

Puppets could offer valuable support for autistic teenagers

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Puppets could potentially provide autistic teens with a tool to communicate, express their identity and interact socially in ways that are uniquely their own, according to a new study by Dr. Olivia Karaolis,

lecturer in special and inclusive education.

A new study has revealed promising insights into the benefits of using puppets to assist autistic teenagers. The research by Dr. Olivia Karaolis, a Special and Inclusive Education Lecturer at the Sydney School of Education and Social Work, explores how puppets used in educational and therapeutic settings may help improve communication, self-expression, and overall well-being among teenagers on the autism spectrum.

Puppets are commonly linked with [early childhood education](#), but Dr. Karaolis's study, [published](#) in the journal *Youth*, demonstrates puppets could be a powerful resource for teenagers, especially those with autism.

"Puppets are more than a toy," said Dr. Karaolis, who has worked extensively with autistic young children, seeing many children speak more frequently and more confidently when a puppet was involved.

"Dramatic play with puppets can serve as a bridge to break down barriers between students and improve communication. The research highlights the potential of puppets to empower autistic teenagers, allowing them to express themselves in ways that respect their strengths and preferences."

Puppets for teenagers

Katherine Hannaford, a teacher librarian at Macquarie Fields High School in Sydney has been teaching students with autism for 20 years and is an expert in puppet making and play-based learning. She has around 40 puppets on a "tree" in the library at her school.

"Puppets aren't just for babies and little kids, they are for everyone," Hannaford said. "I see the Year 7 students come into the library and they

might not know anyone yet and they all come from different schools, and the shy ones might start talking to each other, through the puppets. The puppets talk to each other and then when they put down the puppets, the students are more likely to keep talking to each other and make friends."

Older teens working with Hannaford have made the puppets themselves rather than choosing finger puppets or plushie-style puppets that are typically given to younger children. Sometimes the puppets are sophisticated marionettes or shadow puppets, and they have helped the students communicate visually in a performance. "I've had students performing without fear or self-consciousness because they are behind the puppet," Hannaford said. "It was the puppet talking and not them."

For the students on the [autism spectrum](#), the puppets have also been soothing. "Some students calm themselves with touch, and the puppets are very soft. If a student is feeling overwhelmed, sometimes they will take the softer puppets off the tree and sit on a couch and just hold the puppet until they feel better."

Puppet studies

The study involved a review of existing literature and peer-reviewed qualitative research. The review included 12 qualitative studies: seven articles that discussed the use of puppets specifically with autistic students in high school settings and five studies that described the use of puppets specifically with autistic teenagers in a range of different therapeutic contexts.

The studies originated from the United Kingdom, the United States, Europe, India and one study from Australia. The studies were selected if they showed evidence of a relationship between puppetry and educational or therapeutic outcomes for teenagers with autism.

Dr. Karolis said the study identified a gap in our understanding of how puppets can contribute to the education of autistic teenagers. This gap emphasizes the need for further research to explore how puppets can positively impact the lives of autistic teenagers and young people.

"This research introduces new possibilities for educators, therapists, and parents to consider the unique benefits of using puppets in the lives of autistic teenagers," she said. "As we seek to improve support and opportunities for autistic individuals, the use of puppets as a tool for communication, self-expression, and interaction becomes a compelling avenue worth exploring."

Tips for secondary school teachers

- Think beyond traditional hand puppets and make and create puppets with your students
- Make puppets from found objects, or puppets from other traditions such as Balinese Puppets, Shadow Puppets or Bunraku
- Use Puppets in the secondary classroom to act out Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth or King Lear. Students can develop an understanding of these characters, their motivations and the themes in the plays through creating a puppet
- Puppets can be used in debates and in whole group discussions and Socratic Circles
- Puppets can be a tool to support design thinking—students can collaborate and respond to a problem or an issue by making a large-scale puppet or [puppet](#) performance. Think about the potential of puppets to raise awareness or communicate an important message to the learning community.

More information: Olivia Karaolis, Not Just a Toy: Puppets for

Autistic Teenagers, *Youth* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/youth3040074](https://doi.org/10.3390/youth3040074)

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