Circle Time Puppets

Teaching Social Skills

Teachers Julia and Anne sit on chairs at the front of the room. Julia holds Emily, a puppet, and Anne holds Zeke. Sixteen 3-year-olds sit in a circle before them, eyes glued to Emily.

Emily loudly explains, “I’m mad. Zeke says I can’t play ‘cause I’m a girl!” Zeke the puppet counters, “Well, girls can’t play blocks. That’s a boy game!”

Teacher Julia looks at the puppets. “It sounds like you have a problem,” she says. “I hear Emily saying she wants to play blocks and I hear Zeke saying she can’t. And you both sound pretty mad. I wonder what we should do?”

Using persona puppets to talk with children about their problems is the most valuable tool in my bag of teaching tricks. The puppets are so good at helping children get along! Puppets allow young children to think about solutions to conflicts and are a great way for children to explore their feelings.

Children who talk about different points of view with props like puppets often have an easier time getting along with others and making friends. Puppets can also support anti-bias curriculum efforts and introduce feeling words, such as sad, mad, and frustrated. By bringing puppets into the daily circle time, teachers can create a strong sense of community among children.

Teaching social skills

How can puppets do so much? Let’s look at the example with Emily and Zeke.

Julia sees some boys in the preschool classroom stopping girls from playing with trucks. Julia and her coteacher Anne sit down together and plan a puppet story similar to the situation Julia has observed. They decide that Zeke will play with the blocks, and when Emily comes over and asks to play, Zeke will tell her, “You can’t play blocks because you are a girl.” Emily will tell the teachers her feelings and what she wants Zeke to do. After that, Julia will use the class problem-solving script to walk the puppets (and the children) through resolving the issue.

Julia and the young children in her class use these steps:

1. Identify the problem
2. Talk about feelings
3. Ask about solutions
   (a teacher may suggest a solution, if necessary)
4. Talk about all solutions
5. Agree on a solution
6. Follow through
good guidance

At the beginning of circle time, Julia identifies the conflict and shows how the puppets feel. Next, she asks for solutions from Anne and the children. By asking another teacher to help the puppets find solutions, Julia models seeking help from teachers. She also gets some grown-up ideas for solving the problem.

Julia asks, “Anne, do you have any ideas about what Zeke and Emily should do?”

Anne replies, “Well, I think girls can play with blocks, because I’m a girl and I like to play with blocks and trucks.”

Julia says, “I hear Anne saying that she’s a girl and she plays with lots of kinds of toys, Zeke. She’s saying that girls can play with blocks. Let’s ask the children what they think. We’ll go around the circle and give anyone a turn who wants one.”

Several children have ideas. Some of them agree with Anne. Shoshana says, “I’m a girl and I play with blocks too!” Then Shoshana goes a bit off-topic, saying, “I saw a truck outside.”

Emily gently guides the children back to the topic, saying, “I like to look at trucks too, but I like to play with blocks even more, and Zeke says I can’t! What should I do?”

The class makes a new class rule: Everyone can play with all of the toys. Anne writes the rule on paper and posts it on the wall. Emily and Zeke agree to play blocks and trucks together, and Zeke apologizes: “I didn’t know girls could play with blocks. I’m sorry for hurting your feelings.”

Again, the teachers, this time Julia and Stephanie, plan a story. They don’t need two persona puppets since this is not a conflict.

“I have a secret,” Emily says in a stage whisper.

“What’s that?” asks Teacher Julia.

“I’m feeling sad and scared, but it’s for a silly reason.”

“Can you tell me why?” asks Julia.

“Yeah … I’m scared of going to kindergarten.”

“Why?”

Emily says, “I’m scared of going to kindergarten.”

The children eagerly tell Emily not to worry, that she can meet her nice new teacher—they have. Many of the children share their ideas for what to do when you are scared, like bringing a stuffed animal or taking deep breaths. Teachers Stephanie and Julia write down the children’s ideas and add a few of their own, such as asking the kindergarten teacher to help them make a friend and asking another child where to find the bathroom. The teachers also share the list with all of the children’s families by leaving it posted on the wall.

Using puppets in your classroom

Using puppets to tell scripted stories is not a new idea, but this technique is seldom used in preschool classrooms. Some teachers may feel scared, not know what to say, or feel they can’t make the performance seem real, so they don’t use puppets. Yet this skill is both easy to learn and an effective and positive way to teach social skills.

It sounds like a good idea, but how do you get good at it? How do you make the puppets seem real? How do you cope with the discomfort that comes with acting? Here are some tips for using puppets in your classroom.

Preparing for the puppet show

• Try out each puppet before buying it, keeping your audience in mind. Does your hand fit well inside the puppet? Is your puppet friendly looking? Look for faces that can change to show expressions and hands or paws that move.
good guidance

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• Select diverse puppets with care. Include a range of cultures, abilities, and backgrounds. Consider using animals too. This shows children that all kinds of folks can be friends.

• Think about your puppet’s personality. Is he fearful, feisty, or flexible? A range of puppets gives every child “someone like me.”

• Use different voices for puppets. Try making your voice higher, lower, quicker, or slower. Practice that voice in conversation with another teacher before performing at circle time.

• Write a script if you are nervous. Even if you don’t use the script, it will help you remember what you want to say.

During the performance

• Use childlike language. Your persona puppet will seem more like a real child if she uses words and sentences similar to those the children use.

• Make sure each puppet has a range of experiences and behaviors. This way children won’t label puppets “bad” or “good.” Everyone has problems and successes.

• Invite staff members and parents who speak another language to become puppeteers. The puppets can model dual language use and teach the children to try out new words in that language.

• Use real toys as props when acting out conflicts over things. For example, use real blocks if puppets are fighting over blocks.

Just do it! You might feel on the spot at first, like the first time dancing or singing at circle time. But young children don’t judge you! The more you practice, the easier it gets.

Conclusion

I can’t imagine teaching preschool without puppets. When Emily talks about how being teased makes her feel mad, children gain perspective and their classroom behaviors change. Simply saying, “Remember how Emily felt when Zeke told her she couldn’t play?” and then pointing out children’s own solutions from the circle time (their class rules) works wonders. I also find that children are more likely to tell their fears and feelings to one of the puppets than to me.

When something comes up in my classroom, whether it is “You can’t play,” teasing, going to the hospital, expecting a new baby, or visiting the fire station, Emily the puppet and her friends talk about it at circle time. They share their feelings and shape solutions for our community. I hope that inviting a puppet to your circle is as useful and fun for you as it has been for our class.

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