



Puppeteering

A simple guide by Joe Ridgely, Irene Tan, Julian Wolton

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Why Use Puppets?

Puppets are:

- Live
- Colourful
- Full of action
- Fun
- Non-threatening
- Versatile
- Attention-grabbing

Children respond positively to puppets and will accept things from a puppet that they would not from a human!

They see puppets as real characters and identify with them.

Puppets can be used to address sensitive subjects in a non-threatening way and for this reason are used in counselling emotionally disturbed children.

Puppets can be silly, funny or even rude to get your point across. A puppet can be a role model to show children how to behave or not to behave. Puppet sketches can be used to introduce issues (lying, jealousy, making friends, etc.), show how these issues affect us and what the solution can be. Although they may not always admit it, adults and teenagers love puppets too.

Types of Puppets:

There are many different types of puppets:

- 1) Bar puppet - hanging from a bar
- 2) Marionette or string puppet
- 3) Glove puppet

- 4) Rod puppet
- 5) Moving mouth puppet
- 6) Shadow puppet
- 7) Life-size puppet
- 8) Table puppet
- 9) Finger puppets

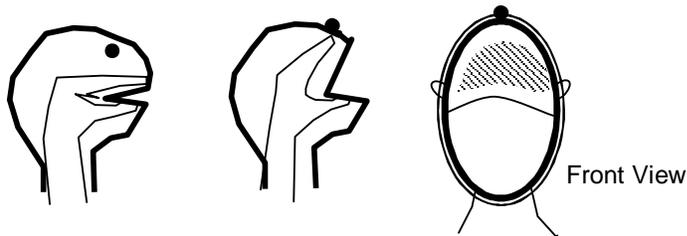
Handling Puppets

To be a puppeteer, you don't need a special voice or expensive equipment. All you need is a sense of adventure and practice - lots of it. Initially you may feel a bit nervous or even foolish, but the rewards you get are worth every bit of effort you put in.

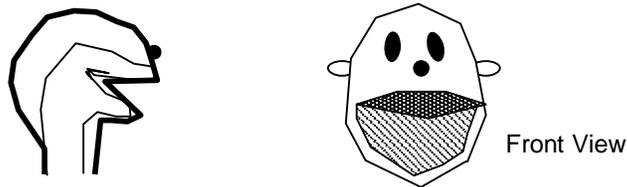
Remember, the puppet is not just a visual aid, but a character, a personality. It has feelings and a mind of its own. These feelings come from you and are communicated through your hands. As the puppet is "alive" it doesn't stay still at all. Even when he is not talking he is responding. This can be achieved by frequent movements of the head:

- a slight nod in agreement
- slow shaking of the head
- a few quick nods to show total agreement or excitement at an idea
- looking down in shame
- hiding or looking away because he is shy

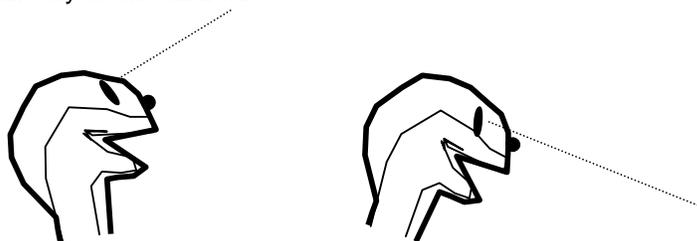
When you pick up a puppet, the most natural thing to do is to open its mouth too wide like this:



The correct way (it makes all the difference) is to keep all your fingers still and just move the thumb. That way, only the puppet's jaw moves and not the whole head.



Because the puppets are real to most of the children, eye contact is just as important as with a real person. Since the puppet stage is usually high up, your whole hand needs to be pointing down so the puppet looks directly at the children:



Apart from the mouth, the hands can be made to move by using rods made of wood or wire.:



Puppets in Ministry:

There are three main ways to use puppets in ministry:

1. Puppet songs

Usually to pre-recorded children's tapes. Works well in all situations, including open airs.

2. Puppet stories

A script written and recorded by yourself. Works best in children's club situations.

3. Live dialogue

One person in front of the stage talking to a puppet, loosely scripted but not recorded. Works best in clubs.

Bear in mind the age group of your audience. Below is a guide to what is appropriate to the different ages:

2-3 year olds:

Don't use a puppet stage – the kids will just come behind! Instead, come out with the puppet on your hand and talk to the children. This usually overcomes any fear of puppets and the kids are fascinated.

4 year olds:

The kids still like to see you, so present your puppets on a table top so they can see you too. Keep stories short and simple.

5 year olds:

Use a proper stage. Longer attention span means they can follow a story line

6 years and over:

Be as elaborate as you like with your stage and props.

Puppet stories and scripts:

Use examples from everyday life, or use and adapt Bible stories. Observe children and find out what they like doing. Get examples from everyday living which are familiar and within their experiences, e.g. going to school; visiting the dentist; losing a pet; at the playground; etc.

There must always be a theme. Choose one theme which is relevant to children. A story needs to have suspense, action (plenty of it), humour and be intelligible to children.

Have one or two others with you as you throw out ideas for a storyline. Work through these ideas together. Always bear in mind the theme that you want and keep to it.

Be careful not to show disrespect to God or the Bible.

Start working out a story line and dialogue. Use different voices. It adds to the variety of your story. Voices reflect the emotions of the script.

- a) Decide what you want to say - theme
- b) Decide who would be best to say it - which character is most suitable.
- c) Decide how to say it - the actual words you will use
- d) Decide how to present it - narration, music, sound effects and props.

Take into consideration where the action will take place and what characters there will be. Once you have chosen your characters, develop them:

- How would they move?
- How would they speak?
- What words or phrases would they use?
- How would they relate to the other characters?

Once you have chosen the character, the puppet should stick to it.

We've discovered that when you are outside, it's best to have puppets mime to lively songs or short fast-moving scripts. Indoors, it's quite effective to have the longer stories.

Remember practice makes perfect, so practice, practice, practice, ...

Recording your script for your performance has many advantages:

- It is the same every time
- No possibility of forgetting lines
- You can concentrate on the puppets
- No need for microphones behind stage
- Sound effects and music can be easily added

If you are pre-recording, have a brief musical introduction. This allows time for the children to enjoy the look of your puppets and have a good laugh. When the music stops, it tells them it is time to listen and they really do! Always record your dialogue and speaking parts first, then add the sound effects. We recommend that you use a double cassette player if that's available to you.

Stage:

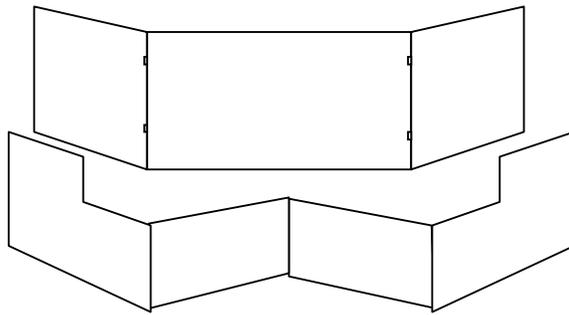
Sometimes the room you perform in will contain natural puppet stages (with a little imagination!):

- Armchairs
- Furniture
- Piano
- Pulpit

Stages can be made in all sorts of ways, from all sorts of materials:

Your stage must be:

- 1) Stable (especially if you are outside).
- 2) The right height for children and the puppeteers. High enough to cover puppeteers (about six inches above the heads) and so the children are not straining their necks.
- 3) Big enough for the puppeteers to move around, especially for musical items.
- 4) Not too colourful. A fairly simple background, otherwise your puppets will fade in contrast to your stage. You want the puppets to stand out.



Lighting - The basic principle is to be sure that the light shining on your puppets is brighter than the surrounding lights.

Music - Background music may be useful to set the tone of the performance.

Props:

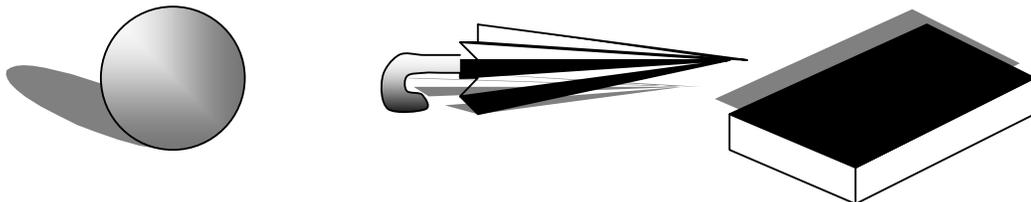
A prop is any item that appears in the puppet performance area, e.g. a sun, a guitar, an umbrella or even a sign board. The props can be attached to the puppet (e.g. a guitar or other musical instrument) or held up on their own (attached to a stick).

Props add interest and realism to the puppet performance. They can also be used to silently announce location, time of day, passing of time, etc.

Props have to be large enough to be seen but small enough to fit in the performance area. Sometimes they need to be in proportion to the puppets. Because of the movements involved it makes sense to have them as light as possible.

Simplicity is the key to effective props. A prop should not draw so much attention to itself that it detracts. Its purpose is to enhance.

It's best not to clutter the stage with too many props. They are only there to convey what they represent. Be mindful of the colour of your props. They must stand out and not blend in with the backdrop. Props can be bought, adapted or made. There is much room for creativity and adaptation.



Important:

As it has been pointed out, puppets are "people" to the children. Therefore it is important that you do not leave your puppet laying around where children have access to them. Always put them away when not using them (a suitcase is a good idea). A small child seeing a limp puppet lying behind a puppet stage can believe the puppet has 'died'.

Have fun!!

Resources:

Books:

'Puppets Ministry Magic' by Liz Von Seggen

'You can be a Puppeteer' by Carolyn London

'When Puppets Talk Everybody Listens' by Shelly Roden

'Over the Fence' by Ann Shorb

If we can help you any further, please contact:

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