

The effectiveness of puppet play & storytelling to promote children's social and emotional development

Puppet play is a fun way for children to explore powerful emotions and learn effective self-regulation skills. To assist children in learning how to name and manage emotions, puppets offer a new method to explore emotions and develop empathy for themselves and others.

Puppets can help to normalise emotions in children. Emotions are a part of everyday life, but they can be overwhelming for some children. Using puppets allows you to discuss emotions in a safe and fun way, which can help reduce anxiety and stress around emotional topics.



What you need for Puppet Play

All you need for puppet play is a few simple materials and some imagination. You can use hand puppets, finger puppets and puppet theatres.

Or you can make your own puppets using craft materials like felt, socks, fabric and lollipop sticks, however, emotions may be easier to notice, name and express in lovable characters that they can relate with. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

Hand Puppets

Hand Puppets can help the child really relate with them as they have lifelike features and expressions. You can also get hand puppets that represent different animals. By using these characters, the child can explore a wide range of emotions in different situations. Hand puppets also make for great classroom puppets, as they are big enough for the whole class to see. As such, they can also be used to boost a child's gross motor skills.



Finger Puppets

Finger Puppets, Animal Finger Puppets, are perfect for younger children as they are small and easy to use. Using their fingers to move the puppets around will also help to develop the child's fine motor skills alongside their emotional regulation skills.

With groups of fairytale characters, farm animals and jungle creatures to choose from, the child can explore their emotions in any number of different scenarios, situations and stories.



How to help children learning Emotional Regulation Skills With Puppets

Follow the child's lead

Children will likely want to use the puppet in their own way and will be more engaged if they are in control. Let them experiment with the puppet and see what they do with it. Let them have some fun and get to like story time with their puppet friends! Follow their lead, and they will be more likely to listen when you do offer guidance.

The goal is for the child to feel comfortable expressing their emotions through the puppet. If they seem hesitant, gently encourage them to express their feelings in the puppet's voice.

Introduce emotions as part of the child's play

To introduce the concept of emotions, you can start by using puppets to demonstrate different feelings. For example, you could have a happy puppet character who is excited and a sad puppet character who is feeling down.

As the child becomes more familiar with the idea of emotions, you can start to use puppets to role-play different situations. For example, you can have the puppets disagree or express their feelings about a recent event in the story. You could pretend that one puppet is feeling angry of a new friend that another puppet has made.



Encourage the child to name the puppet's emotions

Talk to the child about the story and what the puppets are feeling. You can ask questions that encourage the child to name emotions such as, "What do you think the puppet is feeling right now and why?" or simply "How do you think they might feel?"

This will help the child to start thinking about their own emotions and how they can express them. As they learn to name the emotions, they will also be able to understand and regulate them better.

If they need a little more guidance, you can provide some options for the emotions that the puppets may be feeling. For example, "The puppet looks like she's feeling sad that her friend is playing with someone else. Do you think she's feeling lonely or left out?"

Ask your child what they think the puppets should do next?

Conflict resolution and the ability to solve problems are important self-regulation skills for navigating emotions. Asking the child what the puppets should do next in a particular situation will help them to start thinking about how to resolve conflicts and deal with their emotions. For example, you could ask, "The puppet is feeling lonely. What do you think she should do?"

The child may suggest that the puppet talk to her peer or try to join in the game. This is a great opportunity to talk about how important it is to communicate our feelings and needs to others. You could then also ask, "What do you think the puppet should do if she can't join in the game?"

If the child makes a suggestion like hitting or shouting, point out the difference between an emotion and an action. For example, you could say, "It's okay for the puppet to be angry, but it's not okay for them to hit their peer. What could she do instead?"



Encourage the child to use the puppets to express their own emotions

Once the child is comfortable with the idea of using puppets to express emotions, encourage them to use the puppets to act out their own feelings. This is a great way for them to practice self-regulation and communicate their emotions in a safe and healthy way.

You could have them play out situations they find particularly difficult, such as transitions or following instructions. This will help them to understand and process their emotions in a constructive way.

It can also be helpful to talk about the emotions that they saw in the puppets after the play is over.

This will give you a chance to offer guidance and support if they are struggling to deal with their emotions.

Introduce puppet play with friends

Social skills and social development are an important part of emotional intelligence. As the child starts to use puppets to express their emotions, you can introduce the idea of using them with peers.

This will help the child to practice communicating and interacting with others in a healthy way. It will also give them a chance to see how their peers express their emotions and put their problem-solving skills into practice.

You could have a small social communication group where each child brings their own puppet. Or you could have a puppet show where the child and their peers put on a performance.



Here are a few examples to have your puppet do when playing with the child:

Puppet Scenarios:

- Puppet models greeting the child. For example, "Hi I am Tiny Turtle. What is your name?" When the child tells your puppet his/her name, puppet thanks him/her for being so friendly. (Modeling friendly social greetings.)
- Puppet models interest in the child. For example, "What do you like to do?" When the child tells your puppet his/her interests, puppet also shares his/her interests. (Learning how to get to know someone.) You can also prompt the child to ask the puppet what she/he likes to do? (Learning how to show interest in someone else.)
- Puppet asks for help. For example, "I can't get this train track to go together, can you help me?" When the child helps your puppet, your puppet compliments his/her helping behaviour. (Learning to ask for help as well as how to help a friend.)
- Puppet shares his/her emotion. For example, "I am sad because I can't go outside because it is raining." Ask the child what your puppet is feeling. Encourage or prompt the child to say something to make the puppet feel better. (Learning to express emotions and think about another person's emotions.)

- Puppet shares something with the child. For example, “I see you looking for green blocks, would you like my green block.” (Modeling sharing.) If child takes your puppet’s block, say “I’m happy to help you”. (Connecting sharing action with emotion.)
- Puppet waits for his turn. For example, “I am going to wait until you have finished with the red car, then can I have a turn?” If child gives your puppet a turn, puppet thanks him and tells him it makes him feel happy to have such a kind friend.

Note: If the child does not have the language skills to respond verbally to the puppet, it is still good for the puppet to model the words involved in the social interaction. You can also structure interactions that involve non verbal responses from your child. “Would you share that with me?” “Would you like to shake the puppet’s hand?” “Can you help me build this tower?” This way, the focus is on the child’s friendly behavioural response to the puppet. You and the puppet can provide the verbal structure. This will support the child’s communication development in these social situations.

Parent/Teacher Praise: Parents/teachers can use a silly/different voice for the puppet character and then go out of role as parent/teacher to praise the child for his or her social skills. Parents/teachers can look for opportunities to comment and praise their child when she/he waits, takes turns, helps, offers a friendly suggestion, asks for help, shows interest or empathy, is gentle and listens well with your puppet.

Parent/Teacher Prompts: In these puppet plays parents/teachers can prompt their children’s appropriate social responses by whispering in their ear some ideas for what to say to the puppet. For example, “you can tell the puppet you like to play with trucks.” Or, “ you can say please can I have that book?” Don’t worry if your child doesn’t use your suggestion, just move on to something else as compliance is not required. Often times children will copy your suggestion and then you can praise them for such nice asking or sharing.

Remember: Keep it simple, have fun, and do not have your puppet model negative behaviours. Try using puppets when reading stories to act out the character’s feelings and communication.

Useful Links:

[ELSA: Working with Puppets](#)

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