

explore Using Puppets

What are the benefits of puppets in a classroom environment?

Puppets work especially well with younger children, and provide excellent ways for children to work through their fears or vocalise their feelings through puppet play. Puppets can be especially beneficial in helping children to settle into a new school (for example, within Reception class at the start of the school year), but can also be useful ways to explore topic work.

Whilst older children may well respond positively to puppets, it is likely that puppet use with older children will be a much more focussed, shorter activity (i.e. an afternoon's work and no more, or as part of topic work).

Children often become more vocal when a puppet is at hand (so to speak!) and can provide a way to engage even the shyest of children.

What kind of puppets work the best?

There's a question, if ever there was one! Thinking about how the puppet will be used is a good way to decide the sort of puppet that'll work best for you. Let's consider an example: if you wanted to use a puppet to help children settle into their new class, a friendly face is a good starting point (in other words, don't choose something too scary!).

Obviously, if you want a puppet that you can use to help introduce topic work, consider a 'themed' puppet. Alternatively, choose a puppet that appeals to you, and who you think the children will easily accept. A good puppet can become an 'ambassador', introducing children to new topics and helping them to discuss different aspects of what is being studied.

Working With Puppets

The secret to being a good puppeteer is to make your audience believe that the puppet is alive. Think about television performers who work with puppets, and take their example. One cardinal rule that must not be broken is to ensure that the children in your class always see the puppet 'alive'. Don't let them see you taking the puppet off your hand, for example.

Think about the puppet as a person, so that if you're talking to the puppet, you're looking at it, and likewise, make sure the puppet looks at both you and your audience. If the puppet is talking to the audience, make sure that the puppet looks from one child to another, as you would do if you were talking to them.

Don't feel that the puppet needs to be constantly moving, and keep movement of the puppet natural. This means gentle movements, rather than jerky ones (if the puppet is too animated, children can want to start copying the puppet's antics!), and think about how the puppet might show simple emotions.

Making the puppet display emotions is very useful for reinforcing that the puppet is alive, and also for ensuring that the children in the audience retain their interest. The following points provide an idea as to how you might make the puppet show his/her feelings: .

Happy – Keeping the mouth of the puppet open slightly suggests a smile, whilst rocking the head gently from side to side can suggest a carefree mood

Sadness – Moving the puppet's head so that it is facing downwards can be used to suggest sadness. If the puppet has movable arms, you can use these to suggest crying.

Shyness/Upset – move the puppet's head so that it looks at you slowly, and then looks away again slowly. By repeating this a few times it can appear that the puppet wants to engage in a conversation, but is embarrassed to do so.

explore Using Puppets

Worried – Making the puppet glance quickly back and forth suggests that the puppet is concerned about something

Anger - There are a couple of ways to express anger. You can make the puppet's head tilt to one side (looking away from you if it's you the puppet is cross at) or keep the head upright and still, so that the puppet appears to be looking fixedly away from you)

Tiredness – the obvious one is to make the puppet yawn, but slow movements can also be a good way to show the puppet is tired and ready to go back to bed.

Whilst eye contact is great for ensuring that your audience is engaged with the puppet, a lack of eye contact can be used to suggest that the puppet is trying to ignore you, or avoid answering a question. And if you ever want to avoid someone's gaze, looking at the floor or the ceiling is usually a great way to do it!

And finally, what about making a puppet 'speak'? Well, first of all, puppets don't always speak! If you're not confident with making a puppet speak, tell the children that the puppet has lost his voice, or that he's too shy to talk, and he'll have to whisper to you. See, problem solved! Of course, there are times when giving a puppet a voice really does add to the session. To make it appear that it really is the puppet that is speaking, open and shut the mouth once for every syllable. Take time to practice getting the synch right with the aid of a mirror, as this will help to make it more believable that the puppet really is talking.

How do I 'introduce' a puppet to my class?

It's important that your class feels comfortable with the puppet, and even the cutest puppet may seem a little frightening to children on first sight. A good way is to build a story around the introduction. Try placing the puppet in a box, and start by saying, 'I've a special friend that I'm hoping you might be able to take care of for me. He's a little shy, so you'll need to let him know that you'll all be his friends. Can you whisper to him, "It's alright, you can come out now...?"'

By building up the children's interest in the puppet, you can begin to forge a strong link between the class and the puppet. Once this link is established, the puppet can take on a life of its own. You can encourage children to help you show thee puppet things, and engage the puppet as though he is a pupil in the school. Perhaps the children might take the puppet (and you!) on a tour of the classroom, for example.

To help the children to bond with the puppet, it's worth thinking about a suitable name for the puppet. Ideally chose a name that is unlikely to be shared with any children in the class. For this purpose, a 'traditional' type name might work well – something like Ernest, Alfred or Mabel, for example.

A puppet of this sort can become a useful asset in the classroom, visiting regularly and telling the children what he/she has been up to. To help make such a puppet seem more 'real', think about how old the puppet is, whether he/she has any brothers or sisters, and where the puppet lives. Does the puppet like watching television or reading? Perhaps if it's a boy puppet he'll hate the colour pink, but will love the colour blue?

Using a digital camera you might take pictures of the puppet doing everyday activities to show your class what he/she was doing over the weekend, or where the puppet went on holiday last year. You can also build up a range of props for the puppet to interact with.

What kind of activities might I engage puppets in?

The obvious activity is to use a puppet – or a couple of puppets – to stage a play. This helps to engage the children in class work, and provides added visual stimulus for the class as a

explore Using Puppets

whole. However, whilst in many ways this might be the obvious way to use puppets, there are a myriad of other uses for puppets within the classroom, some of which we've already touched on.

For a group of younger children, a puppet can become a confidant for the child. Consider using a puppet to ask children questions. In such instances, it's likely that they will respond directly to the puppet in a way that they may not converse with you directly. This can be useful to find out about concerns they have.

Of course, this role of the puppet as friend can also be useful in helping to explain difficult concepts to either individual children or groups of children. For example, perhaps you might consider using a puppet to help children grasp mathematical concepts, or to help promote reading.

It can inject humour into lessons if the puppet is seen by the children to be making mistakes. Will the children be able to help the puppet? This kind of play is an excellent way to reinforce key concepts. Consider, for example, how a puppet might be used to help explore the idea of opposites ("No, Alfred, that's not *on* the table! You've put your cup *under* the table!"). The key thing to remember is that the introduction of a puppet, especially one with which children are familiar, helps to break down the idea that it's a 'learning environment', and signals a 'play environment'. This can help children to take on board key information without realising they are learning.

Puppets can also be used to help give children a voice in group work. Consider this scenario: you're asking a class of children to provide answers to a range of questions (let's suppose it's basic maths), and there are certain children in the group that you wish to engage in the activity. By using a puppet, you can achieve this aim. The idea is that the child with the puppet operates him, and provides his answer. If the child isn't sure of the answer, the puppet might be seen to give the wrong answer. If the child knows the answer, then of course the puppet will get the question correct. However, since the puppet is the one answering, it helps to remove the fear for the child concerned of getting the question wrong. If the child is too shy, then perhaps the puppet will be shy, and will need to whisper his answer to you?

In such instances, the use of puppets can provide a great way to help children to engage in group activities, whilst at the same time removing some of the pressure to 'have the right answer'. And this is the real strength of puppets, that they enable children to explore situations from a 'safe' viewpoint. The puppet becomes a friendly face that they can confide in, and so the use of puppets can also be beneficial if you're trying to find out why a child is upset. He or she may not want to tell you, but may be willing to tell the puppet.

Act it Out

Well, it had to come sooner or later, didn't it? It's impossible to talk about puppets without considering how they can be used to bring a story to life. Thinking of puppet shows will make most of us think of the seaside shenanigans of Punch and Judy, but puppets can be used to tell just about any story.

You could use a playscript book to provide the dialogue for the puppets. For younger children, Walker Books produce a range such books (the Story Play versions of the 'Read Me' series of books for those aged 3 or 5 years and up). Of course, for older children, you could be adventurous and create your own script from a fiction book with which you are familiar, or you could ask the children to write their own play. This can work well, especially when tied into topic work. The actual writing of the play can become a class activity in itself:

Suggested Activities:

explore Using Puppets

- Consider having the same number of characters as you have tables of children in your class, then allocate each table a character. Write the play by asking each 'character' what their line should be, and then select a child from each of the tables to play the character for which their group supplied the lines. Just remember, to keep it simple!
- You could ask small groups of children to use the puppet(s) to tell a short story. Perhaps you could re-enact a scene from a story you have recently read together, or encourage them to do a 'what happens next' exercise.
- For older children, how about a 'Puppeteer Idol' style competition? You could split the class into small groups and ask each group to perform a short play. Then, the children get to cast their vote for the play they most enjoyed, and the team that performed the play get to perform it for another class in the school.