

Story Telling with Persona Dolls

By Julie Rotondo Bisson

LOGISTICS

1. How are persona dolls different from dramatic play dolls?

A dramatic play doll that lives in the "house area" or "family center" of the classroom is a doll whose name, age, identity, family, and even gender can change at any time a child in the classroom desires it. This allows the children to role play, experiment with, and act out real life incidents that they experience. These dolls are an essential component of an early childhood classroom.

However, a persona doll serves a different purpose. When a child is interacting with or "meeting" a persona doll, they are interacting with another member of the classroom. To achieve this, we create a persona doll whose name, birth date, family, likes, dislikes, etc. remain as constant as those characteristics do for real children in the classroom and whose life experiences unfold just like the real children's in the classroom. These ingredients help the children connect to the dolls and make them and the stories they tell much more powerful.

2. Where should I keep my persona dolls?

Keep your dolls in a place where children do not have immediate access to them but where they can be seen by children so they can ask to hold them or ask to have them included in the day's activities. This will ensure that you have some control over the doll's "safety" as well as the ability to make sure that the dolls are being treated respectfully and their "identities" are being protected (i.e. If you have a doll that uses braces or a wheelchair, you can gently remind children who play with her that "Barbara only comes out of her wheelchair when she is going to bed").

Also, by having the dolls in view, there is a greater chance of them becoming integral members of the classroom.

3. How do we make sure that all of us who use the dolls are aware of the characteristics and experiences of the persona dolls?

It is helpful to develop a system for communicating with co-teachers and parents/guardians about the "lives" of your persona dolls as they unfold. That way, when one teacher has shared a story with the children about

"Lauren's" baby sister her parents just adopted, another teacher doesn't tell the children that Lauren is an only child.

One method that may work to keep each other informed is to develop a notebook or journal for each doll. The journal can be kept in a central location where other teachers and parents/guardians can check it and add to it frequently. If everyone involved in telling stories with the dolls makes sure to take a look at it periodically, everyone should be on the same page.

CHOOSING DOLLS AND CREATING IDENTITIES FOR THE DOLLS

The dolls that you purchase or make and the identities that you create for them should be based on what you know about the children and families in your classroom.

1. Physical Characteristics

What racial groups are represented? What different shades of skin color are present? Think about their eye shapes and hair textures. What do those look like? What body types do the children have (thin, chubby, frail, strong)? What physical disabilities do children have (wheelchairs, crutches, glasses, braces)? Do any of the children have any distinguishing marks on their bodies such as moles or birthmarks or freckles?

2. Ethnic and Cultural Identities

What ethnic and cultural groups are represented in the classroom? Are there African Americans? European Americans? Chinese Americans? Native Americans? Children who have just arrived in the US and are not yet citizens and are Mexican or El Salvadorian or Russian for example?

3. Socio Economic Status

Do the families in your classroom struggle to make ends meet or do they seem to have the money they need? Do you have any families who are homeless? Looking for jobs? How many families have two adults earning an income? How many have just one working adult? Do any of the children in your class have older siblings that supplement the family income?

4. Family Make-up

Who are the family members of the children in the classroom? Do you have families with a mom and a dad? Just a dad or just a mom? Two moms or two dads? Do you have children who are being raised by their grandmother or auntie or older sibling? How many of the children are in foster families? How many are adopted?

A WORKSHEET

Use this worksheet to guide you through the process of developing three short stories for a persona doll.

Develop an Identity for Your Doll

The first step is to develop an identity for your doll based on who is (and who isn't) a part of your classroom. Use the information from the worksheet on choosing dolls and creating identities as a guide.

First Story

Develop a short story introducing the children in your class to the doll the first time you bring her/him to the group. Share basic information with the children about the doll, such as her/his name, age, and maybe who she/he lives with at home. You might also tell the children that this is her/his first day in the program and ask the children for help in making her/him feel welcome.

Second Story

Develop another short story that tells the children a little bit more about who this new "friend" is. This is a good time to tell a story about something that happened to the doll that is similar to experiences that many of the children have had (new sibling, moving to a new house, had a fight with a friend, was excluded from a game).

Third Story

Now that the children know more about their new friend, you are ready to tell a "deeper" story that deals with or introduces an anti-bias issue. Develop a story that addresses the incident or issue. Remember to keep in mind the ages and developmental stages of the children you work with as you write your story. Use the information from the worksheet on developing stories for persona dolls as a guide.

Julie Bisson, 7/01

DEVELOPING STORIES FOR PERSONA DOLLS

1. Building Connections

What are some of the experiences that all of the children have in common? Do they have a difficult time saying goodbye to their families in the morning? Do they cry or feel sad when their feelings are hurt? Are they concerned about who will be their friend? A story about something that most of the children have experienced creates a sense of community and connection to the doll. These are good stories to start with.

2. Validating and Supporting Differences

Do you see any differences that would cause a child to be teased or put down by other children? Do any children show sensitivity or shame about any part of who they are or what they like to do? For example, a child with a prosthesis, a girl who never wears dresses and only wants to play with the boys, children who refuse to speak their home language if it isn't English, children not wanting to wear their glasses. A persona doll story can support and validate children who are perceived to be different.

3. Managing Conflict

Are there any conflicts that have occurred in the classroom that might be dealt with through a story? Is there a child in the group who has a hard time communicating and consistently alienates others? Are the children having a difficult time remembering to treat each other with respect? Are there any conflicts over space or materials?

4. Introduce Diversity

Can you think of some aspect of diversity that is not represented in your classroom that could be positively introduced through persona dolls? If Christmas is the only winter holiday celebrated by children in your class, you might introduce a doll that celebrates Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or Solstice. If you don't have any children in your classroom with physical disabilities, this is a good time to talk about how your doll that has a wheelchair uses it.

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