



Using props helps children understand and internalise the messages contained in stories

EMBRACING DIFFERENCES

INCLUSIVE STORYBOOKS AND HOMEMADE PROPS CAN TEACH CHILDREN TO RESPECT PEOPLE FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE.

Children at Children's Cove @ Orange Grove come from diverse backgrounds, including different races and cultures, family types as well as learning abilities. Recognising that it is crucial to have a head start on conversations about diversity in the early years, the preschool initiated a 'Character Cornerstone' project with ECDA's Innovation Grant. The intent was to build a community of educators and children who are aware of and sensitive to others, regardless of ability, background or family situation.

PROPS MAKE STORIES COME ALIVE

Thirty minutes a week were dedicated to the Character Cornerstone curriculum. In the centre's revamped library space, educators read inclusive storybooks to the children, followed by discussions about these books using DIY props such as hand puppets. For example, *The Amazing Sarong*

celebrates Singapore's multiracial society, while *Two Nests* is a gentle story about family separation.

"The props were used to enable children to immerse themselves in the stories. They were able to understand the stories better and could recall the messages readily," says K2 teacher Ms Sherlin Ong. She adds, "Our centre always had a large selection of books, but it was only when we utilised them in this way that I realised how books are valuable tools to instil self-awareness and build children's interpersonal skills."

Another book was *In My Heart: A Book of Feelings*, which uses colours and illustrations to explain a range of emotions. Educators made paper props of a girl with various facial expressions, and hearts in different colours

labelled with emotions like 'sad' and 'shy'.

"Children imitated the expressions on the girl's face and named the matching emotions on the hearts. It helped them become more aware



BUILD CHARACTER AT STORYTIME



Ms Sherlin Ong shares tips on creating character-building opportunities at home.

- **Look for age-appropriate books.** Give younger children books with simple words and scenarios they can relate to. For older children, pick stories that they can read on their own or that they can retell after you have read it to them a few times. Make it fun.
- **Make props that can be reused for other stories.** Use props that can be made with materials found around the house, like tissue boxes, toilet rolls, plastic bottles, old clothes and even soft toys. Get creative!
- **Act it out.** Role-play parts of the story to immerse in the characters and the plot. Discuss what the characters could have said or how they could have behaved.

of their friends' feelings. They would tell the teachers when they saw a friend crying, or they would go and comfort them," says N1 teacher Ms Lee Ying.

OPEN MINDS AND HEARTS

Though the project ended in late 2020, Character Cornerstone is now part of the curriculum. Each teacher creates props for one book each term. The different Children's Cove branches share resources by exchanging storybooks and props. A review corner was set up for children to recommend books to their friends. They also carry out book reviews together with their parents.

Mr Soon Chuan Meng, whose two children are enrolled at the centre, praises the initiative: "Books are great tools for cultivating character. One good book I have read to Chloe and Ethan is *Boa's Bad Birthday*, which teaches us not to judge too quickly." ●