

# Using Persona Dolls in Religious Education

## Introduction

For some time practitioners have successfully used Persona dolls in a wide range of settings to meet the learning needs of young children. They have primarily been employed to provide opportunities for children's personal, social and emotional development in the foundation stage and early key stage 1. However, Persona dolls are also an extremely valuable tool in supporting learning about and from different religions.

Persona dolls can represent different characters in a range of contexts and from a wide variety of faith and ethnic backgrounds. By encouraging children to enter imaginatively into the life of the dolls, they can be introduced to situations, ideas and issues that are significant and relevant to them and also experiences that are sometimes very different from their own.

### Choosing Persona dolls

A wide variety of dolls can be used as persona dolls. However, several manufacturers now produce dolls that are specially designed for the purpose of teaching about different cultures and religions. (manufacturers include Articles of Faith [www.articlesoffaith.co.uk](http://www.articlesoffaith.co.uk) , Persona Doll Training [www.persona-doll-training.org](http://www.persona-doll-training.org) and the Parrotfish Company [www.parrotfish.co.uk](http://www.parrotfish.co.uk) ) It is recommended that practitioners select particular dolls that closely reflect the background and experiences of children in their setting while other dolls are chosen to introduce experiences and religious beliefs that will be unfamiliar in the group.

### Using Persona Dolls

Persona dolls should be recognised as special and generally only used in planned teaching and learning sessions. Occasionally individual children may request to use the doll for a particular reason, eg if they are upset or worried about something. In these cases, practitioners can use their sensitivity and discretion.

Practitioners are encouraged to use open-ended questions that will stimulate discussion, invite participation, help the children relate to the doll and encourage them to ask their own questions. As the material is contextualised in the life of the doll children find it easier to engage with the mystery and wonder of the religion in focus.

### Building personas

It is advisable to carefully build a persona for the doll as you introduce it to the class. Details such as the doll's name, family background, favourite food, favourite activities etc can be recorded in a class note-book to aid consistency from one session to the next and one group to another. Basic examples of five personas are given in this publication. It is **important that dolls are introduced into a range of classroom activities and discussions**, so that when they are used for teaching RE the children are familiar with them.

## Religious education in the foundation stage

### The contribution of religious education to the early learning goals

The early learning goals set out what most children should achieve by the end of the foundation stage. Religious education can make an active contribution to all of these areas but has a particularly important contribution to make to:

- personal, social and emotional development;
- communication, language and literacy;
- knowledge and understanding of the world;
- creative development.

### Learning experiences and opportunities in the foundation stage

Children should be provided with opportunities in Religious Education (RE) to:

- listen to and talk about appropriate stories, some originating from sacred texts;
- directly experience religion – engage with artefacts, see and if possible visit places of worship (with a focus on feelings and symbols), listen and respond to visitors from faith communities;
- get to know and use religious words accurately, eg God, Allah, synagogue, church, gurdwara, prayer and puja;
- use all five senses – smell (eg incense); taste (eg special foods); see and touch (eg religious artefacts); hear (eg chants/hymns/prayers/bells);
- make and do – make festive food, role play, dress up, dance;
- have times of quiet and stillness;
- share their own beliefs, ideas and values;
- talk about their feelings and experiences;
- use their imagination and curiosity to develop their appreciation of and wonder at the world in which they live;
- begin to use ICT to explore religious beliefs practised in the local/wider community.

### Using this resource

In this resource beliefs and practices associated with Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Islam are introduced through four teaching units: Being Special, Special People, Special Places and Special Times. It is important to recognise that each doll represents **just one** way of being Christian, Jewish etc. For example, Elizabeth is a member of an Anglican church, but if she belonged to another Christian denomination, eg Baptist or Plymouth Brethren, some of her practices would be different.

National guidance for the teaching of RE in primary schools suggests that at least 50% of curriculum time is given to the teaching of Christianity. In line with this recommendation, more material is provided for teaching Christianity than the other faiths.

When focussing on RE, it is important that teaching is as multi-sensory and interactive as possible. A useful device is a backpack owned by the doll, in which he or she brings to school special objects that mean or symbolise something of significance. The suggestions given in this resource for the contents of the backpack are listed for each of the four teaching units. Many of the special objects are easily obtainable. However certain specific religious artefacts can be purchased from specialist suppliers, eg Articles of Faith. ([www.articlesoffaith.co.uk](http://www.articlesoffaith.co.uk))

## Learning intentions for each unit

### Being Special

**Children will learn knowledge, skills and understanding relating to:**

- the idea that each person and each family is valued by God;
- religious vocabulary used by members of the faith community;
- signs and symbols used to welcome children into the faith community,

**So that they can:**

- share and record occasions when things have happened in their lives that made them feel special;
- use some religious words appropriately to describe belief and practice;
- recall simply what happens at a traditional Christian baptism, Jewish Shabbat, Muslim and Sikh naming ceremonies or Hindu Raksha Bandan festival.

### Special People

**Children will learn knowledge, skills and understanding relating to:**

- people who are special to us and who we admire;
- the ways that people in faith communities care for others;
- stories from sacred texts about friendship and care for others;
- stories about a key religious leader;
- religious vocabulary used by members of the faith community.

**So that they can:**

- talk about people who are special to them and say what makes their family and friends special to them;
- use some religious words appropriately;
- identify some of the qualities of a good friend;
- reflect on the question “Am I a good friend?”;
- recall and talk about stories of key religious figures and say what we can learn from them.

### Special Times

**Children will learn knowledge, skills and understanding relating to:**

- the importance and value of celebration in children’s own lives;
- some major religious festivals and celebrations;
- religious vocabulary used by members of the different faith communities.

**So that they can:**

- give examples of special occasions and suggest features of a good celebration;
- recall simply, stories connected with religious festivals;
- use some religious words appropriately to describe belief and practice;
- say why a particular festival is important to members of a faith community, eg Christmas for Christians or Hanukkah for Jews.

## **Special Places**

### **Children will learn knowledge, skills and understanding relating to:**

- why some places are special and what makes them special;
- the church building as a special place for Christians, synagogue for Jews, gurdwara for Sikhs, temple for Hindus and mosque for Muslims;
- religious beliefs about the world as a special place;
- religious vocabulary used by members of the faith community associated with a place of worship.

### **So that they can:**

- talk about somewhere that is special to themselves and say why;
- be aware that some religious people have places which have a special meaning for them;
- use some appropriate religious words to talk about their thoughts and feelings when visiting a place of worship;
- express a personal response to the natural world.