

## Using Persona Dolls to address disability and special needs

The Dolls and their stories are great to address **disability and special needs** issues, and build self-esteem and confidence. The Dolls can help to support children with special needs as some Dolls use wheelchairs, some wear glasses etc.

The dolls build empathy between children of different levels of ability/disability. Dolls can help children 'unlearn' prejudice they may have picked up towards children who are 'different' to themselves, or those with different special needs.

Persona Dolls also assist with integration in mainstream facilities as well as dealing with prejudice from non-disabled children.

### Some definitions

**Prejudice** is an attitude or opinion formed without reason. It can be against any person, group or gender. It may be stigma, or bias, against people who are HIV positive or who have AIDS, people with disabilities, people who are black, gay people, poor people etc. It can show as treating people as 'invisible', excluding, teasing, name-calling, harassment etc.

**Discrimination** takes place when people are unfairly treated because of their identity - the way they look, their language, their gender, where they live, etc. People with HIV and AIDS can also be discriminated against, or stigmatised, because of their health status.

These are the four goals of an anti-bias approach: what we want children to develop and what we adults need to do to take forward our vision for children:

- to nurture each child, each adult: building up confidence, group identity and self identity that does not involve feeling superior to anybody else
- to promote in each child and adult a comfortable, empathetic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds: this has to do with information about others, as well as emotional attitudes and feelings
- to guide each child and adult to think critically about the kinds of bias in society: to learn to identify, challenge and eliminate unfair bias
- to help each child and adult to develop the confidence and skills to stand up for herself or himself and for others in the face of unfair, biased behaviours: this is the activist goal, to teach that people working together can create change and build a more just community, even in the classroom.

### Notes on children with disabilities

- The Constitution protects all people living with disabilities from discrimination. Many laws protect children with disabilities, including the Child Care Act and the Social Assistance Act.
- The Department of Education has ruled that learners with disabilities must be allowed to go to ordinary public schools. Unfortunately, many face discrimination as teachers and schools are not always equipped to cope with their needs.
- Disabilities include deafness, blindness, albinism, speech impediments, difficulty walking, very severe burns, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, epilepsy and autism. Some disabilities (like dyslexia) are hard or impossible to see.

- Negative terms increase the discrimination faced by children with disabilities. Don't use words like 'deformed', 'crippled' or 'handicapped' or 'disabled' – rather say 'living with a disability'. Unacceptable terms include 'mongol' (rather: 'child with Downs Syndrome'), albino (rather: 'child with albinism') and 'deaf and dumb' or 'deaf-mute' (deaf people communicate, through sign language and/or speech).

**Some resources:**

- Disabled Children's Action Group works in partnership with the Department of Education to help schools to welcome children with disabilities. PO Box 18724, Wynberg, 7824; 16 Broad Road, Wynberg, Cape Town Tel: 021 797 5977 Fax: 021 797 5077
- *The Welcome Book, a guide to help teachers include children with disabilities into the classroom*, is available from the Early Learning Research Unit (ELRU), 19 Flamingo Crescent, Lansdowne, Cape Town, Phone 021-7627500, fax 021-7627528, [info@elru.co.za](mailto:info@elru.co.za), [www.elru.co.za](http://www.elru.co.za)

**Some Points to remember**

- Keep stories interesting to children, appropriate and pitched at their age level –about things they can identify with or that could have happened to them.
- Use *appropriate language* they can understand, never use 'big' words.
- Try not to scare children.
- Try and have most 'issue' stories 'solvable' in some way so the children don't get demoralised. We want to empower children.
- Some 'issue' stories are not 'solvable'. Children need to learn this too. That it is a process and that it is good to talk about problems to someone you feel safe with.
- Never humiliate a child. Build self esteem. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' answer – discuss everything.
- Keep stories simple with one focus.
- Be careful not to 'end' the story - it is an introduction. The children will give ideas, solve the problem and the 'end' may only happen after 3 or 4 sessions/visits.

**Three examples of story scenarios:**

**1. Joey's scenario/story (Language, accent/ could adapt to speech problem)**

Joey speaks Afrikaans at home but at school they speak mostly English and Xhosa. Sometimes the children laugh at him. He's not sure why but he thinks it's because of

how he sounds when he speaks English with an Afrikaans accent. Joey doesn't like it when the children laugh at him.

*What do you think he should do? What can he say to those children? Who can he ask for help at his school?*

The children may come up with different ideas:

*"He can tell his mother and his granny and they can tell his teacher and she can talk to the children."*

*"He can get his friend to go with him to tell those children to stop it because he doesn't like it when they laugh at him".*

*"He can get his uncle to beat them up."*

Joey says you've given him good ideas. He's feeling better now. He will speak to his teacher and his Mom and ask his friend Ben to go with him to tell the children. He says thank you very much. He wants to know if you want him to tell you what happened when he comes next time. OK, he will. Bye.

## **2. Zodwa's story (issue: disability and name calling)**

The children already know Zoda, a six-year old girl who lives with her mother and her two sisters. The teacher developed this story after a child in the class was teased about wearing glasses.

With the doll on her lap the teacher tells the children that Zoda has a problem she would like to talk to them about. She thought it would be fun going to her sisters' school but it's not. She doesn't like it one little bit. Some of the children laugh at her and tease her because she wears glasses. And it's even worse than that. They stand in a circle around her and call her 'four eyes, four eyes!' She doesn't know what to do except cry.

*How do you think Zoda is feeling? Is that fair? How can we help her? What can she do?*

## **3. Joanne, aged 5 (disability – uses wheelchair/ maybe a push chair)**

**Context:** This story was developed after Rosie, one of the Persona Dolls, told a story about what she wanted to be when she grew up and the children talked about what they wanted to be. Karl, who uses a wheelchair, said he wanted to be a doctor like his mum. Tony laughed and said, 'How can you do that? You can't even walk'. The other children nodded their heads in agreement. If you have a group with no children using wheelchairs, you could use this story to raise awareness and talk about disability issues.

**Persona:** Use a girl doll with a wheelchair so as not to put the spotlight on the boy who

uses a wheelchair. She could be from any cultural and language background, social class and

home situation. She loves stories and writing and is very good at numbers and music. She loves going to the movies. Introduce her over a few sessions, focusing on positive, active aspects of her life to counter any negative stereotypes about people with disabilities.

**Story:** Remember Joanne told us last time about her trip to visit her grannie on her farm. *Do you remember what she saw?* She saw a new calf. Joanne's class is planning a trip to the farm and they are all excited. Joanne went to the farm and it was great – she really wants to go again. *Have you been to a farm? What did you do? What did you see?*

Well, today Joanne is angry and upset. Lindi, in her class said, 'You can't come to the farm, you can't even walk, how will you get to the farm'. *How do think Joanne felt when she said that? How would you feel? Do you think it's fair if she doesn't go to the farm with her class? Can people who use wheelchairs go to the farm and other places? Are there different ways to travel? What can she say to Lindi when she goes back to school tomorrow? Who can help her?*

**Extension activities:**

- Arts and Culture and Life orientation: Copy the yellow sign/symbol for 'disabled parking only' and learn what it means. Look out for the sign in the community.
- Community involvement: Find out from someone in a wheelchair (or if there is no wheelchair, ask a parent with a pram/pushchair) about obstacles to getting around and what changes in the school/community would make life easier.