

Puppet Theater as a Strategy for Promoting Oral Self-Care in Children: An Experience Report

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Abstract: Objective: To present an experience report on the use of puppet theater to provide oral health education to preschool children attending a public educational institution in Brazil. Methodology: An educational activity was carried out with 122 children aged 5 to 7 years. The puppet play lasted approximately 10 minutes. For the planning, development, and implementation of this educational action, the team organized itself with clearly defined responsibilities. The script addressed the following aspects: dental caries and its causes, toothbrushing technique and dental flossing, dental visits, and healthy eating. Experience Report: The children's reactions revealed curiosity, expectation, and anxiety before the presentation; during the play, their responses shifted to fascination, joy, and motivation for new learning. By interacting playfully with the real world, the child establishes harmony and synchrony between imagination and reality, which facilitates the learning process. The drawings produced by the children after the activity were directly related to the theater's theme, illustrating oral hygiene items such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, and dental floss. Conclusion: Puppet theater enables the presentation of health-related issues in a didactic and engaging manner, especially for children. In this experience, children demonstrated fascination, joy, and motivation toward acquiring new knowledge.

Keywords: Games and Toys, Oral Health, Child.

INTRODUCION

Oral diseases affect approximately 3.5 billion people worldwide, with dental caries being the most frequent condition, impacting about 2.3 billion individuals [1]. This morbidity is the fourth most prevalent oral pathology, affecting 60% to 90% of preschool and school-aged children, and is considered one of the most common chronic diseases in this population [2].

Prevention of this disease involves strategies aimed at improving oral health conditions, with interventions primarily targeting preschool and school-aged children, as this developmental stage is crucial for forming attitudes and behavioral habits that extend into adulthood [2]. One such intervention is the use of play-based activities, which contribute to children's physical and social development, enhance concentration, and facilitate adaptation to situations that simulate real life [3-5].

The use of these activities is recognized as one of the most effective forms of learning, as it fosters interest, engagement, motivation, assessment, and retention of the information presented. Learning takes place within the child's "world," encompassing what feels natural and important to them, respecting their age-specific characteristics, interests, and reasoning schemes [6].

To promote health, educational and/or demonstrative sessions have been identified as powerful tools

for preventing disease, empowering individuals to take informed control of their health [2]. Within such activities, it is essential to introduce demonstrative methods that facilitate learning about oral health care. In this context, puppet theater can be incorporated as an effective methodological resource to achieve this goal [7].

Puppet theater can be used as a learning strategy that fosters the development of oral self-care behaviors among preschool and school-aged children. This type of theater employs puppets with heads and hands attached to a garment, worn like a glove by the operator, enabling movement. Children can see, hear, and even identify with these characters, interacting directly with them, expressing themselves, and having fun while being educated on age-appropriate topics [5].

Several authors have reported that oral health programs incorporating multiple educational strategies for preschool and school-aged children are effective in improving knowledge and fostering positive oral health and hygiene habits in the short term [2, 3].

Therefore, the aim of this study was to present an experience report on the use of puppet theater as an oral health education tool for preschool children enrolled in a public educational institution in Brazil.

METHODOLOGY

The Oral Health Team develops various educational activities addressing child health, with actions focused on Social Pediatrics, one of which takes place in a daycare center. During this period, an educational activity was conducted with 122 children aged 5 to 7

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years. Given the need for oral health guidance, puppet theater was chosen as the teaching strategy.

Theater can be considered a complete dramatic play, as it engages children in their entirety, encompassing creativity and learning through relaxation. It is based on the representation of moments, situations, or problems, involving collective and social practices that are highly relevant today. This approach stimulates creativity and imagination, while allowing children to observe and learn about everyday events [8].

The play included four characters: a narrator, a child, a mother, and a dentist. The puppets were crafted using adult socks, EVA foam, and fabric. For the planning, development, and implementation of this educational action, the team organized itself with clearly defined responsibilities: story production and writing, organization and execution of the proposed plan, interaction with the children, and preparation and application of a follow-up exercise to reinforce the concepts presented. The script addressed the following aspects: dental caries and its causes, toothbrushing and flossing techniques, dental visits, and healthy eating.

Recognizing the importance of prior preparation and the implementation of a structured plan, a rehearsal of the play was performed to improve interaction between the puppets, ensure confidence during the presentation, and measure the time required for the activity.

The children were gathered in the library, where the stage was set for the performance. The play lasted approximately 10 minutes. At the end of the presentation, A4 sheets of paper were distributed so the children could draw and color, reinforcing the importance of oral health and consolidating this teaching strategy in a playful and engaging way.

EXPERIENCE REPORT

In this experience report developed by the Oral Health Team, it was evident that the contents addressed are fundamental to the practice of Health Education, as well as to the effectiveness of interdisciplinary action within the pedagogical framework of the course. Thus, health professionals should remain open to new possibilities for developing practices and care that meet the needs of individuals within their own context.

The children's reactions demonstrated curiosity, expectation, and anxiety before the presentation, which then shifted to fascination, joy, and motivation for new learning during the play. Through playful interaction with the real world, children establish harmony and

synchrony between imagination and reality, enabling the learning process.

The drawings produced by the children were directly related to the puppet theater theme and included oral hygiene items such as toothbrushes, toothpaste, and dental floss.

This educational practice demonstrates that the use of storytelling, dramatization, and artistic expressions engages and motivates children to participate spontaneously, offering them the opportunity to create, imagine, and explore. Learners actively participate, which allows them to identify and overcome difficulties in assimilating content and to create their own alternatives. In this way, children become more aware of the concepts presented and move away from a passive role in the learning process [6].

Preventing oral diseases from an early age allows preschool children to maintain better oral health for longer. Therefore, it is essential to raise awareness among children about the importance of oral care during the first years of life, especially since many preschoolers have access to large amounts of sugar-rich products [9].

In this context, the implementation of strategies that facilitate self-care learning is recommended, such as demonstrative educational activities that improve children's concentration, perception, and memory in real-life contexts. Children acquire greater knowledge of oral health through puppet theater strategies [2].

Ladera-Castañeda *et al.* [2] observed that oral health knowledge significantly improved among preschoolers aged 3, 4, and 5 years through longitudinal monitoring. In contrast, Blake *et al.* [10] did not observe significant improvements after implementing educational interventions. These differences may be explained by the fact that neither study used puppet theater as an educational strategy, relying instead on conventional educational sessions conducted by a dental professional.

Ghaffari *et al.* [11] conducted a meta-analysis of oral health promotion and education programs and concluded that they were effective and had positive impacts on children's dental visits, attitudes, toothbrushing, and flossing habits. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of continuously evaluating these educational interventions, whether short- or long-term. The authors also highlighted that parents' oral health habits strongly influence their children's oral health [9, 10, 12].

Due to its artistic, interactive, and educational nature, puppet theater allows health topics to be

presented in a didactic, attractive, and engaging way, and can also generate reflective thinking in its audience, particularly in children [13]. This type of theater helps preschoolers learn oral health self-care in a fun and enjoyable way, making them identify with the characters and develop positive awareness [14].

Dental professionals and/or dental students should actively participate in initiatives aimed at reducing risk factors for dental caries, such as poor oral hygiene practices. Incorporating puppet theater as an educational strategy in oral health education programs can effectively teach basic health concepts to children in their early years and help modify their hygiene habits in an attractive, didactic, and entertaining manner [16].

CONCLUSION

Puppet theater enables the presentation of health-related issues in a didactic and playful manner, especially for children. In the present experience report, children demonstrated fascination, joy, and motivation for new learning.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declared no conflicts of interest.

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<https://doi.org/10.12974/2311-8695.2025.13.03>

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