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## **Puppets as Teaching Tools in Inclusive Early Childhood Classrooms**

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# **Beyond Pinocchio:**

**T**he National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) suggests teachers extend the range of children's interests and the scope of their thoughts by providing a rich variety of experiences, projects, materials, and ideas to explore and investigate (NAEYC, 1997). With regard to children with disabilities, the Division for Early Childhood (DEC) of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) further recommends early childhood education programs promote active engagement, independence, and mastery in all important developmental domains, including cognitive, social, and communicative (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000). Additionally, a number of authors, including Rogers (2000) and Wolery and Garfinkle (2002), have argued that a child's engagement in tasks may be the most important feature of intervention in terms of positively impacting the child's learning and development.

Puppets, used as a tool in the instructional process, can be effective in enhancing child interest and engagement (Gronna, Serna, Kennedy, & Prater, 1999; Shepherd & Koberstein, 1989; Silvern, Williamson, & Waters,

1983; Snart & Maguire, 1986; Turner, 2003; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003). That is, in addition to their use as play materials, puppets may be combined with other strategies when teaching developmentally relevant and appropriate behaviors to preschoolers. Young children have long been entertained and charmed by puppets. The brilliant colors, assorted textures, and exaggerated physical characteristics of puppets may help to promote higher interest and attention levels among typically developing children as well as among children with developmental disabilities. Thus, puppets' physical attributes, ability to portray emotions through exaggerated expressions and gestures, and their motivational value make them useful with many young children. For children who are shy or socially withdrawn, the use of puppets may encourage increased participation in classroom activities. For less verbally-oriented children, younger children, or children with short attention spans, the use of puppets may well be an engaging technique for modeling a variety of age appropriate concepts and behaviors (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003). In addition, many young children

are captivated by puppets and may be more likely to talk about sensitive or painful issues with a puppet than with adults (Turner, 2003; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003). The global appeal of puppets makes them especially appropriate and useful for teaching and learning in inclusive early childhood classrooms where instruction must address the diverse needs of young children across a wide range of abilities (Gronna et al., 1999). Through the use of puppets, teachers (as well as peers) might demonstrate a skill in a variety of ways to encourage children to become engaged in a range of interesting and varied behaviors.

This article focuses on the use of puppets as a teaching tool for enhancing child interest and engagement in preschool learning activities and routines. Specifically, tips for identifying activities that provide an ideal context for the inclusion of puppets, for developing specific strategies for using puppets within activities, for using puppets to teach behaviors within the social domain, and for selecting and adapting puppets to enhance their successful implementation are provided. But first, a brief summary of the evidence base for puppets as effective teaching tools is presented.

### Research on Puppets as Teaching Tools

Given frequent anecdotal reports concerning the necessity and value of using stimulating materials in the education of young children (Matson, Fee, Coe, & Smith,

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1991), the child-focused intervention practices of the DEC (Sandall et al., 2000), and recommended practices regarding stimulating and novel materials (NAEYC, 1997), it is surprising that investigations into the effectiveness of the use of puppets as instructional materials are somewhat limited. While both limited and addressing a number of different outcomes (e.g., promoting acceptance of differences, enhancing auditory skills, teaching specific social skills), several studies evaluating the use of puppets are found in peer-reviewed journals (i.e., Gronna et al., 1999; Irving, 2000; Matson et al., 1991; Medvin & Mele, 2003; Shepherd & Koberstein, 1989; Silvern et al., 1983; Snart & Maguire, 1986; Webster-Stratton, Reid, & Hammond, 2001). An early study involving typically developing children found puppets and play to be effective mediators for young children's auditory comprehension (Silvern et al., 1983). The Kids on the Block® puppet performances, begun in the 1980s (Snart & Maguire, 1986), continue to be used today to increase children's knowledge and acceptance of peers with disabilities, while the Eating Disorders Awareness and Prevention (EDAP) puppet program promotes acceptance of

diverse body shapes, a healthy self-concept, and a healthy attitude about food and eating (Irving, 2000).

Puppets have been effectively paired with bibliotherapy to teach sharing behavior to typical preschoolers (Shepherd & Koberstein, 1989); with sociodramatic script training to teach appropriate social communicative skills to a preschool child with significant visual impairment (Gronna et al., 1999); and used to assess playmate selection among preschool children (Medvin & Mele, 2003). One social skills intervention, based on theory related to the types of social, emotional, and cognitive deficits or excesses exhibited by children with conduct problems, relies heavily on the effectiveness of child-size puppets to model socially appropriate behaviors (Webster-Stratton et al., 2001). Not only has the use of child-size puppets been shown to increase interest and help to

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sustain children’s attention, but it also serves to reinforce key concepts and newly acquired skills through demonstrations, role-playing solutions, and fantasy play (Matson et al., 1991).

### When and How Can Puppets Be Used?

#### Circle Time and Transitions

While preschool programs vary in terms of the specific curricular approach that guides the activities and routines presented, one would be hard pressed to find a preschool classroom that did not include a planned circle time activity or one in which transitions between activities did not occupy a considerable amount of time.

Both of these activities represent excellent contexts within which to introduce the use of puppets to enhance child engagement. Table 1 provides suggestions for how puppets might be effectively incorporated into these two contexts. Let’s look more closely at each, beginning first with circle time.

Early childhood professionals know that circle time occupies a vital place in the preschool day. It not only serves to introduce the day’s activities but also provides a time for review during the day’s concluding activities. Introducing new concepts and skills to young children while reinforcing previously learned material requires upbeat, appropriately paced, and highly interactive instruction. Puppets whose actions are embedded in songs, stories, games, or lessons may bring an added

Table 1

### Suggestions for Using Puppets in the Early Childhood Classroom

Circle Time	Transition Times
<i>Calendar Helper:</i> Have the children choose a favorite puppet to lead the class during calendar time. The teacher or a child can be the “puppeteer.”	<i>Transition Prompter:</i> Use a puppet to signal a transition between activities. The puppet can shake a bell indicating when it is time to move to another activity.
<i>Weather Helper:</i> Introduce a puppet who wears sunglasses, a hat, mittens, or carries an umbrella, as is appropriate for the days’ weather.	<i>Attention Getter:</i> Use a puppet to quickly capture the attention of a busy group of children and lead them into the next activity.
<i>Rule Bear:</i> Designate a puppet (e.g., a bear) to teach classroom rules and procedures. For example, “Rule Bear says, use a quiet voice in the classroom,” or “... hands to yourself,” etc.	<i>Transition Helper:</i> Allow children to take turns using a puppet to ready the class for special activities such as library time, music, or art class.
<i>Story Time:</i> A favorite puppet can read a story, sing a song, model the motions to familiar songs, and teach imitation skills.	<i>Clean-Up Time:</i> Use a puppet to model the expected behavior, such as placing blocks in a bin.
<i>Social Skills and Stories:</i> Combine favorite stories with representative puppets to teach appropriate social skills. For example, <i>Miss Spider’s Tea Party</i> (by David Kirk) could be used to teach acceptance of others.	<i>Line Leader:</i> Guide the class to the library, gym, or music class using a puppet to increase the attention of the group.

dimension and level of excitement to otherwise routine circle time activities. One teacher, in the following vignette, uses puppets to facilitate children’s active engagement in her opening circle time. (Additional ideas for incorporating puppets into circle time activities are provided in Table 1.)

Mrs. Snyder uses circle time in her inclusive preschool classroom to teach new skills and concepts and to help maintain previously learned behaviors. For example, on many mornings circle time is an opportunity to review and reinforce the children’s understanding

and following of the classroom rules and procedures. So, rather than Mrs. Snyder reading off the rules, she has "Rule Bear" ask the children to help him understand the meaning of the rule that she wants to reinforce. Also during circle time the children are encouraged to participate in a variety of developmentally appropriate activities including songs and stories. Despite an upbeat pace and adult mediation several of the children in the group are easily distracted, resulting in many lost learning opportunities. So Mrs. Snyder has a puppet that routinely reads the story and sings the songs with accompanying movements, and has found this to help in maintaining attention and increase engagement.

Now let's examine transition times. The preschool day involves a continuum of transitions that are often noisy, disruptive, and may be especially difficult for some young children. The following vignette describes a fairly common sequence of events encountered by the preschool teacher when the children need to end an activity, clean up, and move to the next activity on the schedule.

The bell has been rung and verbal instructions for clean up given, yet several of the children at Sunshine Childcare and Preschool do not appear to even be aware of the need to transition. While Sam, a four-year old child with autism, remains engrossed in precisely lining up toy cars on the floor, Leah and Tamika continue their play in the housekeeping center. Although a few children respond appropriately to the teacher's instructions they quickly notice that some of their classmates are not putting away their toys. As a result, clean-up time stalls.

A puppet can help teachers to signal transitions, making them smoother and less stressful for the children and early childhood teachers alike. For example, a teacher has a puppet, equipped with a bell, whose role is always to signal that it is clean-up time. The teacher moves among the children as the puppet leads the children in singing, "It's clean-up time, clean-up time ...." (Additional ideas for utilizing puppets to facilitate smooth transitions are provided in Table 1.)

### Supporting Social Development

Vygotsky (1966) argued that play is the leading source of development in the preschool years. Play not only serves important functions in children's physical, emotional, and social development,

but also provides a highly supportive context for the development of important cognitive functions (Carpenter, Pennington, & Rogers, 2002), imagination and creativity (NAEYC, 1997), and offers a crucial medium through which language (Vygotsky, 1966) and social competence (Koegel, 2000; Wetherby & Prizant, 2001) are expanded. Including puppets in the sociodramatic play center and in social skills training may encourage free expression, increased interaction, and participation for young children with special needs and their typically developing peers, thereby positively influencing intellectual, creative, and social development (Turner, 2003). Table 2 (see following page) provides a number of examples for integrating puppets into sociodramatic play. And, the following vignette illustrates how a child's intervention team enhances their intervention plans for the child through the use of puppets.

*Introducing new concepts and skills to young children while reinforcing previously learned material requires upbeat, appropriately paced, and highly interactive instruction.*



Three-year old Daniel shows little interest in what his classmates in his inclusive preschool classroom are doing. Daniel does not attempt to interact with or imitate his peers during free play or small group activities. His teacher, speech therapist, and occupational therapist meet together with Daniel's mother to develop a number of strategies to help strengthen his imitation skills, including pairing him with a competent peer during center time, and using frequent verbal and gestural prompts. Daniel's mother reports that at home she has begun to use puppets when they are reading and singing together. And, after only a few days of their use, Daniel was waving his arms and shaking his head just like the puppet. The team decides to add the use of puppets to the strategies that they have already identified. For example, as the teacher provides Daniel with verbal and gestural prompts she will, at times, use a puppet to provide the verbal prompts. Puppets will also be available in several of the centers so that both Daniel and his partner peer can use the puppets for completing activity components.

Table 2

**Using Puppets in the Classroom to Support Social Development**

Sociodramatic Play With Puppets	Dealing With Emotions
Simple hand puppets and a few accessories (such as hats and badges) allow children to create different characters and assume different roles such as a policeman, nurse, or veterinarian.	It can sometimes be a challenge for young students to identify their own emotions or those of others. The puppet's exaggerated features may make emotions appear "larger than life."
Create your own puppets by printing photos of faces onto transfer paper with an inkjet printer. Iron the pictures onto simple hand puppets made from durable material.	Teachers can communicate through a puppet when discussing classroom expectations, behavior, etc.
Puppets of favorite storybook characters allow children to act out their favorite story and become any character they wish.	Role play choice making by allowing children to take turns helping the puppets solve problems.
Imitating the gestures of others is often difficult for a child with significant visual impairment. The exaggerated motions of a brightly colored puppet may provide a better model when teaching imitation skills.	Students with significant physical and motor impairments may be encouraged to wiggle and move when a puppet is placed on a hand or foot.
Children with autism often avoid sustained eye contact with peers or adults, but may attend to the actions of an appealing puppet.	To encourage a nonverbal child to vocalize, use a puppet to provide auditory stimulation. Have the puppet provide generous amounts of reinforcement.

Another important area of social development in the preschool years is learning about and how to deal with emotions. The exaggerated physical characteristics of character puppets make them especially well suited for demonstrating emotions (Turner, 2003). Their vivid colors and larger-than-life gestures and expressions may encourage

children with visual impairments or autism to imitate movements or facilitate their understanding of feelings and emotions. Teachers might use puppets to aid children in matching their own experiences with language, as well as teaching them to be an attentive audience. Children with autism frequently fail to attend to, and appropriately integrate, relevant social cues,

which results in significant impairment of the ability to learn from and about other people. The puppet can serve as a visual cue to accompany gestural and verbal prompts. As an environmental prompt, children with autism may prefer the puppet itself over more social stimuli because it remains available to the child once other prompts are faded (Quill, 1997). Several suggestions for using puppets to support children's understanding of emotions are provided in Table 2.

### Another Unique Role for Puppets

One use for a large puppet is that of the "puppet traveler" (see Figure 1). It's common practice in many early childhood classrooms for the class pet to make the rounds to students' homes throughout the school year. Although students are inclined to enjoy this activity, many parents would just as soon forego the honor of being weekend host to "Grover, the guinea pig," for example. A better way to link school and home may be to designate one puppet as the class "traveler." Students take turns hosting the puppet "guest" in their home, sharing family activities, reading together, and even working on individual IEP goals.

When preparing the puppet traveler, select a large, huggable puppet for this honor. Equip it with a personal tote bag or backpack complete with activities, a journal, and a pen so the preschoolers and their families

Figure 1  
**The Puppet Traveler**



Source: Puppet photos courtesy of Folkmanis®.

can record highlights of their visit. If your budget permits, include a disposable camera and encourage parents to send a few photos back to school showing their child and the puppet together. Gather these photos in a special class album, which will surely generate a tale or two. It is quite likely that the puppet traveler will be a class favorite, so you might consider having more than one.

### Finding and Selecting Puppets Appropriate for Young Children

A wide variety of puppets are available to early childhood educators to stimulate the interest and active engagement of their young students. Different types of puppets have characteristics that make them particularly useful and well suited for use in preschool classrooms. For example, full-bodied puppets provide near life-size characters for story telling and play, and work well as regular activity participants serving specific

roles. Glove marionettes are puppets that are attached by strings to a glove, allowing the head and extremities of the puppet to move independent of each other without requiring precise finger movements. Table 3 provides photos and descriptions of several kinds of puppets suitable for use by and with young children. Additionally, several resources are provided for obtaining inexpensive puppets for use in early childhood classrooms.

Sometimes, due to children's developmental skill level and/or limitations, puppets must be modified or adapted slightly to allow for greater child independence or ease of use. Fun, appealing puppets such as hand and glove puppets, finger puppets, and sock puppets are easily adapted for use by very young children or children with special needs. Table 4 offers suggestions for adapting puppets for use with these children.

### Future Directions

Early childhood education is intended to promote active engagement and independence for children by providing a rich variety of experiences, materials, and ideas. Puppets may serve as useful and developmentally appropriate tools when presenting engaging and interesting instruction in inclusive early childhood settings. Although their use in an educational context has been empirically validated, further research is necessary to determine their impact on other areas of functioning including independent engagement, language, social, and cognitive skills across a wide range

Table 3

**Types of Puppets and Resources**






Puppet Types	
<p><i>Hand puppets</i> may represent part or all of an animal or person, and require the user to slip one hand inside the body to manipulate it.</p> 	<p><i>Glove puppets</i> consist of a glove with an animal or figure attached to the back.</p> 
 <p><i>Full-bodied puppets</i> provide near life-size characters for storytelling and play.</p>	 <p><i>Finger puppets</i> are realistic miniatures that slip onto a finger.</p>
<p><i>Glove marionettes</i> are puppets attached by strings to a glove, allowing the head and extremities of the puppet to move independent of each other.</p> 	<p><i>Sock puppets</i> are easily made to represent a variety of fun characters.</p>
Sample Resources	
<p>Folkmanis puppets, makers of fine puppets for more than 25 years  <a href="http://www.folkmanis.com/">http://www.folkmanis.com/</a></p>	<p>Ebay (search for puppets by manufacturer, character name, or type)  <a href="http://www.ebay.com/">http://www.ebay.com/</a></p>
<p>Puppets on the Pier  <a href="http://www.dfs.ru/puppetdream/index.html">http://www.dfs.ru/puppetdream/index.html</a></p>	<p>The Puppetorium, with quality puppets and marionettes  <a href="http://www.puppetorium.com/">http://www.puppetorium.com/</a></p>
<p>Thrift shops, consignment stores, and garage sales</p>	<p>Manufacturer's close-out stores such as TJ Maxx and Marshall's stores</p>



Table 4

### Puppet Modifications for Young Children and Those With Special Needs

Children With Special Needs	Young Children
Use hook and loop tape to attach a small puppet to the back of a child-size mitten. Not only are mittens easier to put on but they allow manipulation of the puppet with a wave of the arm or hand, without finger isolation.	Glove marionettes allow different parts of the puppet to jump and wiggle when the fingers move. For young children, shorten the marionette's strings by knotting or cutting and tying off to prevent the strings from becoming tangled and frustrating the child.
Securely attach bells, beads, or noisemakers to sock, glove, and finger puppets to provide auditory feedback with the slightest movement.	To help teach thumb and finger movements, have children wear simple felt puppets while attempting to pick up small objects from a bin or sensory table.
For a child who is confined to a wheelchair, mount a glove marionette on a short flexible dowel rod, and attach it to the tray using a "C" clamp. The puppet will jump and move when the child kicks his or her feet, swings an arm, or throws his or her head back or from side to side.	For very young children, secure puppets to wrists with hook and loop tape or elastic. Use finger puppets for a child with immature or limited dexterity. Some full-bodied puppets only require a hand to be inserted into the body. These are easy to manipulate, as they do not require the child to isolate and move individual fingers.

of ability levels. Study on the use of puppets with infants and toddlers by parents and interventionists in the home may provide additional strategies to be integrated into familiar routines, resulting in increased learning opportunities for very young children. For thousands of years puppets have been used for storytelling and as entertainment in cultures throughout the world. It is time to move beyond simply enacting the story of Pinocchio and put puppets to good use as instructional supports in inclusive early childhood classrooms.

#### Note

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