adult's need to tell a child off made me think. The child had wanted to move quickly from one situation to the next, but was told that they could not always be the first one to do things. This is what the adult said to that happy little boy ... This group sure has a lot of restrictions

in place. The adults do not express positive emotions either to the children or to each other.’ (RD, HE6, 25 November 2019.)

Hämäläinen (2019) believes that parents’ ability to understand their child’s behaviour, messages and emotions is vital to the child’s development and the formation of relationships that are based on trust. Early childhood education and care providers serve as ‘parent substitutes’ for several hours a day and play an important role in the joint effort of bringing up children. According to Hämäläinen (2019), a child learns that they matter and have value as a human being if an adult reacts sufficiently fast and appropriately to their messages and behaviour. In fact, early childhood education and care staff should consider the emotions, experiences, intentions and behaviour of the children, colleagues, and themselves in different situations. This way, a child’s daily routines in day care can become more predictable and balanced (see Hämäläinen 2019). Children’s mental health disorders can be prevented at an early age if the measures are targeted, not just at the children, but at their parents, other family members and social environment as well (Välijärvi 2019, 76). A day care centre is an influential environment to a child where positive daily educational actions for the child are possible and where a continuum between the day care centre and the parents can be created to promote collaboration that focuses on the child’s well-being.

Some of the events at their day care centre can be memorable to children, and they might want to talk about these events at home. Pritney’s visits twice a week are examples of such events. At home, the children drew pictures and dictated messages for the pony and, once at the day care centre, they put these into the pony’s post box. Silja dictated a message to the pony at home: ‘Dearest Pritni, Please come and visit me sometime. Lovely Pritney. Come and pick mushrooms with me. We are moving house tomorrow.’ On the other side of the letter, the child has used colouring pencils to draw a smiling sun and a piebald pony.

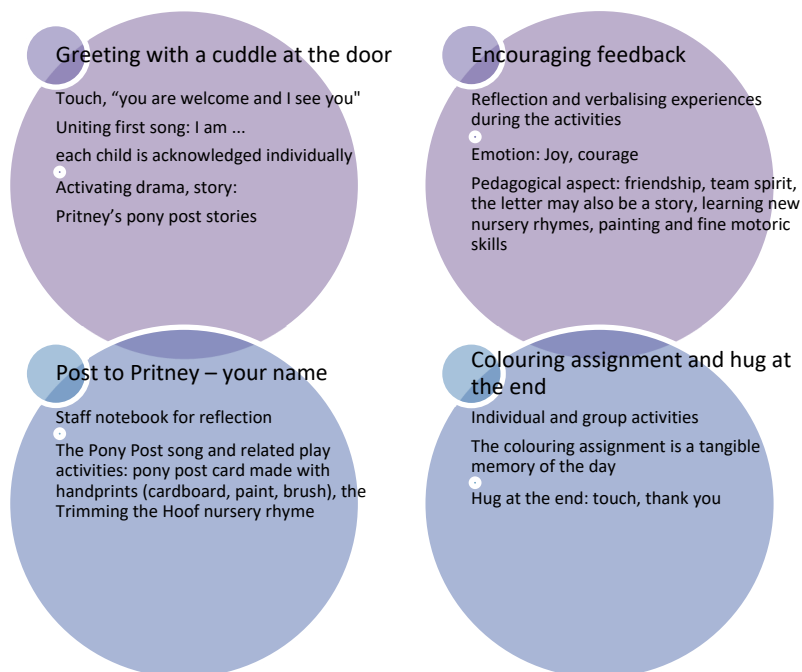


Figure 2. Theme I activity contents.

ECEC providers’ experiences with the mentoring

Negative experiences with the mentoring

Negative feedback

One of the staff members wrote: ‘I do not know what my role is and have not learnt anything new.’ (Final feedback, HE6); ‘I discovered that as an educator I am different, which is good. I know these children and their needs, my work is based on these needs and I like my job.’ (Final feedback, HE6); ‘Nothing has changed.’ (Final feedback, HE6)

‘Often after an activity session, the children are noticeably restless, which has required extra work afterwards with them.’ (Final feedback, HE6)

The method's concept of a shared drama agreement allows the children to decide for themselves whether they feel ready to share a moment with others and take part according to their own skills and views. There is no wrong way of doing this. Such freedom of dramatic expression is not always possible in a day care centre group, if an adult has all the power and thereby controls what is an appropriate way to participate and what is not. This may be reflected in the adults' answers to the question What observations did you make about the children? 'A few children nearly "lost control" when they became immersed in the opera music.' (RD, HE6, 25 November 2019) Another adult wrote about the same observation as follows: 'Some of the children began performing silent opera.' (RD, HE6, 25 November 2019)

Positive experiences with the mentoring

The staff's experiences with the mentoring

'I have realised the value of drama in learning. The children become excited when a puppet explains a thing to them. They are better able to relate when the speaker is a puppet.' (Final feedback, K3–5)

'We have discovered that soft toys and hand puppets are useful in communication between children and adults.' (Final feedback, V3–5)

'It is wonderful that the children can have all these different activity sessions. A diverse set of sessions.' (Notebook feedback, K3–5, 15 October 2019)

'Puppets are a good tool when teaching empathy.' (Notebook feedback, S1–3, 16 September 2019)

'Feeling certain that the group's activities and approaches are headed in the right direction. Boldness to engage in the activities.' (Final feedback, P1–2)

'The most important realisation has been to see how powerful puppet theatre can be!' (Final feedback, HE6)

‘I found the children’s excitement infectious.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, K4–6, 4 November 2019)

‘It is nice to see the children take such active part in these sessions.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, K4–6, 2 December 2019)

‘It is nice to witness the children’s reactions and emotions to different types of music.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, P1–2, 26 November 2019)

Observations about the day care centres

There was a feeling of haste in some of the groups that were bigger and had more challenging children, causing stress amongst the staff. As a result, there was not always time to pay attention to every child’s needs and the staff preferred to treat the children as a group rather than individuals.

Some of the staff members did not want changes to take place and felt there was no need for new approaches. However, many changes will only become apparent over time and cannot be seen immediately. ‘We have not really noticed any change.’ (Final feedback, J3–4)

Some of the staff also said that they would like to be informed in advance about the upcoming activities so that they could control the situations better:

‘We would like to receive information about the themes in advance to prepare the children for the activities. It would be good if the staff members were made aware of what the sessions will be about.’ (Final feedback, J3–4)

About the mentors’ work

‘The mentors provide instruction to the professionals and factor in the needs of different children. It is a good thing that the whole group can take part in the activities.’ (Final feedback, V3–5)

‘The mentors immerse themselves fully in their roles, and the children focus their attention on the puppets, in particular.’ (Final feedback, J3–4)

‘The performances were diverse. Clearly, a lot of work has gone into their planning (tickets, props). The children have loved the post box. The colouring activities at the end of each session are great.’ (Final feedback, K3–5)

‘The way that the children were listened to was fantastic.’ (Notebook feedback, V3–5, September 2019)

‘Pritney, in particular – but the mentors too, of course – became important to the children. Their visits were highly anticipated.’ (Notebook feedback, V3–5, September)

‘The children are always really excited to see Pirjo and Jaana. Is it a step too far when they open the windows and shout out to the carpark? Is it OK to set boundaries?’ (Notebook feedback, V3–5, 23 September 2019)

‘In the morning already, the children kept asking if today was a Pritney day – they were clearly hoping for a visit.’ (Notebook feedback, ES4–6, 12 November 2019)

‘A warm reception for both the adults and children.’ (Notebook feedback, SE4–6)

‘The interaction included everyone, and everybody was able to join in.’ (Final feedback, SE4–6)



Image 7. The pony's Christmas serves as the closing ceremony. The children are decorating a tree with Pritney (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).

‘The children are so trusting.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, P1–2, 5 November 2019)

‘I thought it was nice that the children were allowed to take part according to their own wishes, and in the end, everyone joined in, some actively throughout the session, some from time to time. The session left me feeling good and satisfied.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, P1–2, 5 November 2019)

‘A truly wonderful, inspiring, and diverse session. Smooth instructions, and the mentors worked well together.’ (A day care centre’s adult’s written reflection, HE6, 2 December 2019)

2.5 Summary and recommendations

During the autumn term’s researcher mentor visits, the Pritney method was further developed, and the colouring pictures, songs, singing games, stories and theatre activities were planned according to the needs and wishes of the

day care centres' children. The Pritney method can help study developmental factors linked to children's emotions and interaction. The 21st-century environment in which children are being brought up is characterised by an emphasis on being emotionally present and showing affection in order to support a young child's development and learning, and these goals can be best promoted by creating a safe setting (see Hughes 2011, 19, 43; Suvilehto 2014). Hughes (2011, 87–90) shares the views of the developers of the attachment theory, John Bowlby and Mary Answorth, that babies need to feel that their safety is guaranteed by their parents. Separation from a target of affection causes anxiety, in addition to which affection is strongly linked to the need of safety, well-being and comforting (Hughes 2011, 19, 43). A puppet or a doll can help a child feel safe when faced with life's challenges.

The visits by Pritney the hand puppet inspired the day care centre groups, and one of the children made a spontaneous request: 'Hey, can you ask Pritney please?' (RD, K3–5, 20 August 2019) So the puppet master (researcher mentor) asked and Pritney answered, gaining the child's trust and attention. Another comment explains how the puppet's gaze connect with a child if the puppet master keeps looking at the puppet while interacting and communicating with it during the story session: 'I kept looking at Pritney's eyes,' (RD, K4–5, 21 August 2019) said one child after the mentors' visit. The child had been listening to, looking at and experiencing the hand puppet. The puppet and mentor had been seen, heard, and emotionally received.

Based on the feedback we were given, the day care centres' adults felt that this new method and way of working with children were worthwhile and sparked new ideas. Perhaps they will start using puppets with children more often and boldly immerse themselves with the children in the fantastic world of stories. However, some of the staff members will continue to cling on to the traditional approaches and will not step out of their comfort zones. A quality assessment report by Karvi (the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre) regarding the current state of early childhood education and care (Repo et al. 2019) states concerns about the reduced role of arts and, in particular, drama in ECEC. According to the report, drama was the least utilised form of arts education. The reported reasons arts education had not

taken place included lack of materials, facilities, and staff skills (Repo et al. 2019, 91–95). Some of these challenges were also present at the day care centres. The Pritney method's procedures and our field studies have shown that drama can be utilised at day care centres by using their existing materials and that it is our own internal barriers which form the biggest obstacle to utilising dramatic means.

Applying the concept in practise can happen quickly, as the last diary entry of one of the researcher mentors shows: 'We have received a lot of praise for this project and our role, and dramatic means have been implemented. In J's group, a wise owl puppet attracts the children's attention. They listen to the owl, and Pritney's concept has clearly been understood.' (RD, KVS, 16 December 2019.) It can therefore be concluded that using arts in early childhood education and care is dependent on the willingness of the adults to do so. Parts of our four-month field study as researcher mentors during the autumn term felt very hectic, even chaotic at times, but every day we tried to do what was best for the children. Staff members' skills must be maintained, and the resources and society's support must be sufficient. It is clear that children in smaller groups can be treated entirely differently to larger groups. Valuable work is carried out for future generations in the field of early childhood education and care, and its quality and procedures are therefore important. Arts and games in all their forms create a continuum of well-being that aids a child's learning, growth, and development.

The next chapter focuses in more detail on bibliotherapy as part of children's literature education.

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Image 8. Turre and Pritney watch as children make their pony postcards. Bibliotherapeutic activities promote interaction created by letters and cards (picture by Jaana Keränen).

3 Bibliotherapy in early childhood education and care, and children's literature education – The themes of grief and death in picture books

Pirjo Suvilehto and Mervi Nyfors

Abstract

This article describes opportunities afforded by the use of bibliotherapeutic activities at day care centres and discusses the bibliotherapeutic and goal-oriented use of metaphors in children's literature. Practical examples are given to spark new ideas for the active use of literature and stories to promote professional skills. Emotions conveyed by picture books are discussed by focusing on the themes of grief and death. The concept of bibliotherapy will be illustrated by asking two questions: a) What is bibliotherapy? b) How could a bibliotherapeutic approach be utilised at a day care centre? The article aims to provide the readers with some new ideas for professional growth. The research questions will be answered by a) exploring the concept of bibliotherapy and making proposals for a bibliotherapeutically suitable operating model to be used with children, and b) by discussing the themes of grief and death in children's literature. Suvilehto will focus on the reading of bibliotherapeutic picture books, while Nyfors will study the themes of grief and death in children's books.

Keywords: bibliotherapy, children's literature, emotions

3.1 Introduction and theory

Through theory, this chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of what bibliotherapy is and how it can be applied in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Children's books and reading sessions with children link the bibliotherapeutic approach to the everyday life at a day care centre. Certain criteria exist for selecting a suitable book, and this chapter will describe these by discussing the books' themes, focusing specifically on death and expression of grief in children's books.

What is bibliotherapy?

The possibilities for utilising bibliotherapy (see the Pritney method by Suvilehto & Keränen) in a day care centre setting are analysed from the perspective of promoting children's development and adults' professional growth. A bibliotherapeutic approach means that literature is used as part of the daily routines by reading carefully selected books to children – the concept is referred to as supportive bibliotherapy for a child's growth and development, preventive bibliotherapy and developmental bibliotherapy (Suvilehto 2020). Systematic literature education factors in the developmental needs of children: what are they interested in and what sort of challenges are they facing? Children's literature connected to these topics forms a basis for discussions that may take place spontaneously during reading sessions between children and adults. When this happens, the adult must maintain sensitivity and encourage the child to express their thoughts, views, and emotions. The adult must also learn to react to the child's suggestions. Repeated reading and storytelling sessions can be used to process things that are on the child's mind almost subconsciously. A children's book maintains a sufficient distance to the recipient, as there is no need to talk about the child's affairs while the book is being read, and instead the child can talk about their thoughts regarding the book's characters, events and mood. A story can often speak to a child on a subliminal level, which may show on the outside as the child's desire to hear the same story again and again, for example. The child will continue to explore the story elements without getting bored for as long as their internal development needs are met.

Bibliotherapy can take many forms, from writing and reading to dramatizing and storytelling. At day care centres, the needs of both individual children and child groups can be responded to by taking advantage of some of the many ways in which literature can be utilised, thereby promoting well-being in everyday life. For example, a peaceful reading session between an adult and a child can take the following form: The child sits in the lap of a safe adult and follows the story. The adult enjoys the moment as well. When it comes to a whole group, preventive bibliotherapy like this entails reading specific children's literature that matches the current needs of the group. These needs may be linked to

themes such as bullying, grief, death, moving house or starting preschool or school. Education and care providers can become more bibliotherapeutically oriented by reading literature that supports their self-improvement and writing self-reflective texts.

Bibliotherapy is a form of creative therapy, and its channels of expression include art, music, dance and drama. In bibliotherapy, reading, writing and storytelling are means of achieving the objectives of treatment, rehabilitation, preventive action and personal growth. All the measures used have certain goals, such as learning to understand oneself and others, enhancing self-expression and increasing the sense of self-worth. Other goals might include improving interaction, emotion processing and coping skills, discovering new mental resources, ideas, realisations and meanings, and accepting change. (Mazza 2003; see Suomen kirjallisuusterapiayhdistys; Suvilehto 2020). In educational environments, a bibliotherapeutic approach can involve a process with the aim of establishing interaction through the use of literature and stories. Literature is read either alone, in a group or together with an instructor. In other words, bibliotherapy can be utilised in several ways, depending on the requirements (McCarty Hynes & Hynes-Berry 1994, 11; Shavira et al. 2018). Emotions expressed in children's books are interpreted and verbalised during the reading sessions at day care centres (see Mazza 2003, 9). When used with children, bibliotherapy can mean preventive action, in which stories, storytelling and dramatic expression provide children with support in any growth and development challenges. In fact, bibliotherapeutic methods have been shown to have positive mental and physiological effects on children (see Suvilehto 2020).

Day care-aged children are learning to verbalise their actions, thoughts, and emotions with the help of adults. It feels natural to them to take part in discussions through games, stories, comics, picture books, storytelling or the use of a puppet (see Pritney the hand puppet), all the while keeping a safe distance through a fictional character. This means distancing in a therapeutic sense of the word. Through stories, a child can process difficult, even unspoken, things that are nonetheless part of their life (Suvilehto 2020). Bibliotherapy uses symbols. They give children a natural way of expressing themselves (Mäki & Arvola 2009, 76). Literature can be used to inspire

empathy (Suvilehto 2014, 317), and stories can help children learn important social skills, compassion being one of the most significant ones. Therapeutic stories include elements that touch children on an emotional level (Ylönen 2000, 63). When a child can identify some of their own emotions and experiences in a story, they also learn to understand others. Having empathy requires us to be able to recognise and process our own emotions – in order to understand others, we must first understand ourselves.



Image 1. A child reading a picture book to a reading companion toy (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).

How to choose and read a children's book

Close reading of children's books

The stories and illustrations in children's books involve feelings and spark emotions in readers, which can be explored together. A reading session is based on interaction, and a child will spontaneously comment on the things they see and hear. The education and care giver can pause to study the story with the child. What sort of characters does it have? What type of characters do the children in this group find interesting? Books contain different environments, and these can be looked at more closely, which also helps children interpret images. Attention can also be paid to small details together with the child. The relationships between characters are fascinating: who says what and to whom? The dialogue can also be funny, and focus can be shifted to little nuggets of humour, which allows the adult to learn what kind of things bring joy to the child. Furthermore, the themes, moods and endings of children's books have a profound effect. It is important that the education and care provider reads through the story first on their own before reading it to a child or a group of children, as memories of not just the positive reading sessions, but also the negative ones can persist for a long time. A successful reading session will cause emotions that a child will want to experience again.

The adult can talk to the children about the characters in a story: What are they like? Are they people, animals, or toys? The adult and children can analyse whether the story contains a task that must be fulfilled, or perhaps a challenge or a problem – either a concrete or a psychological one – something that needs resolving. Before reading the actual story, the adult can study the images with the child or encourage them to 'read' their own story based on the illustrations. The focus can be on a character's appearance: What are they wearing? What is their colour scheme? What sort of an impression do they give?

Story characters convey feelings, but what kind? Is a character active, withdrawn, noisy, colourful, calm or something else? Do the story or the illustrations feature any adults and what is their role? What type of an environment is a character in and what is the mood like? Close reading can

allow the adult to realise the vast number of opportunities for discussion that a picture book can offer. After all, their stories are often modelled after real life and inevitably reflect everyday situations. Furthermore, both children and adults often find the stories and images in children's books fascinating and feel there is something there for them to relate to.

Themes and moods

Themes are one of the elements of bibliotherapy, because readers are often able to name one main topic that they find interesting. It can pertain to a character's developmental phase, life situation, feeling or experience. When selecting a book, an adult can consider whether the story deals with any developmental challenges that a child is currently facing, such as emotions and emotion control skills – anger, sadness, rage, aggression, courage, perseverance, loneliness, exclusion, fears, illness, moving to a new home or difficulties in friendships, to name a few. For example, these developmental issues can relate to emotional problems that a character must resolve, either alone or with others. The mood of a single image in a book can be analysed to find out what it might be trying to convey. Alternatively, the focus can be on the overall mood of the story.

The anticipation caused by a story can be assessed through the following questions: What is creating the sense of tension, the drama, in the story, making the reader want to keep turning the pages? Does the book contain any ethical questions about what is right and what is wrong? Does the story involve a child considering ethical themes, such as the ethos of doing something kind, feelings or behaviour connected to empathy, or disapproval of wrongdoing? Does the story encourage the reader, through its characters, to think or learn? Does it include any topics or themes pertaining to a child reader's everyday life? Is there something in the story or the illustrations that is able to catch a child's attention particularly well?

The ending

A children's story should end on a hopeful note. The readers can analyse the ending. The important first page and the ending, i.e. the last image, create a frame for what happens in between and what the mood is at the

story's end. Perhaps the main character has gained a better understanding and become tolerant during the story, or improved their relationship with themselves or others. Or perhaps some part of the story has provided a child reader with an encouraging ethos, giving the book bibliotherapeutical value, which both the adult and the child have recognised.

Children's books offer ways of processing grief and bereavement

The literary and art therapy methods in children's literature are suitable for processing emotional challenges, because they can be applied to a variety of situations. Fantasy worlds and symbols in stories speak to children in their own language, thereby creating a channel into their internal world (Lundgren & Borgström 1988, 12, 28). Symbols and allegories in picture books containing themes of grief and death have particular meaning, because they help the recipient distance themselves from difficult real-world issues. This will allow a child to assess from a safe distance how close they want painful and scary things to get. (Kokko 2012, 168.) Furthermore, images and figurative language make their own special therapeutic contribution to grief literature.

Death and grief as a child's experience

Slaughter (2005, 179) refers to early research (e.g. Anthony 1940; Nagy 1948) according to which death is an emotionally charged theme for children, involving grief, anxiety and fear about the separation that is connected to death. Children understand death differently to adults and may react with stronger emotions. (Slaughter 2005, 179.) But even though their conceptual and knowledge-based capacity is still immature, children possess intuitive understanding, and while they may not be able to verbalise their understanding or emotions, they are familiar with death and grief (Kübler-Ross 1983). Because a child does not yet know how to verbalise their feelings the same way as an adult, their experience of grief, for example, may not be as obvious, leaving the child alone with their emotions. This may lead to a number of emotional problems. Children who have experienced a death of someone close to them are in a risk group for mental, social, and behavioural problems (Karasma & Suvilehto 2014, 311).

A child reacts to bereavement similarly to an adult, but their experience often differs from that of an adult, as it may be the first time that the child has come into contact with bereavement and grief. The child might not understand what is happening to them, because unlike adults, the child is unable to verbalise questions and reactions caused by the experience. Furthermore, children have yet to gain much life experience, which could provide them with tools to deal with bereavement and grief, and as a result a child may even become scared of being crushed by their intense emotions. (Berns 2004, 322.) The most common reactions amongst grieving children include anxiety, strong memories, problems with sleep, depression, longing, anger, attention seeking, guilt, self-blame, shame, problems at school and somatic symptoms (Dyregrov 1996, 18).

Because a child's capacity for thought is not yet fully developed and they possess little knowledge and life experience, it is difficult for them to understand death and cope with grief (Carter 2016, 22). They may be inexperienced at identifying or talking about their emotions and require plenty of understanding and compassionate help and support from an adult in their grieving process (Poijula 2007, 110). A child has the capacity to process and cope with grief one piece at a time; a child's grief is 'striped' (e.g. Kärkkäinen & Lainpelto 2004), characterised by alternating happiness and sadness. According to Poijula (2007, 99), young children find it hard to cope with grief, and therefore they avoid the pain that grief causes them, which to an outsider can seem like an absence of grief. However, a child's grieving process often lasts for much longer than adults think (Poijula 2007, 112).

Animals as symbols of life and death – Why does it have to be a horse?

In children's books, natural phenomena, such as seasons, weather, and animals, can serve as symbols of human emotions. Grief can be metaphorically described as a journey (Umphrey & Cacciatore 2014, 3; reference to Graves 2009). Jukka-Pekka Koskinen and Miranda Koskinen's picture book *Hallava hevonen* (2013) describes a grandfather's death as a mysterious journey, led by an ice horse. The main character Joni's grandfather is an old and ailing man, who is waiting for a specific horse to

take him on a grand adventure. Both the narrative and illustrations contribute to the fantastic nature of the story: death is not seen as horrible and terrifying or as something causing grief, but as something that is anticipated and welcomed. In the story, the horse serves as a strong symbolic character that can be interpreted in a number of ways.

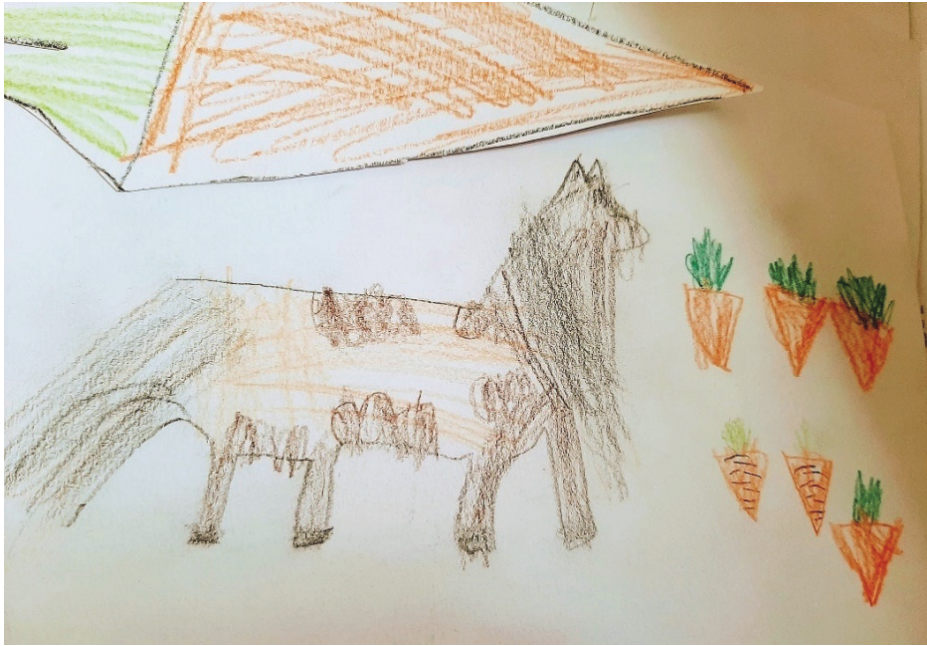


Image 2. A child has drawn a pony in a carrot patch and has sent a letter to Pritney (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).

Human beings have been drawing horses for practically forever, ever since cave paintings 30,000 years ago (Kantokorpi & Rautio 2006, 4). Horses have also featured throughout human history in the tales, myths, and literature of various cultures (Hjelt & Ulv 2019). Therefore, horses can be seen as an ancient archetype that activates certain imagery in people's minds. They are often associated with strength and vitality, but, on the other hand, as their origins were unknown, these animals were thought to have links with the kingdom of the dead and were sacrificed for the deceased. As an animal with great speed and ability to make huge leaps, the horse later became a symbol of the sun and was thought to draw the 'celestial cart' of

the Big Dipper. Furthermore, the horse gave form to the mythical winged creature Pegasus. (Biedermann 1989, 73.) The ice horse in *Hallava hevonen* ('Pale Horse') is connected to this symbol, in particular, and death is observed through a mythical, mysterious horse.

In *Hallava hevonen*, an icy horseshoe, which Joni first finds behind the woodshed and later at the end of the story under his pillow, means that the horse of death is close by, but a horseshoe is also a symbol of good luck. In other words, the book links positive symbolism to death, describing it as a fantastic adventure. In fact, death can be viewed from a fantasy perspective, linking it with elements of solace and hope. One of the aims of bibliotherapy is to raise hope (Suvilehto 2008, 50): life consists of stories and their different versions, from amongst which we can choose the ones we like the most, and even death can be told as an exciting story, a journey to a new and amazing world.

The butterfly as a symbol of the psyche

The butterfly symbol is used in the Finnish books *Puuvanhus ja pikkukoivu* (2010), *Tyttö ja naakkapuu* (2004) and *Tuleeko vaari vielä takaisin?* (2009). It forms an associative link to the fragility of life and the ephemerality of time (Werness & Benedict 2003, 63). In many cultures, it is also a reference to a readiness for change, to beauty, to the transience of things and to joy. On old headstones, butterflies symbolise death. The Greek word for butterfly is *psyché*, and it was thought of as a 'spirit animal', a symbol of the immortal soul, that carries the souls of the deceased to the world beyond (Werness & Benedict 2003, 63). In the abovementioned books, the butterfly is a symbol of solace and hope.

In *Tuleeko vaari vielä takaisin?*, the main symbol is a yellow butterfly that prompts the characters to ponder about life and death. The butterfly is associated with the immortal soul and the butterfly's yellow colour with joy, warmth, and the sun. At the beginning of the story, a boy called Oula is trying to catch a yellow butterfly with his net, but the butterfly manages to avoid being caught and flies high to the tree tops – a yellow dot in the blue sky. The butterfly rising high up into the sky represents a free soul and spirituality. A soul is not shackled to the temporal world the same way as a

physical body, and can instead rise up when releasing itself from a dying body. The same butterfly symbol is also used in the book in connection to the grandfather's grave. At the end of the story, the family are clearing away autumn leaves and find the butterfly dead amongst them. The metaphor linked to the butterfly's life inspires the family to discuss life and death, the ephemerality of it all, the beauty of short moments and how the past will stay in their memories and never disappear:

'The yellow butterfly had a solemn and dignified funeral. It had spent the whole summer flying around, seeing plenty of beautiful flowers and bringing joy to many with its fluttering wings. It had lived a butterfly's life, and as autumn arrived it was time for it to die and make room for new butterflies. But even in the following winter, its memory still reminded everyone of the summer.' (*Tuleeko vaari vielä takaisin?*, 30.)

Birds of death

In *Tyttö ja naakkapuu*, life, death, grief, and remembrance are discussed through a flock of jackdaws living in the trees by a railway station. According to Finnish mythology, jackdaws have a special connection to the afterlife, beyond the veil of death. (Ojanen & Ulv 2015, 79.) This association with death is further strengthened by the bird's black colour. In the book, a girl whose father has died is looking at the big trees by a railway station and at the jackdaws living in the trees while her mother is buying them tickets at the office. When the jackdaws take flight, the girl realises what it feels like to miss someone, and watching the birds helps her understand the memories she has of her father. The jackdaws flying away from the trees is a metaphor, which allows the girl to identify her emotions and realise things about herself:

'The trees already know that the jackdaws have flown away. Now, they are waving goodbye. To be on the safe side, I am waving too. I know how it feels to miss someone. It is something you feel all over.' (*Tyttö ja naakkapuu*, 11.)

The girl also thinks about death through the birds: How long do jackdaws live? What happens if a jackdaw dies while it is flying? Will it hit the ground?

What would the girl do if she found a dead bird? Through their symbolism, the trees and the jackdaws living in them represent the concepts of death and grief and the related emotions to the girl. A person will find it easier to face difficult emotions when viewing their own internal world by distancing themselves from the subject through projection. By looking at the trees and the leaving jackdaws, the girl gains a tangible example of what losing someone feels like. At the same time, she feels compassion towards the trees who, likewise, are experiencing a loss: ‘A tree knows longing the same way as me and mum and dad.’ (*Tyttö ja naakkapuu*, 36).

The book also contains another metaphor that helps the girl reflect on her own experience of losing her father and at the same time feel compassion towards others who have gone through the same: she recalls seeing magpies’ nests on the ground that someone unkind had dropped down from an old spruce tree. That memory resonates with her own experience of her father’s death causing her family to break apart, just like the magpies’ destroyed homes (see also Kokko 2012, 175).

In picture books, metaphors can also be used to study time, an element linked to life and death. Natural elements, such as trees and stones, are used as referents. *Surunappi* (2009, 42) talks about how old some trees can get and how they can live for much longer than people, some even several hundreds of years. The book describes the ‘trees’ rhythm’, which follows the changing seasons. In the spring, trees sprout new buds that turn into leaves come summer, deepening in shade as the season progresses. In the autumn, leaves become bright and colourful, until finally they fall to the ground.

The power of colours

Images contain a vast number of symbols and metaphors, expressed through colours and characters, and colours form direct links to emotions. According to Vasilij Kandinsky (1988, 55–59), colour has a physical and psychological effect on people and directly influences the soul. ‘The eye is attracted’ by the beauty and other characteristics of colours, which cause various physical sensations, but colours also have psychological power that causes ‘vibrations in the soul’ (Kandinsky 1988, 55–56).

Dark and wintery colours, such as black, grey, white, blue and brown, dominate illustrations that refer to death, while images symbolising the continuity of life use orange, yellow and light green – the colours of spring. The symbolism of colours in both *Tyttö ja naakkapuu* and *Puuvanhus ja pikkukoivu* is particularly powerful.

The colour scheme of *Tyttö ja naakkapuu* is mainly autumnal with illustrations using black, brown, grey and blue. The girl's happy memories of her father are summery, and therefore the colours in these images are also lighter (see also Kokko 2012, 169–171). Elements associated with death in the illustrations include fallen leaves on the ground and golden yellow grain ready to be harvested. Metaphorically, this can also refer to a person whose life is about to end.

Surupilven salaisuus (2019) also takes advantage of colour symbolism, utilising natural summer colours to describe joy and happy memories. On the other hand, grey in the form of a sad cloud that makes everything look dreary, refers to grief, longing, fear, and guilt. The book is about the suicide of a loved one, the grief and shame that follow, and the importance of talking and remembering. Although the book describes grief as a difficult process that takes effort to see through, the story also offers a glimpse of hope that grief can be overcome in time, allowing those affected to feel happiness again. This thought is metaphorically conveyed by an illustration in which the younger sister and parents of a girl who has died by suicide stand in the rain with their backs turned to the reader, but have a rainbow in front of them, symbolising hope (*Surupilven salaisuus*, 23).

These books try to approach death in a realistic way that also brings solace. This often entails emphasising the fact that life goes on, despite death. This can be done, for example, by describing how someone who has died continues to exist in the memories of those who are mourning, or how in nature a dead organism decomposes and nourishes others that are still alive and new things that are born. In *Puuvanhus ja pikkukoivu*, an old birch tree falls down and dies in a winter storm, allowing a little birch that was growing next to it to have more space and light to live. This is a metaphor for the circle of life, in which birth and death follow each other. Every living

thing has its time on the earth, but once this time is up, they must step aside and make room for younger generations:

‘Don’t be sad, my boy. Now you have more room to grow and the sun can reach you better, the old one said comfortingly.

I’m not going to disappear. I will return to Mother Earth’s soil and feed your roots. The same birds that used to build their nests on my boughs will come and perch on yours to sing.’

Dark clouds and rain refer to sadness and crying, and the rain symbol is used in the books *Jospa ukki nukkuukin?* (2002) and *Surupilven salaisuus*. *Jospa ukki nukkuukin?* describes the death of a grandfather and how even the clouds are crying because they are sad. The crying clouds act as a metaphor to a fictional character’s internal experience.

‘It was raining outside. It looked like even the clouds hanging down from the sky were sadder than usual. Great big tears fell from the stormy mass into mum’s hair and on her coat as she was walking towards the nursery.’ (*Jospa ukki nukkuukin?* 6.)

In *Surupilven salaisuus*, the older sister of a girl has died by suicide, and feelings connected to grief, including guilt and missing the lost person, are illustrated metaphorically through a cloud. After the older sister’s death, a thick, black rain cloud surrounds the family’s home. It covers everything – the mother, the father, the toys, and the family’s things – and even the food starts to taste of it. Guilt and a refusal to talk make the cloud of sadness even bigger and darker, making life hard, but when the family begin to talk and cry together, the longing, guilt and feelings of anger start to ease and the family members become closer to one another. Memories and talk make the cloud brighter and make it small and pretty.

‘Can you see that little cloud above me? Today it has shades of rose pink and gold. The cloud is there because of my sister. It is her memory.’ (*Surupilven salaisuus*, 3)

3.2 Thoughts about the therapeutic effects of literature

The concept of bibliotherapy that promotes children's growth and development in ECEC environments has been illustrated by answering two questions: a) What is bibliotherapy? b) How could a bibliotherapeutic approach be utilised at a day care centre? We have described a bibliotherapeutically suitable operating model for use at day care centres and with children. The themes of experiencing grief and death in children's books prompt ideas about how the stories and illustrations of these books could be used to discuss difficult topics with children. An education and care provider can provide children with systematic and goal-oriented literature education, in addition to which they can use literature and creative writing to improve their own skills.

In the article, Suvilehto has described the opportunities afforded by bibliotherapy and picture books in ECEC environments, while Nyfors has focused on the themes of grief and death in children's picture books. Bibliotherapeutic activities can be used at day care centres, as reading children's books can activate discussions on even the more difficult topics. Staff members can be trained to guide children to pay more attention to what they are reading and to provide focused bibliotherapeutical literary art activities. Children's literature is a diverse genre and is able to engage children in a special way with the presence of a bibliotherapeutically oriented adult. Early childhood education and care staff have the option of learning about bibliotherapeutic methods and, thus, improving their professional skills in connection with self-awareness and children's developmental challenges

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Image 3. Inspired by a ballet book, the child group soon has the marionettes dancing too (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).

4 Some thoughts and future plans

Pirjo Suvilehto

This publication describes the content and further development of the Pritney method, which is part of the Side by Side project, funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education and carried out in 2018–2020. In addition to drama education, it discusses the possibilities afforded by bibliotherapy – one of the method’s elements – in early childhood education and care. Mentoring amongst day care staff and children is one of the key contents of the project’s Pritney method. Another valuable outcome of the project’s implementation was the use of art- and narrative-based methods in the daily activities of child groups and social-emotional skills by the children themselves. These are the areas we focused on with the Pritney method. This publication serves as the Pritney method’s final report in the Side by Side project, and we hope it will encourage others to boldly use drama and pedagogical hand puppets with child groups. In addition to this, bibliotherapy can make a significant contribution to ECEC, and education and care providers can improve their knowledge about sensitive literature education.

The four-month study period at the start of the autumn term was short in duration but suited the way that the groups work. We paid one-hour visits once a week to the child groups, which was, regrettably, not a lot. With a pedagogical hand puppet, we managed to make contact with the children and established meaningful connections with them. Keeping the main focus on the children was our motto throughout the study.

The participants’ commitment to the mentoring was occasionally challenging during the sessions. Most of them felt that the method’s drama sessions were fun and inspiring and that they could potentially use them in their work as well. The children and adults enjoyed the sessions with Pritney and Turre and looked forward to them, in addition to which the sessions provided them with plenty of content to absorb. Naturally, some thought that it was challenging for an entire group to take part in the Pritney sessions simultaneously, and according to one of the day care centres’ adults, the quieter children remained in the background as usual while the more active

ones tended to dominate the space. Some of the adults felt upset about this. The lack of time for shared reflection amongst the adults also had its impact on the mentoring. The daily rhythm in some groups was quite hectic, and it was not possible to disturb their fast pace with the Pritney method, let alone make demands that time be allocated to discussions.

A question from one of the day care centres' adults has stayed with me: 'Why does it have to be a horse? Few families can afford riding lessons.' Pritney is a pony and therefore a safe and easy character for implementing the children's wishes and storing emotions. The pony and the method introduce the children to the animal kingdom – after all, a horse is a representative of fauna. An even though Pritney is an inanimate puppet, the pony comes alive in the children's minds and during the moments when the puppet master picks it up and makes it talk and communicate.

During the project, I took part in an international conference of psychology researchers in Paris. I had the opportunity to talk about the Pritney method (Suvilehto 2019) and to hear a presentation by psychologist Frans de Waal about animal cognition. de Waal's writings are a fascinating read, and many of his thoughts can also be applied to the Pritney method. According to de Waal (2018, 18), cognition means the ability to process information and transform sensory information into knowledge about the environment. It also means the ability to utilise information flexibly. In other words, different animal species observe their environment flexibly and come up with solutions to any problems it poses. In my view, this is the reason we can learn from nature and animals and gain a new perspective on our internal problems. Children adjust to their environment on a daily basis, as they do not yet have the same range of experiences as adults.

Animals can interpret the body positions, gestures, expressions, and movements of others of the same species, as well as their intentions based on the sounds they make (de Waal 2018, 134). We human beings do the same: we interpret our pets every time a dog wants to go out, a pony wants some hay, a bunny needs to relieve itself and so on. This means that we try to see things from another's point of view. According to de Waal (2018, 134), empathy is an important skill to have. It unites us and upholds communities. Empathy means that we are aware of other people's needs and

wishes and want to help others, i.e. try to see things from their perspective. Animals can become sensitive towards each others' emotions, being able to tell if their offspring are hungry or if there is danger nearby (de Waal 2018, 135). de Waal talks about expressing empathy by standing in someone else's shoes – in a way changing places with someone who is suffering. Providing the exact type of help that a person needs requires that we understand the person's situation at a detailed level (de Waal 2018, 135). Understanding and self-reflection is also required in the everyday encounters between day care centres' adults and the children entrusted to their care and when the children express their needs. Do we possess these vital empathy skills? Do the ECEC professionals have the necessary means to provide individualised help that can unite us as education and care providers and hold our community together? I believe the answer is yes, provided we have the willingness to interact with children in a sensitive way. And that is the sort of model that Pritney the hand puppet has been teaching children.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Research notification and permits (3)



SIDE BY SIDE – ART AND NARRATIVE-BASED MENTORING FOR PROMOTING CHILDREN’S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Your child’s day care centre group has joined the Side by Side research project. The project started in late 2018, and the work with the child group will begin in September 2019 and end in December 2019. The project will end in June 2020. The aim is to assess, study and evaluate the value of the methods used in the project in promoting social-emotional skills and to test out a continuing education model, relevant to the daily work conducted by early childhood education and care providers.

- The Side by Side project is focused on the artistic experiences defined in the 2018 Early Childhood Education Plan.
- It also focuses on the ability of literary art, bibliotherapy, arts education and music to promote social and interaction skills and a positive self-image.

The project will be mainly conducted amongst day care groups and staff members, and the mentors and researchers will take part in the daily routines of the children and adults through active involvement, observation, talking and listening. All this will be done in accordance with what is best for the children and the day care centres’ routines, and each group will have one Side by Side session once a week before noon.

We request your permission for your child to take part in the Side by Side research project. Two forms have been attached to this letter. The first one contains details that we would like you to discuss with your child in a way that best suits you both. In the second one we request your permission to have your child take part in the project.

Side by Side research project 2018–2020

Providing information to the child

Child's name: _____

Child's month and year of birth: _____

Day care centre and child group: _____

Child's guardian: _____

We have talked about these things today:

New adults will be visiting the day care centre. They will talk to the children, write down things, take pictures and record musical sessions. The children may also take photos and make videos with the adults. This will be done only if the child wants to.

Later, the adults will write about their observations in books and journals without mentioning the children's names. Every child can decide whether they want their pictures taken or things to be written about them. Furthermore, every child can decide whether they want to give their drawings or other creations to the researchers, either to look at or to keep.

The adults will try to take the child's wishes into account even if the child does not mention them verbally.

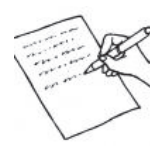
Date and location: _____

Adult's name

Child's name or drawing

The child is very welcome to draw pictures on the other side of the paper. The adult can write down something about the child's thoughts.

Thank you!



Side by Side research project 2018–2020

Permission from the child's guardian

The research team may gather study material pertaining to my child.

Yes **No** (circle the preferred option)

I request that you take into special account:

The research team members may use material pertaining to my child for research purposes.

Yes **No** (circle the preferred option)

(This includes the use of excerpts of the material at scientific conferences and seminars, in publications and as part of teaching.)

When presenting the material or reporting on the study, the identity of the study's participants will be protected. Image material will be edited so that the children cannot be identified. The names of children, families, day care centres or municipalities will not be mentioned in any presentations or publications.

Date, location, and the guardian's signature

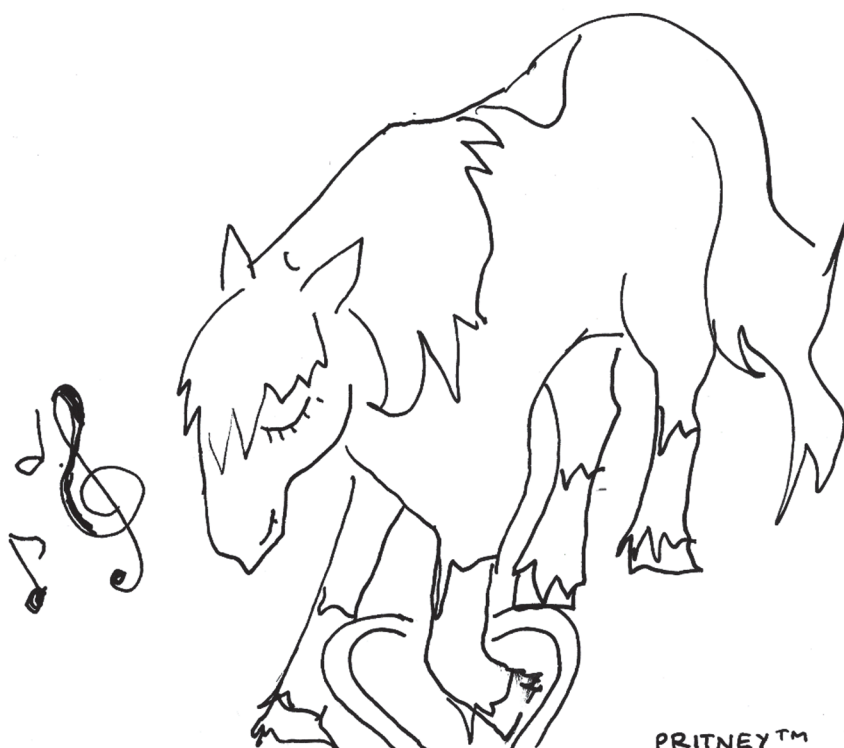
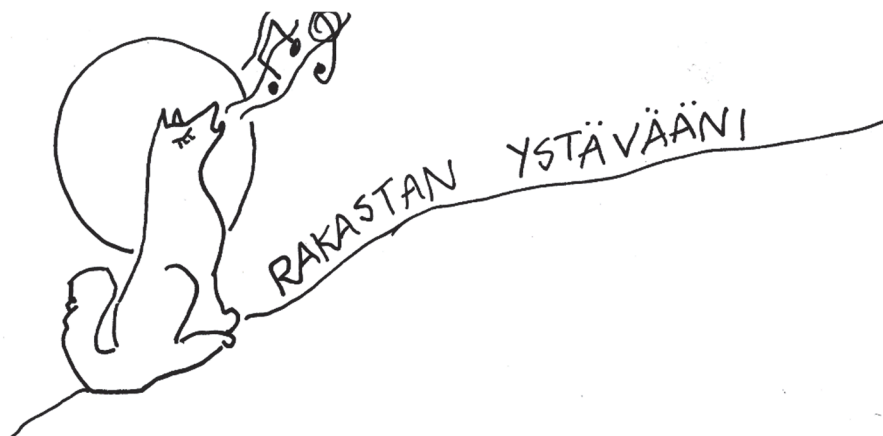
Appendix 2. Colouring images



Image 1. Pritney is doing ballet and Turre is ice skating (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).



Image 2. Turre and Pritney's Christmas tree (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).



PRITNEY™

Image 3. I love my friend (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).



Image 4. Pritney and Turre jumping over obstacles (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).



PRITNEY™

Image 5. Pritney's animal friends (picture by Pirjo Suvilehto).

ISBN 978-952-62-2776-4
ISBN 978-952-62-2777-1 (PDF)
ISSN 1457-3555

OULUN
YLIOPISTO

PL 7500 • 90014 OULUN YLIOPISTO

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