



Training children's ministries

New Chapter

Children of all ages love puppets- whether kids are watching a puppet show or actually being the puppeteers. Puppets have a way of imparting biblical truths in a fun, humorous and unforgettable way.

Sesame Street has long been the place where an odd but approachable assortment of characters live. From monsters, to frogs, to grouches, to ... whatever Bert and Ernie are... they're the



people that you meet when you're walking down the street.

As Aaron Reynolds notes (*Fabulous Reinvention of Sunday School*): *Sesame Street* showed the world that 'real' people and quirky characters can, maybe even should, coexist. But there are a few rules to the craft of

using characters that can bring great power to your own ministry neighbourhood.

Keep characters approachable

While they're certainly unusual, every character on the Street is *approachable*. Even the Grouch. Even the monsters. I mean, come on, they've even got a vampire, for counting out loud. But they're all approachable... lovable even. That's an important part of character success, especially with the younger, preschool gang.

Childlike characters work

Many of the creatures that inhabit *Sesame Street* were conceived with this in mind. According to David Borgennicht in the book *Sesame Street Unpaved*, Elmo is written as a three-year-old, Prairie Dawn is seven, and Grover psychologically represents a four-year-old. No wonder Super-Grover can't seem to manage a smooth landing.

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How does this relate to our ministry? "The character is the voice of the kids." Childlike characters help kids work through the topic, often asking the same questions kids are thinking about. These characters give a teacher a great foil, a way to teach kids indirectly (by teaching the character) without just talking at them.

Characters need a 'real' person to help them work things out.

When it comes to driving the main concept home, when making sense

sesame street secrets...



Puppet basics

TEACH

ENTERTAIN

Although these basics are important at all levels of puppetry, the beginner must become proficient enough in these techniques to the point that they become second nature. It is important to know that all the basics can be practised without a puppet, but you must know the correct way to hold a puppet. Insert one hand through the body of the puppet and into the mouth. Your hand should feel comfortable with four fingers in the roof of the mouth and the thumb in the jaw below. Both the fingers and the thumb should be touching the cloth-covered mouth. You may find that you have more control if you cross your middle finger over your index finger.

1. Lip Synchronization

Synchronize the opening of the puppet's mouth with the spoken word. Avoid moving the mouth at random during a sentence. Do not open the mouth all the way with each word. Save the wide mouth openings for exaggerated or loud expressions.

2. Mouth Action

Correct mouth action is necessary in good puppetry. Practise opening the puppet's mouth by moving your thumb down without moving your fingers upward. A slight forward thrust of the hand may help when first beginning. This is to make sure the bottom jaw moves and not the top of the puppet's head- what we call 'flipping the lid.'

3. Eye Contact

Remember to make your puppet look at the audience regularly. If your stage is elevated, you will want your puppets to look down a little more than usual, rather than over the heads of your audience. This is achieved by simple adjustments of the wrist angle.

4. Posture

If you want your puppet to appear natural, good posture cannot be ignored. To achieve this, the puppeteer's arm must be held at right angles to the floor with hand level. Do not allow the puppet to lean from side to side nor lean on the stage.



5. Entrances and Exits

While there are many ways to enter and exit a puppet, the one we recommend using most often is to make your puppet appear as if he is walking up or down a ramp. This movement uses the whole arm and requires the puppeteer to keep his forearm straight up and down while the wrist remains relaxed. Using a fluid motion, the puppeteer moves forward as he 'bounces' the puppet onto the stage. With each bounce of the arm, the puppet comes more fully into view. When the puppet leaves the stage, the process is reversed.



Characters work best with a real person.

A puppet bird or a talking platypus raising questions or working out problems is great. I just wouldn't advocate for a talking egg-laying mammal leading kids across the line of faith. Characters need to be balanced by a 'real' person, a teacher who reinforces the concepts and relates individually to the kids.

There is no other ministry quite like puppet ministry. Puppets are effective in reaching, teaching and entertaining audiences of all ages. They aren't just for kids. Everyone loves puppets.

In the hands of dedicated puppeteers, these foam and fabric creations can make us laugh, make us cry and even help us share important Bible messages.

Puppets are fun and non-threatening. As a caricature of humanity, they can present significant truths in a manner that is easily accepted. Many unique opportunities for ministry are



available to puppeteers, as puppets can open doors to unexpected and surprising venues for sharing God's Word.

Whether they are shadow puppets, rod puppets, Bunraku puppets, finger puppets, moving mouth puppets, we are convinced that puppets of all kinds are one of the most effective tools for reaching children and families with the gospel. Try it yourself; while you're at it you may just catch Puppet Fever!

A puppet ministry team, in many ways, is like a drama group.

Participants memorize scripts and movements, develop muscular abilities and learn to work together as a team.

And that takes practice.

Teams need regular rehearsals to develop the muscular strength, memorization skills and cooperation needed to master the plays, skits and songs of puppet ministry.

The following steps apply to learning prerecorded material. Learning live material follows a similar path, with time added for script reading and voice development.

1. Review the material with puppeteers.
2. Play the CD. Have puppeteers read the script as they listen.
3. Assign parts to the puppeteers.
4. Play the sound track again. Have the puppeteers move their thumbs in sync with the voices on the sound track.
5. Have puppeteers listen to the tape and lip-sync with their puppets. After a few practice runs, have puppeteers put away their scripts and just follow the sound track.
6. Move to the puppet stage. Have puppeteers work on positioning and on polishing their presentation.
7. Add props, scenery and costumes.

Encourage your puppeteers to be patient as they learn correct techniques. Practice them every time you rehearse. Taking time to learn these techniques in the early stages of your puppet ministry will save you time and quality later. And good skills, when combined with creative costuming and fun voice effects, will heighten puppeteers' enjoyment and increase your ministry's effectiveness.

TIMELY *Tips*

- 1 No puppets teaching the whole lesson.
- 2 Try to keep characters grounded in reality.
- 3 Use puppets to introduce simple concepts. Fewer concepts bring many joys.
- 4 Give them memorable phrases. Don't be afraid of formula.
- 5 Nothing beats practice.



Stage advice



W H E R E T O

buy

Lights! Camera! Action! It would be great to have all the impressive equipment and sophisticated puppet stage sets to present a first-rate production.



But it's really not necessary. Puppet ministry can happen wherever people gather- whether that means an auditorium or a parking lot. Having a nice stage- complete with lighting and sound- can make a puppet team's performance really shine. But doing a skit from behind a dumpster for a group of neighbourhood kids can have the same lasting effect on people's lives.

So what does having a nice stage set accomplish? Sets enhance your program's message. Nothing more, nothing less. Your puppet team isn't crippled if you don't have a nice set. And neither has your team 'arrived' just because you do have one.

So design your sets to enhance the puppet team's message, but don't depend on your set to carry the message.

A puppet stage gives your puppeteers something to hide behind and spotlights the puppets themselves. With that broad purpose, a puppet stage can be anything from a simple sheet to a multilevel, multi-curtained stage designed for grand puppet productions. Let's look at a few ideas you can use as your puppet team performs and grows.

The improvised stage- Occasionally you may find yourself in a situation where you don't have a real stage to work with. If that happens, just use whatever's available. Items such as a pulpit, a piano, a room divider, a chalkboard, a table turned on it's side or a blanket held up between two people can all be used as stages in a pinch.

The refrigerator box stage- Just set it upright and cut a slit along the top for the puppets to appear through. Because of its size, use this type of stage with only one or two puppeteers.

Connected panel stage- Hinge 3 to 5 panels of plywood together and cover with a canvas or fabric.

The microphone stage- Connect a narrow board to 2 microphone stands. Use Velcro to hang a curtain along the length of the board. Because you can adjust the stage easily, this stage type works well for puppet teams with younger kids who're growing quickly.

The plastic pipe stage- The most common stage used today is created

- 1 www.onewaystreet.com
- 2 www.puppetplace.com
- 3 www.axtelpuppets.net
www.axtell.com
- 4 www.dtk-kids.com/type/paper_bag.htm
- 5 www.sonshinepuppets.com



with lengths of plastic piping connected together and covered with curtains of material.

Scenery helps set the mood for your presentation. In puppetry, scenery can be draped over the stage curtain or the backdrop curtain, or made to stand alone next to the stage. You can make scenery out of just about anything: cardboard, foam, polysheets, transparencies or slides projected up onto a screen.

Anyone can put together a slick production. But what matters is that the heart of your message gets across to your audience.

DETAILS



NEW CHAPTER