

# Small comfort

Using Persona Dolls helps explain to children why differences between them and their peers should be appreciated. Trainer *Babette Brown* reveals how it works with an interactive story example

**P**rime Minister Theresa May has said, 'Hate crime has no place in Britain', but attacks against people who are perceived as different have increased since the Brexit referendum. Typical was the case of a mother, with a child in a buggy, who was told, 'Take your Polish bastard back home to Poland.'

Children pick up negative attitudes towards people who are different from them. Some will stand up for their bullied peers, while others will injure, tease and harass them. So how should early years practitioners respond?

Interactive Persona Doll storytelling sessions help children to unlearn any prejudices that they have picked up and feel good about themselves, while appreciating the differences and similarities between their peers and themselves.

Crucially, such sessions help children to understand that name-calling, teasing and exclusion from play hurt, just like hitting, kicking and punching do. Listening to a doll 'telling' a story about being excluded and the pain they feel can help children appreciate that picking on others because they are different is unfair and unkind.

Some stories are about happy everyday experiences, but others are based on hurtful incidents that have occurred at nursery. To prevent the children identifying the victim or the bully, they are told that the dolls go to their own nursery. It is in this imaginary location that the children believe the incidents occur.

Practitioners also weave stories around current discriminatory issues. A Reception class teacher said, 'Without a doll visiting us at circle time "telling" the children about what happened to her/him, it would be hard to initiate discussions around controversial issues and we probably wouldn't have the ones we do have.'

The stories encourage children to respond to other people's feelings and to act when they experience or witness unfairness. Sessions work because children bond closely with the dolls and respond thoughtfully and empathetically to them. They understand that they are dolls but think of them as 'real'. Practitioners treat the dolls as children, thereby reinforcing the make-believe. They bring them to life by giving each a detailed imaginary persona.

## STORY EXAMPLE

### Introduction

With the doll sitting on her lap, the teacher introduces her to the children, 'This is Aminah. She's nearly four years old. She lives with her mum, dad and two sisters in a flat near the library. The three girls share a bedroom, and Aminah wishes she had her own room because she doesn't like sleeping on the bottom bunk. She goes to Rosebank School, but will often come and visit us.'

### Discussion

The doll then 'whispers' in the teacher's ear and the teacher relays what the doll has said:

'Aminah has asked how you felt when you first came to this school and you didn't know anybody?'

[The children respond.]

'Aminah said that she's also feeling worried and a bit scared. She wants to know if you'll be her friend?'

[The children give affirmative nods and smiles.]

'Aminah has told me that her best friend's name is Polly. Last



## MORE INFORMATION

- Babette Brown can be contacted via: [www.persona-doll-training.org](http://www.persona-doll-training.org)
- [www.awarenessdays.com/awareness-days-calendar/anti-bullying-week-2017](http://www.awarenessdays.com/awareness-days-calendar/anti-bullying-week-2017)
- For more on responding to bullying, see 'How cruel?' by Caroline Vollans, *Nursery World*, 2 October, [www.nurseryworld.co.uk](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk)

**Incidents that have happened at the setting, as well as general issues, are used in the storytelling**



Saturday they had a picnic with their teddies in the park. Teddy is the toy she loves best. She takes him with her wherever she goes. She wants to know if you've also got a favourite toy. She said please put up your hand. She doesn't like it when you shout.'

[The children respond.]

'Aminah has to go now, but she'll visit us again next week.'

[The children wave goodbye.]

## Two weeks later

Aminah is sitting on the teacher's lap, hiding her face. The children want to know why:

'Something happened at Aminah's school this morning that really upset her. Should I tell you about it?'

[Affirmative nods all round.]

'Aminah told me that Polly doesn't want to be best friends with her any more. She's now best friends with Megan. Megan's mum says Megan mustn't play with Aminah and that Aminah and her family don't belong here – they must go back to their own country.'

[The children gasp.]

'Aminah said she told Megan that she's never ever been to another country, not even for a holiday. She felt so upset that she sat all by herself in a corner and didn't feel like talking to anyone. She wants to know if you've ever felt like that?'

[The children respond.]

'Aminah told me she's worried about tomorrow. What if Megan and Polly say nasty things to her?'

[The children respond and the teacher ends the story by weaving in the children's contributions.]

'Aminah says you've given her lots of good ideas. She thinks you're right. When she goes back to school, she should tell her teacher what happened, because children shouldn't hurt other people's feelings or refuse to play with them. And she agrees that when she tells family, they'll give her big hugs and special treats.'

Aminah is then passed around the circle so the children can hug, comfort and say goodbye to her. ■