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PUPPETS: PALS FOR CHILDREN, LEARNING PARTNERS FOR TEACHERS

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*"In the moments when you are touched by the soul of a child,
you suddenly realize the significance of these precious years."*

--Shirley Dobson



****Jacky is available to present virtual workshops at this time, on a wide variety of topics including reflective discipline, curriculum and planning, empathy, kindness and equity, teamwork and communication, creating active circle times, and many more! Feel free to contact her by email at azspire@gmail.com**

PUPPETS: PALS FOR CHILDREN AND LEARNING PARTNERS FOR ADULTS

Puppets fascinate and involve children in a way that few other art forms can. It may be because they allow children to enter the world of fantasy so easily. In this magic world, children are free to create whatever is needed right then in their lives. Because puppets often reveal the inner world of the child, a great deal can be accomplished through puppetry. Puppets have the unique advantage of allowing children to lose their self-consciousness because they are separate from the child, yet at the same time allow and encourage children to express strong feelings. Puppets can allow children the opportunity to try on roles, experiment with ideas and concepts, and even to make mistakes. It is okay because it is the puppet, rather than the child, who is saying and doing those things.

"Puppetry begins with the first breath of life into an inanimate object. Any object can be given life and turned into a puppet." Because of the uniqueness of this material, I have developed puppets as regular, contributing members in my classroom community. I have found this to be one of the most effective and exciting way to use puppets in the classroom and at home. Puppets are also wonderful to use in storytelling, singing and puppet plays, yet the special spots they take as classroom friends are the best! Remember, to use puppets with young children, you do not need to be a professional puppeteer; just work on a few things that bring the puppets to life.

WHERE TO START?

1. Find, make, buy a puppet that you are really drawn to—one that is comfortable on your as well as something you could relate to like a dog or a rabbit puppet.
2. Look at the puppet you have chosen. What type of personality does it possess? Is it a sad dog, a curious monkey, or a rushed rabbit? Give the puppet a name and a style uniquely it's own. Once the puppet has a developed character, keep it consistent. The children in my class always recognized Hi-Low the Dragon and her thumb sucking, quiet personality. Maybe the puppet is bossy, or affectionate, or very active. They can become authentic members of your class whose presence affects the entire group.
3. If you feel comfortable, give your puppet a unique voice. It does not have to be one that is dramatically different from your own. For a beginner using puppets, a voice can be difficult to create when you are focusing on bringing the puppet to life. Consider changing the pace, the pitch, or the rhythm of your own voice. If that is difficult in the beginning, buy a squeaker at a crafts store to insert in the puppet to use as a voice. Remember, think of your puppet's personality and try and match the voice to the character.

4. Learn to move your puppet in order to bring it to life. Think of the following when you work on animating your puppet:
 - a. Examine the puppet and notice how it is constructed. Try to find the most comfortable position to hold it.
 - b. Keep the puppet's body upright and not half hanging from your hand or it loses the ability to keep children's attention.
 - c. Establish a position the puppet returns to after each gesture—when the puppet is 'relaxed'.
 - d. Move the puppet's body to indicate a variety of emotions or actions.
 - e. Keep the eyes focused. Have the puppet look at whomever is speaking, or even just glance about. Also, it helps if you give the puppet eye contact while it speaks.
 - f. When using a hand-in-mouth puppet, be careful of 'eating your words'. The puppet does not need to speak on every syllable.
5. Remember, puppets can do anything people can do, and some things they cannot, like fly or disappear. Take advantage of this magical characteristic built into puppets.
6. Even though the puppet may have just one facial expression, it can give the impression of a new expression by changing its position. For example, if it is sad, it can hang its head or slouch.
7. Once you have chosen your puppet and given it a personality, try to establish a consistent role for the puppet. Is your puppet like Igor, the clean-up puppet or Charcoal, the dog who won't stay still?
8. Practice, practice, practice! Look at yourself in the mirror. Be willing to take risks with a puppet and be a little silly or outrageous. When you see and feel your children's responses, you know it's well worth the effort.

HOW CAN PUPPETS BE USED WITH CHILDREN?

1. Children can use puppets informally and spontaneously in play. One way to draw children into productive puppet play is to create a puppet corner and homes for the puppets. A dog can have a cardboard box dog house and an Oscar the Grouch puppet can live in a trashcan. Woodland animals can live in trees made from branches or a carpet roll with dowels inserted in to give the effect of branches. This adds an element of fun to the play.

2. An adult can create storytelling experiences in which children can use puppets. Children can tell familiar stories with puppets, like "Three Billy Goats Gruff." It is also fun to make up their own story, developing a beginning, middle AND an ending, In addition, teachers can develop their own puppets that creatively enhance any type of storytelling experience. These may be individual characters like Frog and Toad and Arnold Lobel's stories or fantasy characters for unusual stories.
3. Puppets can be used for singing with children. My cowboy puppet Bart sings a great version of "You are My Sunshine". Children can have their own puppets to use in singing which often helps those children who are hesitant about singing.
4. Puppets can be a fantastic resource in conceptual thinking. Children are strong tactile-kinesthetic learners and puppets are a tool that are a natural for children. A Chef puppet can help with your cooking experiences, a brightly colored Toucan puppet for colors, story gloves for fingerplays or counting activities, or an animal puppet that mispronounces words for language development. Be creative with your puppets and then watch out, they may take over your classroom!
5. Puppets can be especially useful for helping children deal with emotions in a non-threatening way. Remember, puppets often appear as a special person that actually is a bridge between you and a child. Start by developing a sympathetic, trustworthy puppet in your classroom—I have Claire the Chimpanzee with long arms for hugging. Use the puppet to dry tears, give an extra hug, or sit on the lap of a particularly hard to settle child. Develop others with specific emotions in mind; a bat that is afraid of the dark, a snail that is shy, or an assertive bird puppet.
6. Puppets also help children resolve conflicts and learn social skills. Three puppets could be having a fight over an item they can't quite share. In the middle of the conflict, you can stop the action and have the children solve the problem using the puppet characters. Puppets are a tool that opens doors to safely discuss ideas the children may have. From the children's response, adults can gain insight on children's feelings and issues.
7. Consider using puppets for transition times. They are wonderful for helping children move from place to place, settle to take a rest, or clean-up. Puppets can serve as line leaders, the caboose, or someone that helps with waiting time as they talk to the children.

8. Puppets are also valuable as a way to help children deal with issues that may concern them such as a new baby, a divorce, or even a death. During this time of stress with the pandemic, puppets can be used as a resource for sharing ways to handle feelings and needed information sharing. Using them as sensitive characters that are going through similar issues is a way to help children verbalize what they may be feeling or wondering.

Let puppets join you and your children as special, exciting members of your classroom or family. Give children opportunities to use and make them. There are so many more ways you will discover to interact with children through the language of puppetry.

THE ANYBODY PUPPET

--by Ingrid Crepeau

Anybody is a special finger puppet that is easily made and easily used. You can make this puppet by cutting a pipe cleaner in half. Circles can be drawn on a tagboard and 'eyes' colored in the circles. The circles are hot glued to the ends of the pipe cleaner. The pipe cleaner is then bent into the shape of a "W". The child or adult wears the W between his/her index and middle finger. They just go with your imagination because Anybody can be just about anything!



