

Using Puppets to Help Children Communicate

Children learn how to identify and talk about their feelings through play. Puppets and marionettes offer a safe way for them to explore feelings and work out problems. "Playing with puppets and marionettes is fun and sparks imagination while also developing impulse control, socialization skills and independence," says Danielle Goodwin, clinical psychologist at Lehigh Valley Hospital and Health Network. "Plus your children get to spend time with you, which is what they really want."

Play can help children begin to recognize various emotions, then learn how to cope with them. "We all experience a wide range of emotions," Goodwin says. "We don't want to teach children not to get angry; we want them to learn what they can and can't do with their anger." Play activities also can help nonverbal children express themselves. "Play becomes their language, while toys are their words," Goodwin says.

She offers these suggestions for using puppets with children:

Keep it simple. "You don't have to spend a lot of money on materials," Goodwin says. "A sock or paper lunchbag makes a fine puppet."

Name the puppets.

Let the child lead the activity. Your job is to make the activity come alive with a story and characters, then follow your child's lead. You can gradually begin to ask questions through the puppets, but go slowly.

Respond with a neutral, calm voice. Don't yell, ignore or humiliate. Don't judge or express anger through the puppets.

Don't scare the child or correct her.

Allow the characters to feel a range of emotions—happy, sad, worried, angry, frustrated.

Help the child to identify feelings and resolve conflicts. Ask, for example, "How is Susie feeling about Johnny teasing her on the playground? What could she say to him?"

Always come to a resolution before the activity ends if there's a problem involved.

Goodwin also recommends using drawing, modeling clay and music as avenues for children to express emotions and cope with anxiety. "Expressing our feelings is important for our health at any age," she says. "If we can make it fun too, we can't lose."



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