

# Talk to My Hand: Using Puppets to Navigate Emotions

by Ruth A. Wilson

Caitlyn tipped the wheelbarrow and poured the water on the ground. Roger erupted in anger. He was planning to wash a stone he had just found in that water. He yelled at Caitlyn and kicked the wheelbarrow. A teacher quickly intervened, asking the two children to talk about what had just happened. Both Caitlyn and Roger tried to explain their actions by blaming the other for 'being mean.' The discussion wasn't going anywhere until the teacher held up one hand, moved her fingers, and said, "This is a puppet. His name is Charlie, and he wants you to talk to him about what just happened with the wheelbarrow."

Charlie (the puppet) now had the children's attention. Caitlyn talked first. "I just wanted to pour the water out, and Roger got mad about it." To this Roger replied, "I had a stone in my hand and I wanted to wash it. Caitlyn shouldn't have poured the water out." Now it was the puppet's turn to talk: "Well, it looks like you have a problem. Any ideas about how we could solve this problem?" The teacher looked on in amazement as the two children took turns talking to the puppet (which was really just her hand). Soon, the anger and blaming were diffused, and Roger asked the puppet, "Are you Charlie from the Chocolate Factory?"

This true story of Caitlyn and Roger illustrates the power of puppets (even imaginary ones!) for helping young children develop social and emotional skills. "Children listen to puppets and aren't afraid to talk to puppets," says Joyce Davis, a strong advocate of using puppets with young children. Davis — sometimes referred to as the 'puppet lady' — explains how children feel safe with puppets and can learn from them how to deal with strong emotions. Davis has been using puppets with children for over 30 years and now works with teachers on how to use puppets as a



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medium for learning. "Puppets don't have to be an 'add-on' in the classroom," She explains. "They can be used to teach the children about themselves and the world around them." Joyce often uses puppets to teach children about nature — or as she says, "To open their eyes to nature." Joyce knows that by learning to care for plants and animals, children also learn about caring for more than just themselves.

Everything that Davis says about the power of puppets is supported by research. Studies going back to the 1980s (Shepherd & Koberstein, 1989) and confirmed by more recent research (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004) indicate that there are many benefits to using puppets with young children. These benefits include:

- enhancing children's interest and engagement in learning.
- fostering social-emotional development.

- helping children talk about sensitive issues, including bullying and other forms of violence.

Puppets can also be used to foster early literacy and communication skills, as children often use puppets to recreate characters and stories.

Perhaps one of the most compelling reasons to use puppets with young children is their effectiveness in developing perspective-taking skills and fostering empathy. I was first introduced to this idea when working as a special education teacher in a school where children with special needs were being mainstreamed into the regular classroom. Prior to that time, children with special needs spent most of their school day in special education classrooms, segregated from the rest of the students by both physical and psychological barriers. Special education students were sometimes referred to by the other students as 'retards' and their classroom

was seen as 'the place for dumb kids.' One avenue we used to combat negative and incorrect ideas about children with special needs was in the form of persona dolls. Puppets were also used for this purpose, and both proved to be effective in changing attitudes toward and knowledge of individuals with disabilities (Dunst, 2014). Puppets and persona dolls aren't exactly the same thing, but both can serve a similar purpose in helping children better understand the thoughts and feelings of someone else.

Persona dolls are not ordinary dolls like the ones used in the dramatic play area. They are, instead, dolls with their own individual personas. They have individual personalities, special likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, as well as family and cultural backgrounds. Each doll has its own name, gender, and age. They are also like all the other children in the class in a number of ways. There are things they worry about and things that make them happy. They want to have friends, and also struggle with how to handle anger, frustration, and disappointment.

The persona dolls we used each had some form of disability. Some wore glasses; some were in wheelchairs; and some had limited language skills. The dolls were used to help the other children learn something about what it means to have a disability. More importantly, however, they were used to help the children understand that there was so much more to someone with special needs than her disability.

Persona dolls continue to be used in some classrooms, not only to change perceptions about people with disabilities, but also to combat discrimination, foster understanding and appreciation of different cultures, and to promote emotional literacy. Each doll comes with a story, which the children readily accept. Through the doll's story, they learn to appreciate how certain behaviors like teasing, exclusion from play, and name-calling can cause great emotional pain.

Puppets can be used in a similar way. While children may have trouble explaining a problem to each other and may feel the teacher is taking sides or

doesn't understand the situation, they're usually willing to engage in conversation with a puppet. In the case of Caitlyn and Roger, the puppet helped the children understand each other's perspective about what happened with the wheelbarrow. Caitlyn didn't know that Roger wanted to wash his stone in the water, and Roger could appreciate the fact that Caitlyn didn't deliberately foil his plans. Both children were willing to talk to Charlie (the puppet) about what to do when they felt angry or frustrated.

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Using puppets to foster empathy and perspective taking with young children is consistent with what we know about young children's development. We know, for example, that it's difficult for young children to understand the perspectives



## Emotional and Social Benefits of Puppets

### Emotional literacy:

- Understanding one's own and others' emotions
- Using language to express emotions
- Regulating one's emotions

### Social skills:

- Understanding how one's own actions can impact others
- Understanding how to work with others
- Understanding anti-bias concepts

of others; they believe that life as they perceive it is the way life necessarily is. To help children grow cognitively and emotionally, they need experiences that give them insights into how other people think and feel. Listening to and having conversations with puppets can help children understand that not everyone sees a situation in the same way.

Another thing we know about young children is that they prefer to learn about what affects them personally or what they can personally relate to. Strong feelings — such as anger, fear, frustration, and excitement — are part of children's reality. Learning how to express these feelings in socially and emotionally healthy ways, however, is something they need help with. Puppets can be quite effective in the process, as children are readily influenced by puppets in their thinking and behaviors.

A third thing we know about young children is that their learning proceeds from concrete to abstract. This means that they need concrete representations

to develop abstract concepts, including empathy and perspective taking. A puppet modeling these skills can serve as a concrete representation of the meaning behind these concepts.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of using puppets with children is the modeling of desired behaviors. Puppets can show children the correct way of relating to each other, especially when dealing with strong feelings. For example, a teacher can have a puppet say, "I'm angry, really angry. I want to hit someone, but that's not the right thing to do." The teacher can then have the puppet turn to the children and ask for help. "Can you help me? What do you think I should do when I get angry?" Most children will care about the puppet and want to help it find a solution to its problem.

Sometimes bullying might be the problem. A puppet might be sad, for example — perhaps even crying. The teacher could ask the puppet, "Why are you so sad?" or "Why are you crying?" After the puppet explains the bullying situation, the teacher could then ask the children for advice about what the puppet might do to stand up against bullying. Some children may be too shy or feel too intimidated to confront bullying on their own, but if they can give a puppet some ideas on how to do this, chances are their confidence and self-esteem may grow enough for them to stand up to someone who is bullying them or one of their friends.

It's important for children to know that feelings aren't bad. It's okay to get mad or be sad. What children need help with is learning how to express those feelings without hurting others. Children are less likely to listen to what adults say about how to handle feelings than they are to figure it out by interacting with a puppet.

## How to Use Puppets to Foster Empathy

- Give the puppet a name and personality.
- Use a puppet (or puppets) to act out a child's problem. Then use the puppet to problem solve with the group.
- Have the puppet ask for help in solving a problem or completing a task.
- Have the puppet talk about how it feels to be teased or excluded.
- Have the puppet ask a child about why he or she is sad or mad.
- Have the puppet comfort a child (or another puppet) who is upset.
- Teach children to treat the puppet with respect.
- Use your voice to create the puppet character.
- Engage everyone.
- Avoid using puppets to model aggressive behavior and prevent the children from doing so.

Puppets can be used in a classroom in a variety of ways — all of which can foster empathy. Puppets in puppet theatre, for example, can call attention to how teasing and exclusion can cause sadness. Puppet theatre can also be used to demonstrate pro-social and problem-solving skills. Puppet theatre is usually organized around an idea or theme the teacher wants to emphasize. It can involve some child-to-puppet interaction, but tends to be more performance based with the children watching and listening versus interacting. The puppets are the actors in puppet theatre, with children being the audience.

Another — perhaps more effective way — to use puppets to foster empathy involves more active engagement on the part of the children. The problem-solving scenario with Caitlyn and Roger is an example of puppets being used in this way. Because children feel safe with puppets, they may be more likely to offer suggestions and express feelings to a puppet than to a teacher. You might capitalize on this when interactions between children get intense by having them take turns telling a puppet how they're feeling. It's also instructive to have the puppet share its feelings. This not only gives children insights into the fact that everyone has feelings; it also gives them an opportunity to practice listening to others as they express their feelings.

We know that fostering empathy in the classroom is important for children's social and emotional development. Recent research indicates that empathy also promotes academic achievement. Bridget Cooper, one researcher who has studied connections between empathy and achievement, says that there is "no doubt that [empathy] is a crucial quality in the process of engagement, learning, and achievement" (Cooper, 2011).

In her book, *Empathy in Education*, Cooper also addresses the role of empathy instruction for creating a more caring and just society. We need to find ways, she says, "to avoid depersonalization, alienation, and the modeling of stereotyping." Puppets have proven effective in this regard. People from different countries and cultures have been using puppets for decades to change stereotypes and provide positive social models (Sesame Street Workshop website, 2015). While nothing can replace teachers' modeling of empathy for fostering it in students, puppets can play a significant role in the process. As Joyce Davis says, "puppets are powerful."

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