



## Using Puppets with Under Fives

Sheila Pearson and Claire Wells  
'Sheila's top tips!'



I have been leading the Mothers and Toddler (Rascals, Kiddies and Carers) group at my church for 10 years. I had no intention of using puppets to start with, but have learnt over the years of their value in working with the under fives (and their grown ups!).

The first puppet I bought was a rag doll from Eastbourne Pier. I opened up her back and inserted a glove shape to make her into a kind of puppet. She is called Ruby Rascal and lives in a box. Every week she brings something in her box to show the children.

I found this very useful in attracting the children's interest so that I could tell a story or teach a song.

About 5 years ago, I started to expand the range of puppets starting with a lovely teddy bear puppet from OneWay UK\*. He is called 'Prayer Bear' and comes out of another box, when we have refreshments. We sing "*Thank you for the world so sweet*" grace together. He also reminds me, in my ear of any birthdays, and notices.

I now use puppets in song, e.g. 'Mr Cow' (a Julia Plaut song), 'Sleeping Bunnies', and for mini performances of scripts portraying bible truths and sometimes bible stories. 'The Lost Sheep' is easier for one person, but the Puppet Nativity, which was performed in our Sunday School needed 7 puppeteers.

Don't let me put you off. Just one or two puppets can make a difference, and bring joy to little faces. As your confidence grows and you see their reaction, you may want to learn more of the art of puppetry, I found this comes naturally in time and there is loads of help out there.

Since my interest has grown, I have attended training days and learnt so much. There are a few basic rules for using puppets in Ministry and I will list some.

- A puppet does not have a soul, it cannot be saved nor go to heaven. However it can be good or naughty, learn a lesson, be sorry and have similar feelings to us. This way a puppet can be held up as an example.

- It is important to like your puppet so choose one that appeals to you. Children know if there is something not quite right.. Eyes on puppets are important so they are friendly (especially if big people puppets)
- Get to know your puppet before you show it. Put it on a chair at home and talk to it. Give it a name and personality. Decide where it comes from and what it likes to eat. Does it have a friend? If you don't do your homework, you will have egg on your face when the children ask you. (I once was so keen to show my three lovely sheep, that I took them into church the day after receiving them in the post. Immediately I was asked their names.)
- Don't go out and buy several puppets, without thinking how you will use them. Sometimes you will see one which immediately says yes to you, and can be used with one of your group songs, i.e. two rabbits for "Sleeping Bunnies."
- You don't even need proper puppets for tiny children, they are quite happy looking at a doll or stuffed animal which bobs up and down to music or a doll dressed up to look like Joseph in a coat of many colours.
- Let your friends and neighbours know of your interest. I recently had a neighbour who was clearing his garage. My husband had told him of my puppet ministry, and he gave me a large stringed dog and a camel and some large toys including a caterpillar and a beautiful lamb which washed beautifully.
- As your talent and confidence increases, you may like to use a screen. I have one at the church which I cover with a black sheet. You can then choose whether to show yourself or not. You will be surprised by helpers who are happy to hold up a puppet or a prop if they are not seen.
- Try and keep the mystery of the puppet alive. Don't let the children play with them. They most probably have enough toys around. When not in use, keep them out of sight. They are special, and used only at special times.
- A good way to start is with a story book or song. Think about how you could make it more visual.



The “Hungry Caterpillar” and some cut out fruit pictures with holes. You can buy the book complete with a toy caterpillar. The Rainbow fish is also available in a set with book and toy fish. One side of the fish has lots of pretty scales and the other side has only one. There are lots of ideas out there.

- I now use scripts, written by myself or from CD’s specially made for Puppet Ministry. You can also buy CD’s of well known pop songs, specially recorded with Christian words, e.g. “*why not today?*” to the words of ‘YMCA’. Also Children’s Christian CD’s such as those written by Julia Plaut or Vicki Howie. I bought a Veggie Tales Sing-Along CD, and have performed 3 songs from it with my Puppet Ministry team, during our church services, for Sunday School and for the toddler groups.
- Make your performance count, you will have probably put in a lot of practice and effort. It is no good trying to attract children’s attention when they are in the middle of play, or trying to talk louder than the adults chatter. Set the time near the end of the session. Get the mums to help clear the room of toys and sit the children down on a mat in front of you, whether you are using a screen or just sitting with a puppet on your lap.
- Puppets are exciting and contagious. What a wonderful way to show God’s love, and draw the children and their carers closer to His word. I would really encourage you to give them a try.

The CD used for the Christmas sketch (*The real meaning of Christmas*) came from OneWayUK and is called ‘Puppet Power Christmas Plays’, OneWayUK production, track 3.

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*Vine Baptist Church, Sevenoaks, Kent*

*‘Kiddies and Carers Groups, Rascals and Daddy Comes Too.*

*Puppet Ministry, ‘Little Messengers for Christ’.*

### Little Messengers for Christ

**Notes about  
Mustard Seed  
Claire Wells**



**Fegans  
Puppets by**

Claire Wells also a speaker at the 2008 conference has been running a puppet ministry since 2002.

I saw the puppets at a family service at St Johns Church, Tunbridge Wells in 2000. I met the team who were visiting from Colchester. In 2001 I went to my first Children's Ministry Conference at Eastbourne and saw puppets in action there (One Way UK\*). I have been every year since!

As soon as they appeared on stage and started up with the singing and sketches, I was inspired. I bought two, and after prayerful preparations, 'Timothy' made his first appearance at church He just nodded when the vicar asked him questions. It was a big 'first' for the congregation!

Since the initial appearance, they have appeared regularly at 'Tots and Co' toddler group. I was invited to run a couple of workshops but the puppets rested a fair amount in their boxes for the first year. I was waiting for God's timing and prompting but perhaps I just needed to pray and have a go! Sometimes you can be stuck in the starting blocks and you just need to pray and play!

I realised the wonderful appeal these puppets have with children and adults alike, and so I prayed that God would use me within and beyond my own church and out into the other churches locally. I run a toddler group and wanted to help others with bible stories and bible truths.

I gradually realised that I could offer my puppets as a way of supporting the storytelling in other groups by making sure the puppets were kept as simple as possible. i.e. miming and dressing up in the right sort of costumes for the story. So that's how it started. I did a few things that were too ambitious but my tip is to 'keep it simple'.

The important thing was to fit visits to other churches within my working week and to learn to say no as well as yes!

The person from the group tells the story at the front of stage and I operate puppets from behind a screen. I have a volunteer from the group to help. But the puppets don't speak.

I have just completed another annual puppet nativity tour. I have enough puppet characters for a Christmas Story presentation (complete with sheep,



camel and donkey, coconut shell for clip clopping, fairy lights, star on a stick etc)

I do a good 'Lost Sheep/Good Shepherd' presentation and the Easter Story is presented with characters from the Easter Garden.... Mary, Soldier and Angel. You have to be discerning in the way you present the Easter message with under fives and fringe families. The Truth of Easter is far better than just chocolate and bunnies although I love to have those as well... telling the children (and adults) about the real meaning of Easter.

A message shared through puppets can be a great tool for evangelism.

The puppets have names, and collectively they are now known as the 'Mustard Seed Puppets' because their role is about the Kingdom of God and that a little faith goes a long way. It is also about being small and versatile and sowing seeds with God's direction and blessing. In a small way, I pray it is growing God's church.



I still use the puppets in the toddler group.. together with a range of charity shop glove puppet finds, small puppets from IKEA and some adapted stuffed toys including a range of 'Fetch the Vet' adapted male figures!.

***Claire works for Fegans Child & Family Care a Christian Charity in Tunbridge Wells)***

## **Using Puppets for Christian Ministry**

### **Its a Puppet**

- When puppets talk everyone listens
- When they appear, everyone watches
- Visual and interactive
- Non-threatening
- Attracts attention
- Attracts adults and children
- Examples – Sooty, Sesame Street, Spitting Image
- The Muppet Show
- CBBC, Gordon the Gofer, Ed the duck



### **Look Who's Talking**

- Puppets can communicate across social barriers

- Puppets can communicate across racial barriers
- Into sensitive issues, deep spiritual messages and concepts, counselling and therapy
- Historical evidence of puppets being used throughout church history to communicate the Christian teaching and faith to those who could not read or write - drama, stained glass windows, passion plays

### **Puppets can be used for**

- Children's ministry – holiday clubs, Sunday Schools and schools work and lots more!
- Evangelistic outreach
- Street work
- Family ministry
- Seasonal services
- Making announcements!

### **Using puppets helps**

- Develop personal self confidence and image and helps overcome shyness
- Team relationships
- Physical skills
- Imagination
- Your sense of humour!

### **How do I start using puppets?**

- Initially you may feel foolish and nervous, embarrassed and self-conscious.. but have a go... play!
- Most forms of puppeteering don't involve ventriloquism or a silly voice. Some can just mime or nod
- All you need is a willingness to learn, lot of enthusiasm, and practice, a dash of imagination and sense of humour and fun.
- It is the imagination and feelings of the puppeteer that makes the puppet come alive and be real and credible
- To give the puppet feelings, a character, a personality and a mind of its own (but not a Spirit)
- The closest art form to puppeteering is mime and drama



### **What sort of puppet?**

- Finger puppets, (how about a story apron?)
- Glove puppets
- Muppet type puppets with moving mouths
- Ventriloquism puppets
- So many more!
- Homemade out of ordinary items around the house!  
Mops, boots, socks, etc
- Soft toys, animal hot water bottles, novelty flannels!
- Look to TV for inspiration!!



### **What is right for you?**

- What type of ministry?
- What sort of scale?
- A team approach?
- Think about costs
- Home made?
- Credibility is essential for a Christian message so high standards of puppeteering for presentation are important

### **Puppet Manipulation**

- A skill that requires practice.
- Lip synchronisation and good eye contact is essential
- Don't get over ambitious – keep it simple
- Practice with music
- Bond with your puppet!
- It doesn't have to be sophisticated.. just credible

### **Don't...**

- Take your puppet off your hand in front of the audience – keep the mystery
- Allow audience to 'have a go' whilst on stage
- Let audience (especially children!) see the puppet go back in its storage box or plastic bag unless this is a special on stage part of the act.
- Refer to the term 'puppet show' when doing presentations with Christian message
- Mix messages i.e. secular fairytale and Christian messages together

- Hold glove puppet up high with your arm seen going into its bottom!! Try to hold the glove puppet over your other arm
- Don't allow them to get involved in moonlighting or children's parties – they already have an important job to do.

### **Life-like**

- Practice in front of a mirror to start with
- Keep puppets looking alive by simple small facial movements of head and upper body if rod arm puppets
- Don't be tempted to do mad 'Kermit the Frog' movements unless this is a deliberate part of the sketch
- Keep eye contact on audience
- With rod arm puppets, don't let them 'sink' or stare! Or end up gaping at the ceiling.
- Make sure you are comfortable before you start.
- Try different expressions and interaction between puppets
- Even a sock can and shake its head!

### **How does a puppet talk?**

- Voice over from pre-recorded track (*you can buy these from One Way UK*)
- Squeaks or other noises
- Translated or repeated
- A whisper in your ear (the sooty method)
- Ventriloquism
- Body language!

### **Stage**

- What do you need?
- Flexible
- Washing line? Cloth or curtain draped over something e.g. a clothes airer or display boards?
- Consider costs and transporting /setting up
- Size? Use a smaller scale one for more intimate groups e.g. toddler or under fives so not too high and daunting.
- Sturdy
- 'Professional?'
- Nothing? Maybe your arm will do!

## Other Resources

- When choosing your first rod arm puppet, consider buying a boy as most girls will like puppets anyway but boys may bond with a male rather than female puppet.
- Think about how you will store them in order to protect them from damage and distortion of facial expressions (important to avoid)
- You can buy pairs of legs (or make them) if your puppet doesn't have them.



## How does a puppet appear and disappear?

- Stage left/right
- From behind props
- Lifted by you
- Walking upstairs or downstairs effect
- Popping up and down
- Hiding/revealing

## Handling Puppets

- Don't pick up people puppets by nose! They are expensive so handle with care

## How do I write a script?

- A strong theme
- Sadness, happiness, anger and romance
- Simple everyday situations
- Applicable subject matter
- A quick interesting beginning?
- Impact!
- Jesus' parables
- Action and Movement
- Humour
- Repetition
- What would audience react to – consider them
- Keep it simple and professional
- Tell a story from an animal's perspective... what they noticed/observed as they watched or took part



With Under Fives, make up stories/scripts with a toddler's perspective i.e. daily life and relationship experiences

## Other resources

- Pre-recorded puppet tracks words – music – sound effects
- Props

## Where do we go from here?

- **PRAY!**
- Get your church leader on board first.
- Go gently
- Puppets can be a credible ministry if done well and prayerfully
- Not just 'A Puppet Show'
- Can be perceived by some traditionalists as 'child's play'.
- Be sensitive and discerning about how you start in this ministry
- Don't expect a church to understand the power and potential of puppets at the start.
- Some people are instantly won over – watch their reactions
- Are they 'naturals' with puppets?!
- Puppeteering appeals especially to those with visual style of learning and communication.
- Just because someone enjoys a presentation, don't expect them to throw themselves into puppeteering!
- What's in a name?! If setting up on your own or considering a team approach, its important to have a good name for your Christian Ministry
- If setting up a team and/or going out to other venues, its good to have a team logo or shirt to show that you are a bona fide organisation (Check also whether Child Protection requirements apply to your team and practice sessions etc.)

Remember: **PRAYER** - The essential basis for puppet ministry

## Buying Puppets and Resources

- Can be second hand
- Glove puppets and toys from charity shops etc
- Appeal for donations of unwanted toys and puppets from your church members!
- Toy shop finds
- Ebay!



- If buying from specialist suppliers, it is good to find out if they are actually involved in using puppets. Other suppliers may not have the wealth of experience but are selling the merchandise.

You can pick up lots of tips about puppets by browsing on www and seeing puppet ministry sites around the world!

**Adapting puppets** – use wigs and make new costumes to adapt your people puppets for different appearances.

You can create other characters for a specific need by adding a wig from a joke shop

If your people puppet doesn't have legs, don't bring it out from behind a stage /screen unless it has them. Not credible effect if using people puppets with just the heads and bodies. You can buy or make sets of legs to dangle down if you want to use them in this way.

Some people puppets come dressed in Bible costumes but you can also make your own.

See how friendly and approachable the face is when using with very young children.

Some people puppets are small and can sit on your lap. You can get them to nod but they might be better whispering in the ear rather than lots of dialogue if the mouths are stiff and narrow.

### **Suppliers**

**\*\*\*One Way UK** [www.onewayuk.com](http://www.onewayuk.com)

An excellent Christian Ministry set up originally from a vision at Reading Baptist Church. Now an international supplier of puppets and training materials, newsletters, teaching and round the UK puppet training workshops and festivals.

Training DVD and puppet scripts and Gospel ministry resources. Also puppet sound tracks you can use with popular/well known songs with adapted Christian lyrics. See website

Unit D1 Acre Business Park  
Acre Road,

READING RG2 OSA  
Tel 0707 122 6303  
Orderline/fax 0118 975 6303

Cont..

**\*\*\*Time To Sow** [www.timetosow.com](http://www.timetosow.com)

Demonstrations and talk too –also supply craft and card resources

PO Box 216  
Stotfold  
SG5 4WZ

E-Mail : [info@timetosow.com](mailto:info@timetosow.com)  
Fax 01462 639829 Phone 01462 639829

**Puppets By Post**  
[www.puppetsbypost.com](http://www.puppetsbypost.com)

[www.puppetpeople.co.uk](http://www.puppetpeople.co.uk) based in Danbury Essex

**Children's Ministry** supply a range of puppets

\* Don't forget you can find great bargains if you look carefully in charity shops. Not all puppets have to be expensive. Great animal glove puppets can be very effective too!

**\*\*\*Scripture Union** - see this very useful article from the Bubbles Training material pages of the website

[http://light.scriptureunion.org.uk/light/secure/downloads/070606\\_095706.pdf](http://light.scriptureunion.org.uk/light/secure/downloads/070606_095706.pdf)

