

Tips for Using Puppets to Promote Preschool Children's Social and Emotional Development

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Preschool children are working to accomplish the important developmental milestones of learning social and friendship skills including beginning to share, help others, initiate social interactions, listen, and cooperate with peers. They are also working on emotional regulation skills including emotional literacy, self-control over aggressive behaviors, ability to wait and accept limits, and beginning problem solving skills.

One of the ways to promote your preschool child's social and emotional skills is through the use of puppet play. Puppet play is effective because it helps the parent/teacher enter into the child's imaginary world and allows children to experience the feelings of other characters (early empathy development) and learn important social behaviors and conversation skills.

With puppets, dolls, or action figures you can act out stories you are reading with children, make up fantasies, and explore solutions to pretend problems. You may be nervous at first using puppets, but try it out and before long you will experience the joy of entering into your child's thoughts, feelings and imagination, one of the most intimate places you can be at this age.



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

Puppet Scenarios:

- **Puppet models greeting your child.** For example, “Hi I am Tiny Turtle. What is your name?” When your child tells your puppet his/her name, puppet thanks him/her for being so friendly. (Modeling friendly social greetings.)



- **Puppet models interest in your child.** For example, “What do you like to do?” When your child tells your puppet his/her interests, puppet also shares his/her interests. (Learning how to get to know someone.) You can also prompt your child to ask the puppet what s/he likes to do? (Learning how to show interest in someone else.)



- **Puppet asks for help.** For example, “I can’t get this block to go together, can you help me?” When your child helps your puppet, your puppet compliments his/her helping behavior. (Learning to ask for help as well as how to help a friend.)



• **Puppet shares his/her emotion.** For example, “I am embarrassed because I can’t ride my bike. Do you know how to ride a bike?” Ask your child what your puppet is feeling. Encourage or prompt your 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 your 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 finish that game, 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 friend.



Note: If your 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 nonverbal 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 your child’s friendly behavioral response to the puppet. You and the puppet can provide the verbal structure. This will support your child’s eventual language 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 behaviors. Try using puppets when reading stories to act out the character's feelings and communication.

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