

*Looking for a way to engage children's imaginations—and enable them to improve skills across the curriculum? Personalized paper dolls promote problem solving and creativity!*

# Paper Dolls: Back to Basics, With a Contemporary Twist

Bobbie Gibson Warash

Does the following scenario sound familiar? The year could be 1963 (or 1983 or even 1933). A group of children gathers around a brand-new box of paper dolls. For an entire afternoon the children are enthralled as they cut out outfits, dress the dolls, and use them in pretend play.

For today's parents and grandparents, paper dolls were an inexpensive toy that fascinated them and engaged their minds for hours. What many of their parents may not have realized were the benefits children were gaining from this experience. Children were involved in a quiet activity, yes. It was also a time where a lot of sharing was going on and much learning was taking place. Children were improving their fine-motor skills as they cut with scissors. They were using language to exchange ideas and create make-believe situations that included role playing. All were participating in a social activity that increased their communication abilities and motor skills.

Paper dolls had a certain appeal that is not found with many of today's toys. It is true that children become highly engrossed with electronic entertainment devices such as video games and television, but these require little genuine two-way interaction and even less imagination. Commercial toys in general are so prescriptive in their design that they limit play and problem-solving opportunities. By contrast, paper dolls, like other age-

**Commercial materials  
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problem solving.**

old toys, are simple and allow room for imaginative growth. Children can

use the dolls to re-enact scenarios that enable them to grasp day-to-day circumstances. Through doll play, children often resolve delicate and complex issues that they have on their minds.

## The Paper Doll Project

Teachers at the West Virginia University Child Development Laboratory (Nursery School) wanted to offer projects that would be more meaningful to young children, so they developed the paper-doll idea. The teachers had noticed that children were increasingly desensitized to toys as the items became more elaborate and the quantity increased. It was as though the more the children got and the more animated the toys were, the more toys they expected and the more they expected the toys to do.

At the same time, children showed little respect for learning materials and equipment. They would even walk on top of materials, such as puzzle pieces, if left on the floor. Earlier research (Warash & Kingsbury, 1999) at the Nursery School showed that children took more pride and interest in their work when they had a personal investment in the project.

When children participated in a Nursery School puppet project (Warash & Workman, 1993), they brought to school a pair of their outgrown, one-piece pajamas. In turn, they were deeply involved in recycling the pajamas into their own body-size puppet. They used their puppets in their play and took very good care of them. It was apparent that the children became extensively involved in constructing their puppets and developed a sense of pride and ownership as a result.

The paper doll project seemed to be another perfect way to offset the effects of the expensive, impersonal, and elaborate toys that predominate today. This project would get back to the basics, using good, old-fashioned toys that

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provide opportunities for plenty of child involvement and interaction.

### New Directions for a New Year

Before the school year started, the Nursery School teachers established several new program initiatives. They tailored the paper-doll project to fit within these goals.

- The teachers wanted a better selection of less-commercial items that did not dictate children's use of the material in play. They chose more toys and activities that were simple, which could spark children's imaginations.
- An array of recyclable items for children to use for creative inventions was provided, such as fabric pieces, wrapping paper, buttons, and yarn. Many of these items were used to embellish clothes for the paper dolls.
- Teachers offered more open-ended materials during free play. They ordered more generic items such as wooden figures that could represent a cadre of occupations and wooden trucks that could represent various kinds of vehicles.
- Everyone wanted to help children to appreciate the materials they had, to have more investment in the outcomes of their activities, and to take pride in their accomplishments, all of which might help them to respect the materials.

This project fit well within the program's philosophy. Children at the Nursery School use pictorial contracts (Warash, 2001) to decide the small-group centers they want



Photographs courtesy of the author  
*Children were encouraged to make the type of clothes they wanted for their dolls. Some boys wanted to make football uniforms, while other children preferred regular outfits.*

to attend. Children choose from a variety of teacher-directed and child-directed centers. They move around freely from one center to another at their own pace for approximately 45 minutes. After center time, the remainder of the half-day session consists of free play, and some children choose to continue to work on projects.

The paper doll project was designed as one of five teacher-directed activities offered 3 afternoons each week. Children involved in the group were 4- and 5-year-olds who attended preschool 5 days a week. All 21 children were from middle-class families and had attended the morning class of Nursery School the previous year. They were quite proficient with scissors because of the various long-term projects they engaged in the year before and at home.

The paper doll project was designed to give the children the opportunity to create their own toys to use in their play. Teachers hoped that this involvement would stimulate a sense of ownership that would engage children's respect for the materials as they played with them. They also knew from previous projects to follow children's cues. A project could go in any direction or even fail.

### Design-Your-Own Dolls

Instead of buying pre-made paper dolls, which might be complicated to cut and often have a predisposed view on fashion, children designed their own dolls. In the process, children's skills were enhanced in a variety of curriculum areas, and they had many opportunities to recognize and solve problems.

To begin the project, a teacher took a close-up photo of each child's face that children then cut out to use as their doll's face.

Teachers made three different 12-inch doll body shapes on cardboard so children could pick the type of body they wanted. Children traced the body on light-weight poster board. These 4- and 5-year-olds were accomplished scissor users, but the child-size scissors proved to be frustrating for cutting poster board. Therefore, children were given the

#### Goals of the Project

1. Children make a simple, reusable, old-fashioned toy.
2. Children demonstrate respect for their play materials.
3. Children create a toy that stimulates their imagination and pretend play

option to use adult scissors under direct adult supervision in small groups. The adult scissors cut more efficiently, but the larger grips and blades required more coordination.

Children chose the scissors they felt more comfortable using. Because cutting poster board was a tedious task, the teachers thought they might have to finish the cutting. However, the children all were persistent in cutting out their paper doll bodies. Kerry was a very active child who does not gravitate to sit-down types of activities. She spent much time working on her doll by herself. Even though one doll arm was about twice the size of the other when Kerry finished, she was very proud of her work.

The teachers hoped that children's dolls would not look the same—and they certainly didn't. Sometimes children made changes to their original paper doll body by adding more detail with a marker. The children were so excited about their accomplishments that the dolls were the first thing they showed

their parents when they arrived to pick them up each day.

Next, children glued their photo faces on the bodies. Children were encouraged to make the type of clothes they wanted for their dolls. Some boys wanted to make football uniforms, while other children preferred regular outfits. Generic cardboard patterns of shirts, dresses, and pants were provided so the children could trace items if they wished.

Children made their clothes into the style of their choice by using different colors of felt and adding accessories. All of the children flocked to this activity and spent much time tracing and cutting out outfits for their dolls. They decorated felt pieces with markers. After outfits were completed, children spent time dressing their dolls. Velcro® strips were used to secure the clothes to the dolls and to facilitate clothing changes.

Paper dolls and clothes were stored in oversized manila envelopes. Because the children demonstrated such a high interest in these paper dolls, the dolls were often used during free play. As parents came to pick up their children, a common greeting would be, "Hey mom, look at my doll!"

### Extensions Into the Curriculum

After several weeks of making clothes and dressing dolls, teachers decided to extend the activity by integrating it into other Nursery School themes. For instance, when a teacher read a book about children wearing traditional clothing from Mexico, she provided fabrics and accessories so children could make their own traditional clothes for their paper dolls.

The paper doll unit was further

developed when children constructed their own dollhouses from large recycled shoeboxes. Parents were provided with a list of materials that they could contribute for the children's use. Using recycled items such as small boxes, film canisters, plastic lids, aluminum foil, and other materials, children made and painted furniture for their houses.

### Children made and painted furniture for doll houses.

Children used these materials in very creative ways. One child used a detergent scoop as a television for his house. He asked for a permanent marker to draw a picture on each side of the scoop to represent four different television stations. Another child used a piece of foil as a mirror on the wall. Some used carpet pieces for flooring, and some made shutters out of cardboard strips. Children worked on their dollhouses for 12 weeks, and all of the children were involved.

Future directions for this project could include children making paper dolls to represent each family member, as well as family pets. A disposable camera could be sent home to take close-up photographs of the heads of each family member and pet. The project would also be started at the beginning of the school year so children could work on it throughout the year.

### Why an Extended Project?

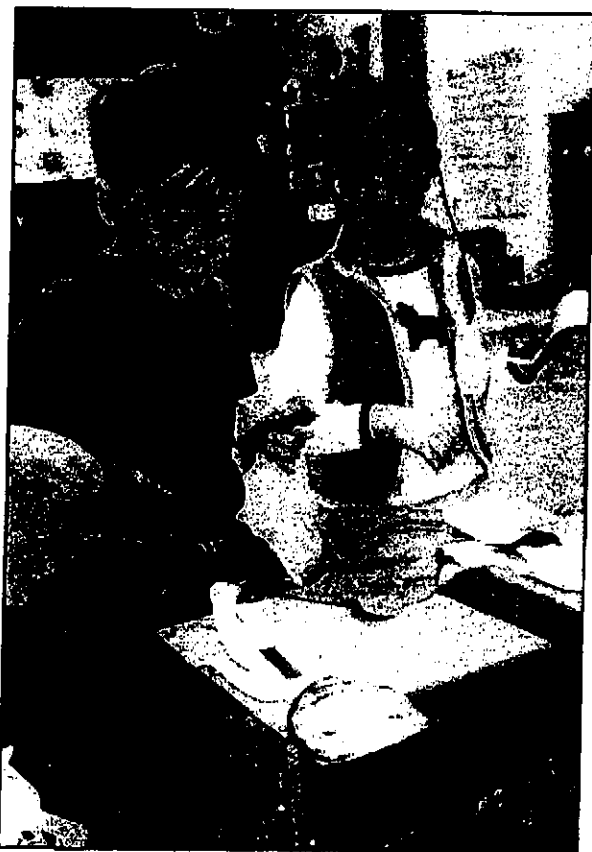
Long-term projects have been a vital component of the curriculum of the West Virginia University Nursery since 1986. Children focus

### Paper Doll Project Steps

1. Take close-up photo of each child's face.
2. Prepare choices of 12" cardboard body shapes for children to trace on light poster board.
3. Help glue photographed heads to poster board bodies.
4. Cut cardboard patterns (pants, shirts) for children to trace on fabric.
5. Offer craft items for children to glue on clothes.
6. Place Velcro® strips on doll and clothes.
7. Provide many opportunities for children to use the dolls by integrating them into the curriculum and their free play.

more fully when they have an interest in project activities, when different curriculum areas are integrated within the project, when families become involved and excited about the project, and when the project lasts for an extended period of time.

Other educators have found that children's interest and absorption can be strengthened with projects that require sustained effort and involvement over several weeks (Rosenfield, Folger, & Adelman, 1980). According to Katz and Chard (1991), project work that extends over a period of time strengthens the disposition to become involved and absorbed in mind-engaging work.



*The paper doll project offered many opportunities for socialization that led to improved communication skills. As children worked on their dolls, they were engaged in constructive conversations of how they might use the dolls. They used their paper dolls in creative ways.*

In addition, preschoolers are more likely to work on projects in small groups. Extended small-group projects promote interaction. This interaction facilitates learning. Young children are more engaged in active explorations where they use expressive processes, in contrast with passive types of activities (Katz & Chard, 1991). Pretend play is an excellent vehicle for development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Extended projects provide opportunities for young children to develop emerging processes and skills when they are given assistance to advance. Teachers know that it is best to offer activities just beyond what children can do on their own and with the assistance of a teacher (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that children can be challenged to do activities independently as well as be exposed to things at higher levels. He believed that the best approach to learning is to assist chil-

dren to reach just beyond their individual levels of achievement (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

### **Benefits of the Paper Doll Project**

The benefits of these paper doll explorations were multifaceted. Children were absorbed in creating their own paper dolls and clothes. They were committed to the activity, which was evident in their involvement as they chose to work at this center.

Because of the amount of time they spent using scissors and tracing with a pencil, their fine-motor skills improved significantly. Children's cutting skills improved dramatically, an observation made consistently by families during the project. Children who had previous difficulty with cutting were using scissors with ease.

Boys and girls were equally interested in making the dolls and clothes. While these boys did not play with baby dolls in the house-keeping area, they spent a lot of time cutting and dressing their paper dolls.

### **Benefits of the Paper Doll Project**

1. Provided a mechanism for children to engage in more elaborate pretend play.
2. Stimulated children's imaginative use of art materials and the resulting dolls.
3. Provided opportunities to integrate the project with various curriculum themes, such as occupations and cultures.
4. Encouraged children to edit their work—make changes, add to dolls.
5. Provided opportunities for interactions among children, and among children and adults.
6. Further developed fine-motor skills through cutting and gluing.
7. Developed children's sense of pride in their accomplishments.
8. Encouraged children's respect for their play materials.
9. Facilitated children's sustained interest in a long-term project.

The paper doll project offered many opportunities for socialization that led to improved communication skills, too. As children worked on their dolls, they were engaged in constructive conversations of how they might use the dolls. They used their paper dolls in creative ways. Small groups of children invented scenes with the paper dolls as the actors.

Using paper dolls facilitated the imagination of young children to set up pretend scenarios and gave them the opportunity for more advanced stages of play. The paper dolls were simple homemade props that set the stage for the children to plan their own roles. As groups of children worked on their dolls, conversations about the names they had given their dolls arose.

**Social play enables children to function at a higher level.**

Several children wanted to use their paper dolls in a puppet show with a stage and props. Children made clothes that resembled traditional clothing in Hawaii. They cut slits into the bottom of triangular skirts to replicate grass skirts. They pretended they were landing on the island and the paper dolls were dancing and meeting the new people. Symbolic thinking and the cognitive skills that children use in imaginative play such as this are necessary for continued development (Bodrova, Leong, Hensen, & Henninger, 2000). Social play enables children to function at a higher level than their independent level of performance.

The paper doll project also enabled children to expand on their

knowledge about occupations. When the teacher talked about people such as firefighters, nurses, doctors, and construction workers, corresponding materials were provided for children to make appropriate uniforms for the dolls. When the children were making firefighter uniforms, many interesting and informational conversations arose. Elena said that firefighters squirt water from a hose. Dustin said that they put water on the fires and 911 is for a fire engine. Caroline chimed in with additional information that firefighters cool down hot things and that they wear hats, boots, jackets, and pants. Tommy went on to talk about fire drills.

Encouraging children to revisit their drawings and creations is extraordinarily valuable in promoting their learning (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998). When children revisit, they are more likely to develop mental functions associated with higher-order thinking skills (Moran & Jarvis, 2001). Children at the Nursery School revisited their work and they often revised something on their paper dolls. Sometimes they added fingernails to hands or a bracelet to an arm. Some children made changes to their original dolls, while others would make a new cutout form that included more detail. These types of behaviors occurred because children had the opportunity to use their creations in various ways.

Families were enthused about the project, which encouraged the children's further involvement. The dolls and dollhouses also were displayed to families and friends during an open house at the Nursery School. Children were excited as they showed their parents their

accomplishments. It was evident that the process was important, and that the products were something they were very proud of because they could use them in their play.

**Children took good care of their paper dolls.**

It is easy to recognize the values of such a project by noting the children's increased competency with scissors and recording incidents of their more advanced social play. Children's overall accomplishments went far beyond these observed milestones. They made something that they could continue to use. Their dolls were not hung on the wall or placed in a closet for later admiration. The paper dolls were revisited again and again throughout the semester in various play opportunities. They took good care of their paper dolls and respected their materials.

The goal to involve children in making a simple old-fashioned toy that could be used in play, and that in turn would be taken care of, was certainly accomplished. And that was just the beginning of the benefits of this contemporary twist on a traditional toy.

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