

# 'PUPPET PEDAGOGY'

## Animating the inanimate

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Puppets have enduring appeal. They 'speak' to babies, toddlers and young children in a universal language. The inclusive appeal of puppets extends to all ages, abilities and cultures. **Puppets are entertainers, friends, empaths, storytellers, and sharers of knowledge.**

Although puppetry is an ancient visual art with a history extending back 3,000 years, puppets have been a part of **early education practice and formal play therapy** for many years.

Puppetry is the act of **animating the inanimate.**

**This article considers the value of using puppets as a pedagogical tool to support the wellbeing, learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children in early education.**

### Puppet Pedagogy

Puppets can be used by children for **self-directed play** and by educators as an **intentional pedagogical tool**. Puppet play **opens a relatable gateway to a child's imagination and understanding.**

When puppets are used to tap into and support **emotional well-being** – this is particularly beneficial for children. Puppets can offer a **physical interpretation of emotions** for young children, by experiencing the feelings of other characters (**empathy**).

Educators who **intentionally** incorporate puppetry into play-based learning opportunities provide children with dynamic and interactive characters to explore their **creativity, express themselves, and process emotions.**



### Relating to Emotions using Puppets

Young children may find it difficult to generate strategies to **regulate their anger, sadness and other emotions.** Early childhood educators should find **creative, safe and respectful ways** to support children's emotional and social development.

Puppet based communication allows children to engage with characters that **model emotional expression** and offer relatable scenarios that encourage empathy self/co-regulation and self-awareness. By using puppets to role-play different scenarios, educators can guide children through the process of addressing disagreements, understanding perspectives, and finding peaceful solutions to conflicts.

By characterising emotions using puppets, educators can create a **safe and interactive environment for children to explore and articulate their emotions.**

Puppets can also give children a 'friend' to talk to, or a way to talk to other children without having to speak directly.

## Developing Listening and Communication Skills

One of the significant advantages of incorporating puppets in literacy activities is the enhancement of listening skills among children. By engaging with puppets during storytelling, singing or reflective discussion, not only sharpens their listening abilities but also expands their vocabulary range.

Puppets offer children an opportunity for role-playing that allows them to explore new personalities, and ideas to develop imagination. By harnessing the engaging power of puppets, educators can create an interactive environment that inspires a love for reading, strengthens language skills, and fosters a deeper connection with literacy from an early age.

### Puppets for Inclusive Practice

Puppets serve as valuable tools in promoting inclusive practice by catering to the varying abilities and **uniqueness of children**.

Through puppetry, educators can create a **safe and inclusive space** where all children feel represented and valued.

Puppets offer a unique avenue to incorporate diverse perspectives, cultures, and experiences into practical everyday activities. By featuring puppets from various backgrounds and ethnicities, educators can encourage discussions about **diversity, acceptance, and empathy** among children.



Asha has formed a relationship with Marigold. They have lots of interesting chats and Asha is determined to teach Marigold lots of new things.

"I'm teaching Marigold how to sing the ABC song. I sing it and then she sings it. Her voice is quiet (lowers voice) but I am helping her to speak loud. Marigold doesn't know what the letters look like so I showed her 'A' for Asha and 'M' for Marigold on the on the wall (alphabet poster).

### Child-led Documentation

The simplicity and versatility of puppets is what makes them an ideal 'educator's companion'. The educator has the capability to **create and mould a puppet character** to suit the learning message, to model a feeling or behaviour or to simply communicate with the child.

With some simple tips on puppetry basics like changing voice, using humour etc, educators can utilise puppets in fun and relatable ways that open a **meaningful doorway to Aistear learning themes and goals**.

A child-led learning story created on the **MOSAIC Pedagogical Documentation system** illustrates this.

#### Learning goals achieved:

- 1 I am an active communicator who can influence/ initiate interactions/ cómhra (conversations).
- 2 I can communicate my interests through play.
- 3 I use oral language(s) with muinín (confidence) and competence for a range of purposes.
- 4 I interact with others for giving and receiving information/ listening/ taking turns in cómhra (conversations) /storytelling.
- 5 I can use language during role play to imagine and recreate roles and experiences.

#### Dispositions/Schemas

Imagination

Communication

Role Play

#### You can help me build on this by:

When asking Asha what she would like to do next she suggested extending Marigold's learning a little further.

"I want to write letters 'A' and 'M' or maybe paint them. Marigold will like purple paint like her hair".

..and so they did!



## Some tips for puppet play

### Establishing a unique character

When using a puppet be sure to consider and establish its character – for example, is it shy, loud or cheeky and remember to maintain its voice or accent. You don't have to be a ventriloquist but if your puppet has a mouth, it's important to mimic the correct action of a puppet talking.



### Prepare the children

- Give the children **time** to **engage their imagination**. Ask, 'Do you want to meet a new friend?'
- Ensure the children are looking at you and the puppet. Encourage engagement through **tone of voice and actions**. The puppet should maintain eye contact with the children.
- Address the puppet and make sure it **responds to you**. It does not have to speak - it can use actions. Or the puppet can whisper in your ear and you can **voice the interaction**. Children accept this quite naturally and are willing to engage with the puppet.

### Choosing Puppets for babies and toddlers

Choose brightly coloured puppets that have a distinct and **visible mouth area**. Talk using slow, high-pitched, and clearly enunciated words to help keep children's attention. You can engage babies by moving the puppet as he or she tries to track it.

**Colourful puppets** are excellent language starters for young children. Try to engage children in conversations with the puppets.

**Silly, fun physical contact from the puppets** (peek-a-boo games, gentle tickles, and kisses) tends to delight young babies and toddlers. As they begin to show more interest, encourage young toddlers to touch and hold the puppets for themselves.



### Choosing puppets for pre-school children

A pre-school child will often feel **emotional connectedness** with puppets and may confide in them. They can also use puppets to help act out new ideas or emotions they want to express.

Giving children the opportunity to use the puppets themselves helps them **feel in control**.

The pre-school child will think of puppets as **members of the group**, therefore ensure that each puppet has a unique character and personality. Also, ensure each puppet is **treated with respect**, and has their own place to sit – such as a special shelf or chair.







## Creating Puppet Magic

Puppets don't need to be shop-bought to be effective and puppet making is a fun creative activity. A **sock puppet** or a **stick puppet** are fun and simple for children to create.

**Finger puppets** can be created from old gloves, using markers or recycled bits to create features and character. You can also purchase inexpensive baby bath mitts featuring a range of friendly animal faces, which work well as simple puppets.

A **puppet theatre** can be constructed using a box, a splash of paint, glue and creative decoration. Or simply use a curtain rod and a hanging curtain secured safely between two chairs, allowing children to sit behind and perform by holding puppets above the curtain rod.

Think about the puppet play offered to the children you work with..



- Have you adopted a few puppets that have **unique characters and personalities**?
- Are the puppets **age-appropriate**?
- Are puppets used as both a *purposeful pedagogical tool* and as a character that children can **freely engage with**?



## In summary

**Early childhood education is delivered through relationships, responsive environments, purposeful planning, and value for the individual agentic child.**

**Educators who use a variety of character-based puppets to engage with babies, toddlers and young children have tapped into a valuable teaching and learning tool. When used intentionally as part of curriculum delivery, puppets will support educators to make learning relatable and fun.**



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