

Transcript – Ways & Means Podcast – S4E6

Emily Hanford: From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways & Means. We share bright ideas for how to improve society. I'm Emily Hanford.

Minnie: OK, let's go... 1, 2, 3 ...

We're in a preschool classroom in Durham, North Carolina. The children have stuffed their backpacks and lunchboxes into their cubbies and now they're circled up on the floor in front of their teacher. They're sitting cross legged, practicing counting on their fingers.

Classroom: ... 10, 11

Minnie: Do we have 11 fingers?

Children: No!

There are higher and higher expectations being placed on preschool children nationwide. Preschools are no longer just places for playtime. Now, kids are expected to start learning to read and write and count before they reach kindergarten. What's more, four-year-olds are also expected to be able to behave in the classroom, but that's not always happening. Christina Christopoulos is with the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University.

Christina: We have seen this trend where children come into pre-school and they are having such intense problems that the preschools cannot keep them. They tell the parents we are sorry, we just can't handle this type of behavior. So, a lot of kids have been kicked out of preschool. It's very difficult – I mean how can you kick out a 3 and a 4 year old from the classroom?!

Research shows kids don't learn how to regulate themselves automatically. You have to teach self-control skills head-on. Katie Rosanbalm is Christina's colleague:

Katie: You need to directly teach kids the skills to regulate themselves the same way you would teach them to read or to

do math. You need to instruct it, practice it, coach it, give them opportunities.

But *how* do you do this? How do you teach a whole classroom of four-year-olds how to handle difficult feelings?

Intro Music

Today on Way & Means: Teaching preschoolers how to handle tough emotions. One solution might be harnessing the power... of puppets.

Music ends

We've known for a long time that puppets are an effective way to talk to kids.

Mr. Rogers theme song

Mr. Rogers: Many of the characters in the neighborhood of Make-Believe are puppets that I make talk. I'll show you.

Puppet: Daniel Striped Tiger is my name. Hi!

Mr. Rogers used puppets to talk directly to children about their emotions in his hit PBS show "Mr. Rogers Neighborhood." One of his most famous puppets is Daniel Tiger. Here's Daniel Tiger talking to one of the characters on the show, Lady Aberlin.

Lady Aberlin was supposed to pick Daniel up, but she forgot.

Lady Aberlin: I'm really sorry Daniel.

Daniel: Are you?

Lady Aberlin: I can see by your face that you're really sad.

Daniel: It feels awful to get forgotten.

Music Fades

Classroom Sounds

Minnie: So how are we doing today? (Good!) Good? Let me see two thumbs up if we're doing.... Oh my goodness friends, you all are so smart!

Minnie Best is a preschool teacher at Fayetteville Street Elementary in Durham. Minnie has been teaching for over 15 years. She says kids show their emotions at school in a bunch of different ways.

Minnie: In my situation, I have a child that hits, you know -- the way she expresses herself, she hit another child.

Minnie is a part of a study that the researchers we met earlier are running in North Carolina. The researchers have trained preschool teachers on a classroom curriculum that uses puppets to teach emotional and social skills. The plan is to test kids at the beginning and end of the school year to see if puppets can help improve children's classroom behavior. The curriculum centers on an imaginary place called Dinosaur School.

Minnie: ready to start dinosaur school? (Kid whispers, "yeah, yeah ready!")

Class singing: "shake hands with a friend and say "Bonjour..."

As the children sing, Minnie Best takes out a puppet with four ponytails, held together with colorful bows.

Puppet Jewel: Hello everybody...how are you? (Good!) It's so good to see you!

Meet Jewel.

Puppet Jewel: It's been such a long time!

Katie: Dinosaur school is where we have a dinosaur puppet named Dinah who is the principal of dinosaur school and the kids love her and they cannot wait to see her every week and they will do whatever she tells them to do it's a lovely teaching tool.

This is Duke researcher Katie Rosanbalm again.

Katie: And then we have a child puppet, that's really the size of the kids, and that puppet provides the perspective of a child in the classroom who may be struggling to learn these skills right alongside the kids, and can kind of mirror what they are going through.

Today, Minnie Best is going to use Jewel the puppet to teach the children how to snap—using their middle fingers and thumbs, which they call "tall man" and "thumbkin." Snapping isn't the real point of this lesson though. The point is to try to do something hard, and work through the feelings that challenges bring up.

Minnie: Okay, how many times have you ever felt frustrated because you couldn't do something? Show me your frustrated face... oh my goodness, that's frustration!

Today both Jewel and Ms. Best are acting like they can't snap.

Puppet Jewel: Oh no... show me your snapping muscles, I just can't do it!

The kids all focus on rubbing their tall man and thumbkin fingers together fast enough to make a sound. Most of them are succeeding, but one little boy named Aiden can't seem to do it, so Ms. Best pretends she can't do it either. An assistant teacher and Jewel the puppet are providing moral support...

Minnie: Jewel, I'm gettin frustrated because I just can't do it.

Puppet Jewel: No, let's try again, Miss Best, let's try again. Are we ready? On three you ready? On two, three. *Snap*

Minnie: Oh my fingers came together and did it Aiden!

Aiden: I can't do it. I need some help.

Minnie: OK, well let's try...ok, ready tall man and thumbkin, fast. You did it! (Cheering) Give yourself a pat on the back!!!

Katie: By using the puppets. The kids relate to them in a whole different way, and I think absorb the information at a much deeper level.

Researcher Katie Rosanbalm.

Katie: And when they see this child puppet struggling with the same kinds of problems they have and they get to help him find a solution and practice that solution... It's a level of enthusiasm that you don't see when a teacher is just leading a class, and especially for kids who may be shy or kids on the autism spectrum who may have a harder time with social interaction. They love talking to the puppet.

The teacher-training part of the program is organized like a pyramid. The teachers learn that the most important thing when it comes to classroom management - the base of the pyramid - is good relationships.

Katie: So at the beginning of the school year, all we want teachers to focus on is, how do you build those positive relationships with each and every student in your class.

Minnie: This is our new friend Khaliya. (Hi, Khaliya!) Khaliyah just started yesterday, she's a brand new friend!

Katie: Then as you move up the pyramid, you think about proactive strategies to use in a classroom. How do I practice the rules with the kids, so that they know exactly how to behave and what I expect of them? How do I praise the child that's doing what I like so that the other child who isn't doing it right then will go, "Oh I would like that praise and I want some of that too."

Minnie: ... A present, GOOD JOB!

The top of the pyramid is all about consequences and a teacher's plan to deal with misbehavior.

240 preschool teachers in North Carolina have been trained to use this classroom management program and puppet curriculum. Researchers ran a randomized trial in 120 classrooms.

Children in classrooms that used the Dinosaur School curriculum showed significant improvement in identifying their emotions. (Like, recognizing that they're sad or angry.) Those children were also better able to ignore problems rather than react with aggression or crying. And finally, teachers who used the Dinosaur School Curriculum said they themselves used more positive behavior management strategies in class.

Katie Rosanbalm says showing preschool teachers how to explicitly teach emotional and behavioral skills could have big implications throughout a child's education.

Katie: So, think about what a high school student has to deal with. They have much more risky opportunities at their fingertips that they suddenly have to manage their emotions about. And the consequences of failing that is much worse. If I'm four and I get in trouble for kicking over my friend's block

tower, that's not nearly as bad as if I'm 16 and I get in trouble for stealing or some other way that I failed to control my behaviors.

Teacher Minnie Best says learning how to use puppets to teach self-regulation skills by has changed her classroom tremendously.

Minnie: I continue to use the puppets daily because it really works. We even use our puppets during math and counting. When we have a child that's getting frustrated, and we're seeing that child cannot, for some reason, grasp that concept, we will sit the puppet down with us and we'll say, "Oh, can you see that Ruby has taken her fingers and counting?" and it makes the children feel at ease. That's what I'm seeing.

Teacher and Children singing: "Goodbye Jewel, Goodbye Jewel, Goodbye Jewel. We're glad you came to school! One more time..."

Katie Rosanbalm is a Senior Research Scientist and Christina Christopoulos is a Research Scholar at the Center for Child and Family Policy at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

Theme Music

Incredible Years Dinosaur School is part of a series of interventions developed by Psychologist Carolyn Webster-Stratton.

The Duke study was funded by the [Institute of Education Sciences](#)

If you head to our website, ways and means show dot org, you'll find Tip Sheets for supporting the development of self-regulation in young children. One is for people who work in preschools, and the other is for parents and primary caregivers. Thanks to Katie Rosanbalm for those.

Thanks also to Fayetteville Street Elementary in Durham, North Carolina and teacher Minnie Best.

This is our last episode of Season 4 of Ways & Means. We will be back for Season 5 soon. In the meantime, please tell your friends about us!

Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Jones and Karen Kemp. Our engineer is Johnny Vince Evans.

Thanks and goodbye to our assistant producer and graphic designer, Melissa Carrico. And a big welcome to our newest assistant producer, Hunter Stark.

Until next time - I'm Emily Hanford.

Ms. Williams: We can all dance! This is the compliment song.

Minnie: Can I stand up Jewel and Ms. Williams?

Ms. Williams: Yes, I'm going to stand Jewel right there in the chair.

Music

Minnie: Oh you can snap while you're doing this because we just learned to snap.

Teachers Singing: Have a long word that you made not have heard and it always makes you feel good. It's a C-O-M-P-L-I-M-E-N-T. It's a compliment, it's a compliment. It's when you say something nice that makes someone smile. It's a compliment, you try. I like your shirt. I like your shoes....

Music Fades