



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

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Preschool children are working to accomplish important developmental milestones of learning social and emotional skills, such as learning to share, help others, initiate social interactions, listen, and cooperate with peers. They are also developing emotional regulation skills, including recognizing and expressing emotions, controlling aggressive and anxious behaviors, and beginning problem-solving skills.

One effective way to promote these skills is through puppet play. Puppets help parents enter the child's imaginative world, allowing them to explore emotions of other characters (early empathy development), learn social behaviors, and conversation skills in a fun, engaging way.

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.



Benefits of Puppet Play:

- **Fosters Empathy:** Puppets help children experience and understand the feelings of others.
- **Supports Social Skills:** Through puppet scenarios, children practice important behaviors like greeting, sharing, and asking for help.
- **Encourages Emotional Expression:** Puppets allow children to express and talk about emotions, promoting emotional literacy and regulation.

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

- **Modeling Social Greetings:**
Puppet: "Hi, I'm Tiny Turtle! What's your name?"
Child responds, and the puppet thanks them for being friendly.
Goal: Practice friendly greetings and social interactions.



- **Demonstrating Interest in Others:**
Puppet: "What do you like to do?"
The puppet shares its interests and encourages the child to ask, "What do you like to do?"
Goal: Encourage curiosity and help children learn to show interest in others.



- Asking for Help:**
 Puppet: "I can't get this block together. Can you help me?"
 When the child helps, the puppet thanks them.
Goal: Teach how to ask for and offer help.



- Expressing Emotions:**
 Puppet: "I'm embarrassed because I can't ride my bike. Do you know how?"
 Ask the child what the puppet is feeling, and prompt them to say something to make the puppet feel better.
Goal: Develop emotional expression and empathy.



- **Modeling Sharing:**
Puppet: "I see you're looking for a green block. Would you like mine?"
If the child takes the block, the puppet expresses happiness.
Goal: Teach sharing and connect actions to emotions.



- **Waiting for a Turn:**
Puppet: "I'm going to wait until you finish. Can I have a turn then?"
When the child shares, the puppet thanks them and expresses happiness.
Goal: Teach patience and turn-taking.



Parent Role:

- **Praise:** Parents can use a playful or silly voice for the puppet, then go out of role as a parent to praise the child for their positive social behavior (e.g., sharing, helping, waiting patiently, taking turns, offering a friendly suggestion, asking for help, showing interest or empathy, being gentle and listening well with your puppet).

- **Prompts:** Parents can quietly suggest responses for the child by whispering in their ear some ideas for what to say to the puppet. For example, “*You can tell the puppet you like trucks*” or “*You can say please when you want the book.*” It’s okay if the child doesn’t immediately follow your suggestion; just move on to another activity as compliance is not required. The goal is to encourage imitation and praise positive social behavior.



Additional tips:

- **Keep It Simple:** Focus on one or two social skills per session.
- **Have Fun:** Puppet play should be an enjoyable experience for both the child and the parent.
- **Avoid Negative Behavior:** Puppets should model positive behaviors, never negative ones.



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 the 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 behavioral response to the puppet. You and the puppet can provide the verbal structure. This will support the child’s eventual language development in these social situations.

Puppet play is a powerful tool to help preschool children develop crucial social and emotional skills. By modeling behaviors, providing praise, and encouraging interaction, parents can support children’s growth in these areas in a fun and engaging way.