Once aware of the special qualities in puppets, teachers and children together can begin to discover dozens of specific ways they can use them. They discover, too, that skills are more fun for children to tackle when the teacher uses a puppet helper. For this reason, and because puppets encourage self-expression and participation, puppets are especially effective tools for teachers and children in Special Education.

Former student and workshop participant, Richard Labadia of New Haven, Connecticut, assesses the value of puppets in his class of special children: "Children with special educational needs should be taught in such a manner as to make what they learn useful and part of the world in which they directly function. This style of functional teaching enables the child to grow and become part of today's society. Very often Special Educators must use various avenues to repeatedly teach the same concept. This can become a boring task to both teacher and student. This is where puppets come into the educational circle.

Puppets can teach a concept over and over and still get an interested and varied response. Puppets hold to no age limit or time gap. The more a child interacts with puppets and the skills required for that interaction, the more that child will learn about himself."

This is the way Richard teaches with puppets:

To help teach the seasons and time-related concepts, Richard lets a talking calendar do the teaching. This unusual puppet presents the names of the days, months, etc. and helps children remember them.
Puppets help children experience manners and act out safety procedures. Richard made an oatmeal box police officer that he uses to teach the dangers of poison.

For science and nutrition, when children are learning about specific food and food groups, Richard invites them to make fruit and vegetable tab puppets. Combining puppets with positive reinforcement techniques is extremely effective.

Former student and Special Education teacher, Martha Haran, talks about a puppet's power to hold special children's attention. "When the class gets fidgety, I bring out a puppet to 'take over the lesson.' Often I have a puppet waiting for the class when they return from recess. The puppet quickly captures the children's attention and leads them to the next activity. Children eager to play with puppets themselves are allowed to take turns using them to get the class ready for special learning such as Art or Physical Education. This helps to keep the room orderly in a pleasant way and gives the children the thrill of being (with the puppet) the center of attention."

Because children love puppets and will go to great lengths to help or please them, puppets can help mainstream Special Education students. Introducing a puppet with special problems, or simple cardboard-reinforced props of wheel chairs, braces, hearing devices, etc. allows the teacher and children to practice patience, develop awareness, discuss feelings, and learn how to assist those with special needs.

The process for exploring these issues and presenting experiential opportunities through puppets can evolve naturally. It does not require elaborate staging and scripting. In fact, to use a scripted format may encourage formula phrases, responses and stock answers to complex problems. The process should focus instead on the feelings people have in relating to and understanding people with special needs. Feeling comfortable enough to be spontaneously responsive to the children they are teaching is more important than worrying about following a script perfectly. Puppet shows may need scripts, but puppets surely do not.

**Improvisation with Puppets**

Using puppets in Special Education and therapy is a creative approach to working with children. It is essentially a spontaneous and improvised form of play. When dialogue and action are spontaneous, the play experience stimulates free expression and independent thinking.

This process is described in a paper by Roberta Jane Confino of New York City. Teachers who are familiar with puppets find that guided creative play has psychological values leading to freedom of thought and feeling; development of imagination and self-confidence. Using the puppet in an improvised activity gives the teacher an opportunity to observe characteristics in children. She can gain insight into the needs of those with particular problems. She can observe the creative student, or see to those who need help in forming their ideas.

The teacher may observe group interaction and expression, and discover new directions for future learning in guidance-related areas. In informal play, the teacher can give a puppet a tongue-
tickling name, and he becomes instructive as well as amusing. Children in need of guidance can begin to identify with puppets. This socio-dramatic use of puppets enables children to feel what it is like to be "others." They can begin to feel, understand, and empathize. Though it is "just pretend" to some children, they are nevertheless learning to socialize. Children more easily understand the need for rules when rules are taught through puppets.

**Using Puppets with Hearing Impaired Children**

Puppetry can be used successfully as an aid in helping children with speech and hearing problems. In the Maywood, New Jersey Public Schools, for example, Speech Therapist Dorothy DeLano tested children for speech difficulties by having them say "hello" to a puppet. A simple "Hello, Red Sampson" can be used to spot poor pronunciation of sounds E, S, R.

In the New Mexico School for the Deaf, paper masks and rod puppets have been used with a group of second graders. The primary goal is to develop speech facility in children and self-confidence in speaking before a group. When asked to prepare a presentation for children who could rarely read lips, Mrs. Nelson Kharasch at WTTW, Chicago's educational television station, decided to use puppets.

Simplicity, a great deal of repetition, a slow pace, audience participation, exciting visuals, and a puppet with a mobile mouth who always faces the audience and takes pleasure in the presentation," she says, "are my stock in trade."

Karen Howard also teaches hearing impaired children. "Puppets are useful because of their obvious visual attributes, their effectiveness in exaggerating feelings with big smiles or frowns, and their motivational value," she says.

"Hearing impaired children are often confused by abstract concepts such as emotions, which normal hearing children appear to pick up simultaneously. Because the hearing impaired child lacks important sensory means, it is important to drill continuously through other sensory channels such as touch and sight. A hearing impaired child is often insecure and unable to appropriately express his feelings. Puppets help engage a child's emotions and meet emotional needs.

"Using puppets as symbols of feelings," says Ms. Howard, "is effective in allowing children to identify with emotions expressed by the puppets, and to act out their own feelings using the puppets. The physical activity provided by the use of puppets is considered beneficial for the hearing impaired child who may normally appear hyperactive in his energetic need to constantly explore his environment."

**Using Puppets with Visually Impaired Children**

Norton Richman is a teacher with the Commonwealth of Virginia Department of the Visually Handicapped. His relationship with an eleven year old girl who is blind, through Willie, a furry Beaver friend, suggests that those who are handicapped may learn life-skills more easily if their emotional needs are met first. Norton has found that puppets
can do this uniquely where other forms or approaches to teaching cannot.

Scared, frustrated and uncooperative, Laura (not her real name) did not want to learn life-skills. It would mean having to become more independent. Learning to button buttons was a monumentally distressing task for her, and Norton himself was growing increasingly frustrated.

His initiation with Laura was very stiff. He had never taught children before working with Laura. He was feeling hesitant. Not only that, he would have to work with her after school when she would be tired and resistant to more schooling.

To lighten the sessions, every once in a while Norton would change his voice, making one of the kitchen utensils talk. Laura enjoyed this. It occurred to Norton that a puppet might work.

He introduced Willie. Although Laura couldn't see Willie, she could feel him and hear his slow and easy-going tone of voice. The puppet was warm and touchable. With Willie, Norton no longer had an absolute role as "the teacher." Willie helped to remove the tension of having to produce results. Yet Willie served to become the process through which educational progress was made.

To determine just how much impact the puppet was making, Norton purposefully left Willie home one day. "Where's Willie?" Laura asked almost immediately when she realized she missed his familiar voice.

An eleven-year-old like Laura knows that Willie is not real, but somehow the process of play and imagination merges with emotional needs that have not been met. In using Willie, Norton recognizes that as a person and a counselor, he alone cannot always fill emotional needs that, unless met, will impede progress.

Through Willie, Norton can soften the need to correct and reinforce rehabilitation skills. Laura is willing to please Willie. She'll work for him because he doesn't threaten her.

According to Norton, Laura's incidents of crying decreased by more than 90% with Willie's participation in the learning process. It is easier to dialogue around difficult issues with a puppet. With Willie there, Laura can more readily express her frustrations. She doesn't block her feelings as much.

Willie has not only helped him to give Laura what she needs, but has given Norton the chance to take a backseat in the counseling process. A change of pace, Willie's creativity stimulates questions, jokes and input. Norton is not a "real joker," but with Willie he finds it easier to play. "It's just easier to kid around. Children need this. It takes so little to put them - and you - at ease."

By the time for his late afternoon session with Laura, Norton is usually tired. "It's harder to grab Willie. But then another voice says, 'Now is really when you need Willie.' The puppet seems to neutralize my resistance, helps my energy flow and stops me from pushing too hard." The build-up of stress makes Norton's work frustrating. The puppet enables him to feel that he has a means - a tool - to help regulate the pressure he feels.
Thus applied, puppetry is not a visual plaything whose antics we can only watch on TV or in movies. Nor is it only for theater professionals. Puppetry is truly an extension of the self. It is rooted deeply and personally within the user and reaches far within those with whom we are communicating.

Like many people new to the process, Norton was skeptical at first. He had doubts about the talent he thought would be required to use a puppet with Laura. Results-oriented and always pressured for time in his 40-client caseload, he saw "experimental" time as a luxury. But his experience with Laura convinced him, his colleagues and supervisors, that puppets get results. Puppets may be as magical in terms of the results they produce as they are in the realm of fantasy.

Norton recently began using Willie with a new client. Under normal circumstances, it might take weeks to adjust to a new situation. But his new client, also a young girl, hooked right into Willie, and the learning process was underway. The teacher's authority is less imposing when a puppet is there. It's a signal that says, "I'll meet you halfway."

"As much as it is a comfort for a child to know that a puppet is there," says Norton, "I don't leave the car without Willie. I have my own reasons for wanting him along."

Using Puppets to Address Problems of Child Abuse and Emotional Disturbance

A.R. Philpott, editor of Puppet Post, a publication of the London-based Educational Puppetry Association, reviews the use of puppets as therapeutic aids by speech therapists, child psychiatrists and occupational therapists. Philpott believes that puppets can be used therapeutically in many different ways. He reports, for example, on the puppet theater set up in New York's Bellevue Hospital for maladjusted and neurotic children. Here the element of participation for the children in the audience resulted in a comfortable rapport between them and the puppet therapist. Short group puppet skits were followed by individual and group treatment. Philpott also found that puppet making by the children had further therapeutic value.

According to Philpott, the therapist must understand the psychology involved in puppetry and how puppet play differs from "live acting." One of the reasons puppets are effective therapeutic tools is that during interplay the focus is completely on the puppet, not the user, whether he is patient or therapist. It is also helpful for the therapist to be aware of basic puppet making and handling techniques.

In creative puppet play, the user is free to assume any role he chooses. Through the puppet, one can change sex, act like other members of his family, become an animal or a creature from outer space. The user can play out any situation, and give it the outcome she wishes. If criticized, the user can say anything; the puppet - not the user - takes the blame. In creative interchange with puppets, a child can stand back and observe himself. This detachment can help express his needs and understand his feelings and actions. A vehicle for expression and release, puppetry can play a major role in work with children.
who need emotional support and freedom.

Children's therapist Kee MacFarlane had only been working with puppets for one year when, through them, she uncovered one of the country's worst cases of sexual abuse in a California day school. The primary focus of Mrs. MacFarlane's story centered on her work with abused children. But it is significant that the discovery of facts leading to disclosure happened to evolve through her work with puppets.

In addition to dramatically raising public consciousness about child abuse, Mrs. MacFarlane also demonstrated dramatically how simply and effectively puppets can work; not only in terms of the children's response to them, but also in terms of the way in which her use of puppets helped charge public interest in the case.

Because puppets allow us to express ourselves in a non-threatening way, they serve as an excellent therapeutic tool in work with abused or emotionally disturbed children. Here is one teacher's reflections on the subject she recorded in her puppetry notebook: "I have found that a child who is totally resistant to expressing his feelings in a verbal way, is able to express them with amazing clarity through a puppet. Once expressed and out in the open, the feelings can be dealt with therapeutically."

Special Education and Therapy are major areas of interest for Puppetools. If you or your co-workers have developed new techniques or approaches using puppets, we'd like to hear from you.

The Role of Puppets in Mental Health Reform, Prevention, Program Development, Treatment and Transition

Puppetry can play a dramatic role in these and other areas of the Mental Health field. Our exploration of Special Education has provided working models of the therapeutic value of puppets. In treating patients, the mental health of your staff is equally important. Puppets can provide the stimulation and process essential for workers who must constantly use personal resources.

Implemented in the myriad of education and social service arenas, the use of puppets can affect the overall morale and productivity of people and the quality of their communications.