



Ashisha

Paper People

"They" are the paper people that represent significant individuals in my daughter's life.

Susan Sarver

They gather in a circle on the playground, go fishing with Grandma, bicker with cousins, negotiate with siblings, and they live in a shoe box. "They" are the paper people that represent significant individuals in my daughter's life.

My four-year-old daughter developed an early passion for paper dolls—the store-bought variety with the slick punch-out clothes. One gray day when she was down with a cold and the old paper pals were in need of some new companions, she said, "I know what, Mom. Let's make some more." Now, I knew that my artistic skills were limited and that my homemade beings could never rival the properly printed forms featured in toy stores; but when boredom joins hands with illness, parental resources must be stretched. Besides, as most veteran parents know, effort is often more critical than talent.

My daughter's first request was for a paper reproduction of our immediate family. The sketched bodies of Mom, Dad, sister, and dog fit nicely on a sheet of plain white

typing paper. My daughter contributed by filling in the details. She decided which outfits and colors each one would wear, explaining her choices with elaborate commentary. She revealed why she liked to see me wearing a skirt and blouse, why she preferred Daddy in jeans, and why her older sister liked to wear braids. Then she duplicated the tiny details that characterize each member of the family—Daddy's blond hair, my green eyes, and the front teeth missing from her sister's smile.

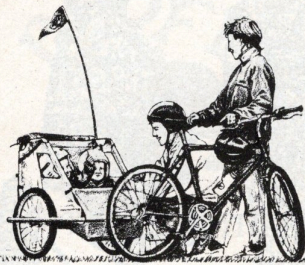
When the characters were completed to my daughter's satisfaction, we cut them out together. As soon as the figures were cut free, they sprang to life as members of a family. With gestures and voices (supplied by my daughter), they talked about what happened at school, where they would go for a picnic, and what they wanted for dinner. The paper parents stepped in to help settle serious disputes among the children, and they all kissed each other good night. The amazing thing about this paper family was not only that their physical charac-

teristics reflected my daughter's view of reality, but that their emotional dynamics did as well. Listening to their conversations, I began to understand my child's perception of the sensitive relationships between family members.

One day, she asked me to sketch Grandma, Grandpa, and her favorite cousins. Another day, we designed several pages of dolls representing her classmates. Before outlining each figure, I asked my daughter to describe the child so I could include one essential feature in the drawing. Her descriptions went well beyond the physical, which added to the fun and sparked new insights into my child's relationships with other children. After she colored and cut out each doll, I watched as these peer interactions unfolded through dialogue and play.

This year for Valentine's Day, instead of the usual red paper hearts or commercial cards, my daughter decided to create a personalized figure for each of her beloveds. I provided a quick set of sketches, drew a red heart on each chest, and wrote the inscriptions on

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the back. My child spent a pleasant
afternoon bringing her valentines to
life with crayons, markers, and scis-
sors before bringing them to school
the next day.

The paper community has since
expanded to include teachers and
playmates. These figures luxuriate
in a world filled with tiny paper
accessories—books, suitcases, toys,
pets, and small food items all
clipped from old coupons and mag-
azines.

The paper people project, invented
six months ago in a moment of bore-
dom, continues to furnish props for
hours of playful pleasure. My
daughter's artistic skills, eye-hand
coordination, and flair for the dra-
matic have flourished. But even
more rewarding is the knowledge I
have gleaned from paper people
about my child's perceptions of real
people.

*Susan Sarver is a registered nurse
currently studying English at the uni-
versity level. She and her husband and
their two daughters—Jennifer (8) and
Ashley (4)—live in Charlottesville,
Virginia.*