

# Learning through Dolls

*In this download, Alex Chiorando, an Early Years Trainer and Consultant (Marmalade Early Years Consultancy) shares with us different ways in which dolls can be used in learning and to teach key skills.*

## Hello Baby: Using Dolls to Build Belonging and Connection

Over the years I have come to see just how powerful dolls can be in an early years setting. When they become part of everyday life rather than just something kept in the home corner, they offer children a gentle way to connect, to care and to communicate. They create opportunities for children to experience closeness, practise nurturing behaviours and explore feelings in a safe, familiar way. Used thoughtfully they can strengthen relationships, support emotional development and help children feel a strong sense of belonging within the group. I hope you find some of these ideas helpful in your own setting.



## Hello Dolly

I used to buy dolls and lovely outfits and pop them straight into provision and the children enjoyed finding their new baby. However, one day I decided to get the children involved in the whole process. We ordered the baby dolls together and talked about how we could make them feel comfortable when they arrived. The children prepared beds, got clothes ready and made sure that we were stocked up on nappies. I let the children help choose the doll's names and we talked about where they would live in the room. When they arrived, the children were so excited. They greeted them by name, dressed them and showed them their new home. It was beautiful and I really noticed the children enjoying the feeling of comforting and reassuring the dolls. It definitely strengthened the sense of community within the room.



## What's the Matter Baby?

A doll can be a soft way to explore feelings. I like to include them in my gathering time. Sometimes they sit quietly and I'll notice out loud that the baby looks tired or a little bit unsure. Children often respond by offering ideas about why the doll is feeling like this and suggesting ways that we can help. This creates space for emotional language to develop naturally through conversation, which I find much more effective and meaningful than direct questioning.

## Let Me Show You, Baby

I like to include our dolls in the everyday rhythms of the day rather than keeping them just in the home corner. They come with us to wash hands, sit nearby at snack time and sometimes wait by the door when we are getting ready to go outside. The children naturally begin to show them what to do, talking through each step and helping them understand how things work in our room. It is lovely to watch, and over time you notice how this builds confidence, language and a real sense that the dolls are part of our little community.



## Hush Little Baby

Sometimes when the room feels busy or a little unsettled, I like to bring a doll close and sit down with it. The children usually join me without needing to be asked. We might wrap the doll in a blanket, gently stroke its back or whisper a quiet song to help it rest. Sometimes we make a cosy space together with cushions or dim the lights so the baby can relax. You can feel the atmosphere change as my voice softens and the children naturally follow, settling alongside the baby.

I often talk to the children about how our bodies feel in these moments when the lights are low, voices are gentle and we are lying quietly with a blanket. It becomes a simple way of helping children notice what calm feels like in their bodies, while also nurturing empathy for the doll and for each other.



## Come Close, Baby

Sometimes I simply hold a doll close and sit down with it. The children drift over and sit near me as they know what is coming and they really love it. We look at the baby's face, make eye contact with it and gently stroke its hands or cheeks. You often see children move closer to each other too, leaning in and settling quietly. It helps children experience what it feels like to be close, calm and connected. It also reminds them of the warm, secure feelings they know from being held, noticed and responded to by trusted adults. Over time you see this come through in their play, as they begin to copy the gentle, caring interactions with each other, which is always lovely to watch.

## Tell Me, Baby

Some children find it much easier to communicate through a doll than to speak directly. They might hold the baby while talking, whisper to it or use it to show something that feels difficult to say out loud. Other children need a little modelling at first. I might gently speak to the doll myself, wondering how it is feeling or what it might want to tell us. This often gives children a safe starting point and you begin to see them using the baby in the same way. Having a familiar doll available like this can help children feel secure enough to share their thoughts and feelings, and over time you can see their confidence grow as they begin to find their voice.



*Many thanks to Alex Chiorando (Marmalade Early Years Consultancy) for writing this for us.*