

PUPPETS AT LARGE



Puppets as partners in learning
and teaching in the Early Years

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Foreword by Jenny Mosley



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Discovering the magic

"You know it's the first time I've heard these little ones laugh," she said, "I mean really laugh. There is nothing quite like that sound - when children really let go and chuckle like that. It's moments like these that make working with young children so worthwhile."

These were the words spoken to me by a play assistant following a storytelling session I had carried out in a pre-school recently. I knew what she meant and shared in her excitement. I, too, had experienced at first-hand the satisfaction gleaned from having a group of delighted three- and four-year-olds actively responding to something I had delivered to them. Quite simply, I had given them pleasure and in return they had given me their rapt attention and the sound of their laughter. This was my reward.

You might already be thinking that I am about to instruct you in some advanced technique or revolutionary educational approach. After all, engaging successfully with such young children can never be that easy! It might surprise you to discover that the storytelling session was neither innovative nor sophisticated but it did have one very special ingredient - a puppet.

You could say that the use of puppets was one of the earliest survival skills I developed as a teacher, having discovered from my first few days in front of my nursery class just how uncompromising a group of disaffected three-year-olds can be. Only comedians on the northern working men's club circuit have to face audiences that tough! If the problem was so overwhelmingly great then the answer when it came was proportionately

simple; I needed to rethink my act completely if I was to seize and sustain the children's interest and ultimately get my messages across to them. They needed exciting sights and sounds and - not forgetting - surprises. And puppets are wonderful at delivering surprises!

I now know that I was not alone in feeling anxious during my first experiences in Early Years education. From time to time as I travel around pre-schools and nurseries in my advisory capacity today, I sometimes come across a despondent practitioner who confesses to dread or even actively avoids the session's group story time, complaining that their young children 'just won't sit and listen'. The common conclusion among such practitioners is that the children are too young.

My response is to ask them to reflect upon any occasion where they have observed children of this age as they gaze, fully absorbed, at the television screen while one of their favourite animated characters recounts a story. There isn't a problem with either the sitting still or the listening then, is there? The route to success, as with so many other aspects of your work, lies not so much in what you do, but the way in which you do it. Let's go back to the beginning of the chapter, to my reflection on the puppet and storytelling session at the pre-school. I believe that the children's laughter was an expression of their surprise - their delight at witnessing the unexpected. Professor Timothy Brighthouse talks about 'surprising kids into learning' and believes good teachers 'weave magic' into their teaching. By being entertaining, it is possible to consolidate the learning you work so hard to achieve.

Fabric friends for the Foundation Stage - linking the learning

Puppets as a link to learning

As soon as you begin to use puppets you will be amazed at how easily they support the development of children's understanding across all areas of the curriculum. You will have great fun thinking up ways to involve them in your work, making learning more vibrant and fun for you and the children. Listed below are some ways in which the successful use of puppets can enable you to make effective links with learning. There are also some useful ideas to help you get started.

Personal, social and emotional development

Puppets are a particularly powerful medium within the crucial area of a child's personal, social and emotional development. 'Behaviour and the development of moral values, like dispositions, are heavily influenced by what children observe from adults who are close to them. Small children learn a great deal through imitation.' (Marion Dowling; *Young Children's Personal, Social and Emotional Development*, Paul Chapman Publishing.)

Puppets support learning by enabling children to:

- feel increasingly secure and develop a sense of trust in the adults in their setting.
- raise their levels of self-confidence and self-esteem.
- develop a strong sense of self and an increasing awareness of the needs and opinions of others. Adults using puppets need to ensure that they act as role models to help children develop inclusive

attitudes towards other individuals or groups. Carefully planned scenarios give children the opportunity to stand in other people's shoes and explore how they might feel.

- learn how to foster and sustain friendships through respectful listening to others, sharing ideas and emotions and taking turns in conversation.
- learn about relationships and what is required of an individual in order to become a successful member of a social group. Working alongside the puppet allows children to enter into a variety of different situations and encourages them to make decisions about how they might behave themselves or act towards their peers.
- learn to embrace and enjoy new experiences which encourages the development of positive attitudes towards learning.
- confront and make sense of their feelings and fears. It is very important for young children to have the chance to act out or discuss such issues within a situation in which they feel safe.

Some ideas to try out for yourselves:

- Read or tell stories in which your character finds itself in a particular dilemma but manages to achieve a positive outcome with a little help from his friends. Sometimes the story might be open-ended. Invite the children to provide a solution. *The Power of Puppets* by Georgia Thorp contains scripts for puppet stories and you can use these as a starting point. Alternatively, have fun inventing your own stories.

- Involve your puppets in role-play scenarios that lend themselves to discussion about particular feelings. This encourages the children to empathise with the character.
- To stimulate discussion, use props such as a broken toy, a lost teddy, a birthday party invitation, a photograph or even a dream catcher.
- Create a time-line of photographs taken indoors and out showing your puppet acting out different aspects of your daily routine. Display the timeline to help the children feel secure and develop a sense of ownership of their setting.

Communication, language and literacy

'Communication, language and literacy depend on learning and being competent in a number of key skills, together with having the confidence, opportunity and encouragement, support and disposition to use them. This area of learning includes communication, speaking and listening in different situations and for different purposes...' (QCA Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage). Puppets are at the peak of their effectiveness when it comes to getting young children's language development off to a positive start. They can help you to provide a stimulating starting point from which rich dialogue can flow. We know that children are more effective communicators when they are really interested and excited in an activity. The fact that the puppets are willing to take on any role you ask of them makes it possible for you to set the learning within a variety of appropriate contexts.

Puppets support this area of learning by:

- providing opportunities for children to talk and interact with others -
- recounting or recreating experiences, making observations and sharing ideas. This helps to increase their confidence in speaking out in a group.
- providing opportunities for children to develop an early love of books and stories and enjoy rhymes and songs.
- exploring the meaning and various uses of print in the children's environment.
- offering incentives for children to make marks and write for real purposes in the ways they see adults do.
- modelling appropriate use of language in a variety of contexts.
- helping to develop children's phonetic awareness through active play.
- providing opportunities for children to explore and practise aspects of non-verbal communication. This is especially vital for children with communication difficulties.

Some ideas to try out for yourself:

- Make the most of key events in the puppet's life, such as a birthday or a family event. Incorporate these into your setting. Encourage discussion around these events and involve the children in the preparations and festivities: making cards, compiling lists and writing letters.
- Provide the puppet with interesting items or objects for the children to describe and discuss. The children love it when their friend has something hidden in a box or bag for them to unwrap. Try going on a treasure hunt with your puppet; you or the puppet could provide the clues. The activity will help you to check for understanding among the children.
- Create a diary for your puppet. Ask the children to provide drawings and captions or use photographs for the

Story time

Puppets are excellent for helping you to deliver a successful story-time session. Using the puppet to help you introduce a book to the children and demonstrate good listening skills really affords you many opportunities to make the most of this special time together. Try having a special puppet who lives in a magic story box. The children will be eager to come together as a group and await the arrival of their friend!

Suggested themes for extension work:

- Making friends
- Happy times/sad times
- Exploring feelings
- Likes and dislikes

Helpful questions to ask the children:

- What can you see happening in the picture?
- Why do you think the friends are smiling?
- What is your favourite book?
- What do you think is happening in the story they are reading?

Follow-up ideas:

- Group story writing: make a book for the puppets to share. You could provide a starting point for a story and the children could suggest what happened next. You can record the story on a white board or on a flip chart so that the children can see their story take shape. It is really important that children have the opportunity to see adults demonstrate writing for different purposes. When the book is complete, the children can illustrate parts of it with their drawings. How about putting the children's finished book in the magic story box as a present to the puppet while he is asleep? The next time the puppet visits, he will be eager to thank them and enjoy reading their story back to them.
- Encourage children to paint pictures of their favourite stories or parts of a story. You can tell the story behind each child's painting by scribing underneath what the child says about the picture.

Don't sit under the apple tree...

This photograph offers many opportunities for you to explore a challenging aspect of a child's personal, social and emotional development. Within any social grouping, there are times when everyone experiences moments of exclusion or isolation. Young children need you to help them make sense of these feelings and this photograph offers a useful starting point for discussion. Focus with the children on what the puppets might do to make their friend feel included and be able to share in their happy moment.

Suggested themes:

- Making friends
- Happy times/sad times
- Exploring feelings

Helpful questions to ask the children:

- How do you think Jamilla is feeling?
- Why do you think Ben has given Mary a present?
- What kind of presents do you like to get?
- What do you think Ben and Mary could do to help Jamilla feel happy?
- Who is your special friend?

Follow-up ideas:

- Offer children a range of scrap materials which they can select from independently so that they can make a present for Jamilla to help her to feel happy again. They might choose to make a model or draw or paint a picture instead.
- Have a birthday party for your puppet or for Mary, one of the puppets in the picture. Involve children in the preparations - making decorations, special food, party hats and writing invitations or making birthday cards.
- At circle time, with your puppet on your lap, offer the children the prompt: "I feel happy when..."
- Have a variety of wrapped up boxes for the children to pass around. The puppet can help them guess what might be inside.



Practice makes perfect

Ben rather fancies himself as a budding pianist and is quite oblivious to his less than appreciative audience! Children enjoy music and you might use this photograph as a starting point for some sound-making activities of your own. Songs and other musical activities - apart from being a popular inclusion in any daily programme - are a wonderful way of helping children to develop an awareness of rhyme and rhythm. They also provide natural opportunities for children to discriminate between different sounds and thereby develop a child's phonetic awareness.

Suggested themes:

- Exploring feelings
- Making friends
- Likes and dislikes

Helpful questions to ask the children:

- What do you think is happening in the picture?
- Do you think Mary is enjoying Ben's music?
- What do you think she should do?

Follow-up ideas:

- Set time aside each session for you and the children to enjoy a musical activity together. This might be action songs or rhymes, clapping games or enjoying listening to different kinds of music. Encourage children to think about how the various pieces make them feel.
- Have your puppet compere a talent show and invite individuals to take to the stage. Offer plenty of support and give generous helpings of praise. This will help your young children learn the importance of valuing the efforts of others in a group. A toy microphone, especially one which attempts to amplify sound, is a great prop here. Ben could use it to introduce each turn and the child could then hold it. Watch out - soon everyone will want to audition!
- Use a rain stick to help children tune in and listen during sound work. It has a remarkably calming effect. Why not make your own instruments too?