

# Special friends

Dolls with their own personas and life stories are being used by some practitioners to help raise issues of equality and encourage children to think critically. *Vicky Hutchin* explains



One of the trickiest aspects of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) for practitioners is to support three-, four- and five-year-olds to ‘think critically’, an important aspect of the Characteristics of Effective Learning. Even trickier for many of us is raising issues of equality with young children and helping them find ways to combat stereotyping and prejudice. However, there is one highly effective and very practical strategy that helps us address both these issues. This is using Persona Dolls to tell stories.

Supporting young children’s thinking skills can be a challenge because it involves interacting in particular ways that might not come naturally – trying to ‘get inside the children’s heads’, asking open-ended questions, encouraging them to express their thoughts and ideas, and finding the spark that will ignite their interest and ways to extend their thinking further.

As Nancy Stewart writes in *How Children Learn*, ‘It is challenging to be an effective conversation partner and co-thinker with young children and we all have occasions where our approach misses the mark. We wonder whether we might have contributed in a more helpful way or whether we were too dominating, and cut off or diverted the children’s thinking.’

## STORYTELLING TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Persona Dolls have been around in the UK now for about 15 years, building on an idea developed in the US in the 1950s. A Persona Doll is not a doll for the children to play with but the practitioner’s ‘special friend’ who ‘visits’ on a regular, usually weekly, basis.

The male and female dolls come with different skin tones and hair that reflect a wide range of ethnicities. All practitioners in the setting need to work together to create a ‘persona’ for the doll with help from parents.

**Working with Persona Dolls is an adult-led activity where the children are the problem solvers and critical thinkers**

**Practitioners need to work together to create a ‘persona’ for the doll**

It involves establishing a background – a family, ethnicity and cultural heritage, language background, ability, special need or disability, where it lives, its friends, likes and dislikes.

The aim is to transform the inanimate doll into a member of the group, with a life like a child’s life. To demonstrate both diversity and commonality, there need to be some similarities and some differences between the children in the setting and the doll.

Once the persona is established and everyone feels it is authentic, the doll is introduced to the children, and stories about events in the doll’s life can be told. These will be about events or issues that are usually very pertinent to the group of children, but about the doll who goes to a different setting or school. Some stories will be happy ones, about events such as a family party or a special outing. Sometimes they will be about difficult events such as being called nasty, discriminatory and hurtful

names because of the doll's ethnic background or a disability or being excluded because of gender or race.

This storytelling is not like other storytelling or reading: it is interactive, with the children contributing as much as the practitioner.

Recently, I have been lucky enough to be involved in the filming of practitioners using Persona Dolls with children in a number of different early years settings and contexts, for a new training DVD for Persona Doll Training entitled 'Storytelling to Make a Difference'. While watching these sessions, I saw for myself how effectively the dolls and their stories support all aspects of Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Communication and Language; and Understanding the World – People and Communities. But more than this, using Persona Dolls is a uniquely practical approach to developing children's understanding of fairness and social justice, using their critical thinking skills to solve knotty problems.

### THINKING CRITICALLY

The Characteristics of Effective Learning are great for helping us to reflect on how we support children to become effective learners and on what more we could be doing.

I do a lot of training around England on the EYFS and much of my work is about observing, assessing and planning. I always say that the best time and place to see the characteristics in action, particularly aspects of 'playing and exploring' and 'active learning', is when observing the children in play and child-initiated learning. Watching the filming of the Persona Doll sessions has got me thinking again about how we help children to think critically.

### An adult-led activity

A Persona Doll story session is not child-initiated learning or play – it is very much an adult-planned, adult-led session, where the practitioner calls together a group of children in a quiet space, at a quiet time, to sit down and to listen.

Every time I see a session I am amazed at how absorbed and involved the children are and how enthusiastically they usually respond. Even though the adult is in control, the children participate from the start as they are encouraged to recall what had happened to the doll in the previous session, the problems they helped to solve and the solutions they

suggested. As they do so we see their confidence as creative, critical thinkers and problem solvers grow.

Next, a new story is presented. The children are asked again to listen to the adult and the story emerges as the doll 'whispers' into the practitioner's ear and the practitioner tells it to the children. The practitioner asks the children whether something like this has ever happened to them, how they might feel and what they can suggest the doll might do to solve the problem.

At this point the children take the lead with their own ideas, comments and reflections. The children are the problem solvers, using their own strategies, often with very little additional prompting. All the children's ideas are welcomed and discussed and the session ends where the children have taken it.

### Thinking about thinking

For the children, this adult-led session provides a reflective time to think and to come up with possibilities and solutions appropriate to their age and understanding. The children are not just encouraged to have their own ideas, but to express these to the group. There are no right or wrong answers; all their answers are up for open discussion.

As they participate, we hear them make links between the strategies they have used elsewhere to a new situation about someone else (a doll). This helps them to develop not only their thinking about tricky social issues but also to think about their own thinking. These means using the self-regulatory and meta-cognitive skills we need to be fully functioning

## MORE INFORMATION

- *How Children Learn* by Nancy Stewart, Early Education
- *Persona Doll Training DVD and support book 'Storytelling to make a Difference'*, [www.persona-doll-training.org](http://www.persona-doll-training.org)
- 'The importance of self regulation in learning from birth' by David Whitebread in *Characteristics of Effective Learning*, editor Helen Moylett, Open University Press, 2014

and effective in life. As David Whitebread (2014) tells us, 'Meta-cognitive and self-regulatory abilities are the single most powerful determinants of children's academic successes and a range of positive life outcomes'.

### Why does it work so well?

Persona Doll story sessions work so well because the children bond with the doll as if it was a friend and are automatically motivated to empathise. Even the eight- and nine-year-olds we have filmed see the doll as another child like themselves. And it works because it supports those very strategies that help children to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

For the practitioner, it is the supportive framework of these sessions that helps, providing a structure to ask those open-ended questions which might not come so easily, to stop talking and encourage the children's responses, to really listen to the child's voice, use the language of thinking and model being a thinker.

As Nancy Stewart suggests, we need to 'use the language of thinking and learning: think, know, remember, forget, idea, make sense, plan, learn, find out, confused, figure out, trying to do. Model being a thinker, showing that you don't always know... and can think and find out. Value questions and many possible responses'. ■

*With thanks to Babette Brown of Persona Doll Training for her support in writing this article. The new DVD, 'Storytelling to Make a Difference' can be ordered from [www.persona-doll-training.org](http://www.persona-doll-training.org)*

**Children often bond with the doll as if it was a friend**

