

Puppets: Make them and use them

If you're old enough to remember when Big Bird learned of Mr. Hooper's death, you already understand the powerful role a puppet can play in a child's life. If you don't remember the episode of Sesame Street, search for Big Bird learns about death on YouTube.

Generations of children have learned from Oscar the Grouch, the Count, and even Ernie and his Rubber Duckie. Puppets make learning accessible to children—as they build vocabulary, develop numeracy and literacy skills, negotiate and solve problems, and encounter life-changing events like deaths and births.

In common with other dramatic play, puppets fascinate and engage children. They are invited into a world of fantasy and drama that they can build and control. As with other dramatic play props, puppets encourage children to explore the real world symbolically—a block becomes a cell phone, a cape transforms a child into a superhero, and a scarf enables a child to flit like a butterfly or swoop like a hawk. A puppet can be a tool for individual and solitary exploration of conversation and language development. A puppet can also be a cast member in a group's re-creation of a favorite nursery tale or picture book.

So why does this important teaching tool so often end up in a jumble basket on a shelf or in a closet of unused materials? As with all materials, children need an introduction before they can engage in their own explorations and discoveries. A dull green head with a cloth hand covering is not likely to invite an exciting interaction on its own. In classrooms in which teachers have introduced, used, and explored the uses of puppets, the same toy quickly becomes an important companion in learning.

Introducing puppets

Even the youngest children are attracted to new opportunities for exploration. Put a glove puppet on your hand and children will gather. If you give that puppet a voice, children will respond—often lengthening their attention span, staying engaged for a longer time than they might without the prop. Animate the puppet so children can interact with it: wave, shake a hand, tickle an ear, blow a kiss. Invite children to recite a rhyme or sing along with the puppet.

For older children, teachers can use puppets to facilitate transitions, organize group time, direct an activity, and help explore feelings and relationships. Consider:

- Using a puppet to announce clean-up time, a move to the playground, or other transition activity. Sew small bells to a puppet's hands that ring to signal an activity change.
- Using a puppet to introduce letters and words. Introduce the letter *P* by draping a purple scarf around a puppet's neck. Use the puppet as a pointer that can isolate printed letters and sounds and then blend them into complete words. Use an animated puppet to demonstrate *over*, *under*, *between*, *behind*, or *on top*.
- Using simple stick puppets to introduce concepts and stories. Glue flannel board shapes and characters to a craft stick to help direct the sequence of *This Is the House That Jack Built*.



- Using a puppet to introduce a story. Let a bear puppet be the object of discovery when the group is *Going on a Bear Hunt*.
- Using a puppet to help negotiate solutions to problems. Introduce the puppet as an impartial character who can reflect words, emotions, and ideas.
- Using a puppet to encourage children to express themselves—especially when they are uncertain. A child may know that you have the answer but may be more willing to risk a wrong answer with a puppet.
- Selecting and building puppets respectfully. Be aware of cultural and racial diversity—and stereotypes—and build a puppet collection that reflects differing abilities, backgrounds, and cultures.

Tips for success

When teachers use puppets to encourage learning, they generally find it useful to:

- Give each puppet a consistent identity and character, even when it's not being used. A pointer puppet is used only at circle time for literacy activities, for example.
- Give the puppet a place in the classroom. The negotiator puppet always sits on the shelf near the block center, for example.
- Give the puppet a voice. Puppets need to talk directly to children and not merely be interpreters of the teacher's voice.
- Use the puppet consistently. Let the puppet be a regular participant in classroom activities, not just a tool in desperate situations.

While commercial puppets might have the advantage of being durable, they are expensive—especially if you expect to use them for both teacher- and child-directed activities. Most home-made puppets are inexpensive and have the advantage of being tailor-made for particular uses and situations. Get started with a few commercially produced puppets that are gender and role neutral and then develop your collection with character-specific puppets that you build yourself.

Puppet building gives children an opportunity for creative expression. It allows a child to express creativity—even when all the children are making turtle puppets. Don't squelch creativity by dictating or modeling the final product. Later when children are using puppets, encourage the same creative expression: There is no right way to use a puppet; it's all about creativity.

The puppet forms described below can be either teacher- or child-made. If your group is making puppets, adjust the material lists and procedures according to the children's ages and skill levels. Remember to give children opportunities to use the puppets they have made.

Making and using puppets

The following activities describe the basic puppet forms but are not limited. Be creative and have fun.

Hand and foot puppets

Hand and foot puppets are among the most simple forms—easy and inexpensive to make,

infinitely variable in use.

Typically, commercially made puppets have either moving mouths or moving hands. Explore other options when you make these puppets yourself—or when children make them.

Feet first

Foot puppets are especially effective for toddlers and young preschoolers who are still learning about coordinating and strengthening their body parts. Encourage children to lift and sway their feet to animate these puppets. Make sure your puppet construction is safe and sturdy.

Here's what you need:

- clean, discarded socks
- collage scraps
- scissors
- glue
- sewing needle and yarn
- large floor mirror

1. Cut off the cuff and heel of the socks to make the toe easy to put on over a child's shoes.
2. Decorate the bottom of the sock with facial features, clothing, and hair as desired.
3. Encourage children to sit with legs stretched out in front of a mirror.
4. Show how to pull the puppet over the feet to see the puppet reflected in the mirror.

Plate characters

A single paper plate folded in half horizontally can form a frog or vertically, a butterfly. Two plates stapled together can form a ladybug, a bear's head, or a dandelion, as indicated below. Use your imagination.

Here's what you need:

- paper plates
- markers
- stapler
- collage scraps

1. For each puppet, use two paper plates. Cut a wedge out of one plate.
2. Staple the two plates together along the edges, creating a pocket to slip a hand into the back side.
3. Decorate the front of the plate to make human or animal faces, fantasy creatures, plants, or the sun.
4. Place one hand in the back pocket and move to animate the puppet.

Variation: Use glue to attach a glove to the back of the plate. Slip the hand into the glove to manipulate the puppet.

Make plate puppets into a garden party. Shape and staple paper plates as described above. Invite children to decorate the front of the plate as a flower using real leaves, petals, grass, and twigs, using markers to add detail.

A character for each finger

Use either cloth or discarded rubber gloves for these simple puppets. The cut-off fingers become the puppets, and the glove hand becomes a hand protector in the garden or a liner under winter gloves.

Here's what you need:

- discarded gloves
- permanent markers
- scissors
- glue
- collage scraps

1. Cut off the glove fingers so that the puppet fits to the second joint.
2. Use markers to draw features onto the glove fingers.
3. Add pompoms, sequins, ribbon, or yarn to add details.

Use these finger puppets for counting rhymes. Put a finger puppet on each index finger to encourage conversation between *Right* and *Left*.

Rabbit mitts and gloves

Rabbit puppets are made the same way whether you're making one mitten puppet or four finger puppets on a glove.

Here's what you need:

- discarded mittens or gloves
- sheets of craft foam
- glue
- markers
- needle and thread (adult use only)
- scissors
- pompom
- fabric and yarn scraps

1. Cut out rabbit ears from craft foam.
2. Attach the ears to the mitten with glue, or stitch in place with thread.
3. Cut out and attach dark eyes, and glue a pompom nose into place. Add whiskers with a marker.

Variation: Craft other character puppets using these techniques. Vary ears, eyes, and mouths to reflect the character you've chosen.

Tiny Tim

If all the children decide to make Tiny Tim glove puppets, encourage creativity and diversity of design. Recite the rhyme together



and plan the turtle movements as you would a finger play.

Here's what you need:

- dark glove
- green and brown felt
- scissors
- glue
- fine tip marker
- cotton balls

1. Cut an oval from the green felt and glue to the back of the glove to make a turtle shell.
2. Cut brown felt dots and glue them to the green felt.
3. Stuff cotton balls into the middle finger of the glove. Draw eyes and a mouth onto the turtle head.
4. Place a hand in the puppet and animate to the rhyme "Tiny Tim."

Cup puppets

Cup puppets invite children to create puppet characters that are independent of their own bodies. A string tied to the puppet's head provides the mechanism for movement.

Wild things

These puppets offer children a tangible way to express feelings

Tiny Tim nursery rhyme

There was a little turtle.
His name was Tiny Tim.
I put him in the bathtub
To see if he could swim.
He drank up all the water.
He ate up all the soap.
And now he's in the bathtub
With a bubble in his throat.
Bubble, bubble, bubble,
Bubble, bubble, bubble
Bubble, bubble, pop!

about monsters. See "Talking with children about monsters" in the Spring 2011 issue of *Texas Child Care Quarterly*.

Here's what you need:

- paper or plastic foam cups
- stapler
- collage scraps including pipe cleaners and large paper clips
- markers
- scissors
- glue
- colored tape

1. Turn the cup upside down and draw a wild face—one eye, a slanted mouth, and pointed teeth, for example.
2. Add body parts or clothing with collage scraps. Make sure to include hair, horn, or hat features.
3. Read Maruice Sendak's classic book *Where the Wild Things Are*. Encourage children to make puppets that reflect their own wild thing.

Pop-up Polly

Here's what you need:

- paper or plastic foam cups
- small foam balls
- plastic drinking straws
- markers
- scissors
- glue
- yarn
- collage scraps

1. Make a hole in the center of the cup bottom large enough for the straw to pass through.
2. Plan the puppet—boy, girl, or animal, for example.
3. Add facial features to the ball with markers. Glue on yarn hair and other decorative trim as desired.
4. Poke a small hole into the bottom

of the ball to fit the end of the straw. Add a dot of glue if necessary.

5. Push the bottom of the straw through the hole in the cup so that the puppet face is hidden inside the cup.
6. If you're using the puppet as a storytelling prop, be ready to push the character out of its hiding place at the right moment.

Variation: If children are making pop-up puppets, help them develop a theme so that each child has a turn for sharing a character. For example, use pop-up puppets in coordination with standard counting finger plays like "Five Little Monkeys" and "Way Up High in the Apple Tree." Or make pop-ups to correspond to the features in "The Wheels of the Bus," "Down by the Bay," or to Verna Aardema's book *Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain*.

Sack puppets

Save paper bags, especially lunch bags, for puppet-building activities. The making is as much fun as the using.

Character puppets

Plan the puppet character you wish to make. Picture books, animal studies, and fairy tales offer inspiration.

Here's what you need:

- medium-sized paper bags
- newspaper
- tape
- cardboard tubes
- collage scraps
- fabric pieces
- scissors
- glue
- markers
- pencil or short wooden dowel

1. To make the head of the puppet, open the paper bag and gently stuff it with a sheet of newspaper.
2. Push the cardboard tube into the open bag, gather the open edges, and tape the bag closed around the tube, holding the tube in place.
3. Draw a face onto the bag. Add facial features appropriate to the character—a flat pig’s nose, a long trunk, a beak, or long, floppy ears, for example. Encourage creativity with art supplies.
4. Older children might want to make a more elaborate puppet by adding a body and hands. For the body, use a piece of cloth about 2-feet square (or a large sheet of newspaper). Fold the fabric in half, cut a small slit, and slip the cardboard tube through the slit so that fabric can be taped to the tube just below the head.
5. Cut out construction paper hands and staple these to the inside of the folded cloth.
6. Glue one end of the pencil to one of the puppet’s hands.
7. To use, hold the paper tube under the fabric and manipulate the pencil to make the puppet wave, scratch its nose, or cover its eyes.

Sock puppets

Simply a sock pulled over the hand, a sock puppet is infinitely variable, quick, and almost free to make.

Slither like a snake

Use the same techniques described below with different socks to make alligators, dinosaurs, garden worms, and a very hungry caterpillar.

Here’s what you need:

- discarded striped or argyle socks
- buttons
- glue
- fabric scraps

1. Place your arm in the sock. The toe end will be the snake’s face.
2. Glue on buttons for eyes.
3. Add other fabric trim to make a fantasy snake—hair, tongue, or even a big clown nose.

Suspended puppets

Traditional marionettes have been staples of children’s play for hundreds of years. They have also been used in renowned adult theater and opera presentations. The Prague Opera presentation of *Don Giovanni*, for example, is presented with full orchestra and marionettes, and is always sold out.

Eensy weensy spiders

If children are making this spider puppet, encourage creativity. Each spider can have colored legs, body decorations, and facial features that are unique to each young artist.

Here’s what you need:

- paper plates
- stapler
- markers
- elastic cord
- scissors
- construction paper

1. Cut the construction paper into strips each about 1-inch wide and 11-inches long. Fold the strips accordion style to shape springy spider legs.
2. Make a hole in the center of one plate. Thread a length of elastic cord through the hole and knot



CREATIVE COMMONS: PHOTO BY PHYLLIS BUCHANAN

- it on the concave side of the plate. Add tape to reinforce the hole and to hold the cord in place.
3. Staple eight spider legs along the circumference of the second plate, four legs on each side.
 4. Staple the two plates together along the outer rims so that the knot and leg staples are on the inside.

5. Draw spider eyes on the top plate.
6. Use the suspended spider to highlight songs and rhymes.

Jointed marionettes

Creating puppets with joints makes them appear more life-like. Usually a marionette will have a head, trunk, arms and legs. More sophisticated versions have knee, elbow, and wrist joints.

Here's what you need:

- cardboard and plastic boxes
- scissors
- markers
- large plastic sewing needles
- cord
- collage scraps



CREATIVE COMMONS: PHOTO BY MARY ANNE ENRIQUEZ

1. Plan the puppet. Ask if it will be realistic or goofy; a person, an animal, robot, or flowering plant. Lay out boxes in a rough design to include a head, a trunk, arms, legs, and tail, for example. A flowering plant may have joints at leaves or petals.
2. Connect the boxes using cord and a sewing needle. Make the cord long enough that the joints of the body can move readily. For example, if you're making a person, the elbow and knee joints will allow the finished puppet to move in the manner of a human. It's usually easiest to join appendages to the trunk before attaching the trunk to the head.
3. Cut lengths of cord to attach to the head and each appendage. Tape securely in to place. These cords will allow the puppet master to move body parts separately.
4. Decorate the features of the marionette with collage scraps according to the puppet's form. Animal puppets might have fake fur, while a robot might require aluminum foil.

Variations: If preschool children are making these puppets, they will likely need help with the needle and cord maneuvers. School-agers will likely be able to work independently. Challenge these older children to first choose a story to dramatize with puppets so that each child is building a unique character. Alternatively, marionettes are terrific for cooperative art. Encourage children to work together to build and manipulate their marionettes.

Partner puppets

Puppets can support both small and large muscle development. Encourage children to use these

puppets in outdoor shadow play or as a dance partner. Partner puppets are good listeners when children share books and stories.

My shadow—or not

Hang a white sheet with enough space for actors on one side and the audience on the other. Place a flood lamp or strong flashlight to shine on the actors, creating shadow characters for the audience to watch. A child and partner puppet can march behind the sheet, stopping to talk briefly to the audience, or several children and their puppets can act out a skit.

Here's what you need:

- large flat boxes
- paper plates
- 4-inch wide strips of fabric
- 1-inch wide elastic
- stapler
- construction paper
- collage scraps
- 24-inch lengths of double-sided hook-and-loop tape
- glue
- markers

1. Arrange the puppet so that the box is the body's trunk, the paper plate the head, and the fabric strips arms and legs.
2. Cover the box with paper or fabric as desired.
3. Draw facial features onto the paper plate. Add a beard, hair, and eyeglasses as desired.
4. Staple the head to the body's trunk.
5. Cut the fabric strips so that two are about 6 inches longer than a child's legs and two are 6 inches longer than the child's arms.
6. Cut 5-inch lengths of elastic, four for each puppet. Staple each to the end of a fabric strip

(two handles for the hands, two that will fit over a child's shoes).

7. Staple the fabric strips to the trunk.
8. Glue one end of the hook-and-loop tape to the front of the box like a belt. Leave the other end free to wrap around the child's body to hold the puppet in place.
9. Add construction paper hat, boots, shoes, or other details as desired.
10. Help children wear their partner puppets by slipping hands through the handles and feet through the stirrups, and wrapping the belt around the waist.
11. Encourage shadow play. Talk about which puppets look like their makers and which don't.

Dancing partners

In addition to dance and movement activities, this life-sized puppet can participate in children's conversations, or stand in a corner watching children at work and play.

Here's what you need:

- discarded brooms
 - discarded pantyhose
 - yarn
 - fabric and felt scraps
 - glue
 - markers
1. Cut each leg of old pantyhose into two equal pieces. Knot one end of the tube and cover the broom bristles with the knotted end at the top.
 2. Use glue, yarn, and fabric scraps to create a face and hair on the covered bristles. Glue on old plastic eyeglass frames and maybe a beard or mustache.

3. Play music, and encourage children to dance with their new partners.

Resources

- Crepeau, I. and M. Richards. 2003. *A Show of Hands: Using Puppets with Young Children*. St. Paul, Minn.: Redleaf Press.
- Miller, Linda and Mary Jo Gibbs. 2002. *Making Toys for Preschool Children*. Beltsville, Md.: Gryphon House. ■