

Suggestions for tools to use for communicating with children

Find out more about what these images can mean in practice by reading on.





Now to explain the images:

Sensory Material to start or finish and to slow down



Using these as suggested in the title is a good way just to sit and be with the child allowing them to enjoy and feel the textures and play with what lies contained in the boxes. Ordinary sand, kinetic sand, lentils, dry white kidney beans are all pleasingly smooth and calming for children to run through their fingers. Kinetic sand allows shapes to be made and savoured. Hiding small objects in the flow material which a child can discover, remember, count and close their eyes to identify, adds options if this feels right. It brings you and the child into the present moment.

The material above and below has come from many years of direct work with children as a social worker and a child counsellor using the arts. They can of course be adapted by parents and carers or anyone who has an ongoing close relationship with a child.

Key ideas have come from Mary Corrigan's workshops to social workers and adopters, , Ann Cattanach who taught on a play therapy qualification I did, Richard Rose's course on therapeutic life story work, Margo Sunderland who taught on my diploma in counselling children using the arts and Karen Treisman whose books and teachings I have become familiar with through being employed by Islington at ALN, a regional adoption agency. For more about my professional background do see the About section of www.lifestoryhub.com

These inspiring people have all been social workers at some point. The exercise with the Behaviour Tree which I call the Root Tree was shared by Richard Rose. Sometimes the original roots of these tools are hard to trace and are naturally prompted by the world around us.

Below I am going to give brief explanations of how and why I use these tools in life story work and hope that these examples inspire parents or carers to create their own versions and work out what feels right for them.

Some advice to bear in mind is:

Plan your session and keep them relatively short if possible as children need gaps to digest and breaks of two weeks between sessions to absorb and/or reflect on what they learn and feel about the subjects brought up in sessions. See the session plan template PDF.

Processing Ideas and feelings



The Tumble Tower [Jenga] is a great game in it's own right as a fun activity at the start or finish of a session but it has other

potentials. Do look at Pam Dyson who is an American play therapist] demonstrating this on You Tube: [Jenga](#)

Mary Corrigan's building blocks of good parenting can be mutually discussed and demonstrated. Conversations can be had about any topic relevant to life stories whilst playing the game using the turn taking as a way to structure and control how long the session lasts giving the child some power. The Jenga blocks can have a variety of questions in pencil on them for all, leaving it random who answers them.

Joy Rees's whole talk on Life Story Work is worth watching but at 6 minutes the building bricks idea is shown. I would say the Jenga blocks allow this to be demonstrated imaginatively with the child taking out the bricks when applicable resulting in wobbles and an unsafe structure etc' Here is a link to how a social worker can approach life story work [Life story work, an introduction by Joy Rees on Vimeo](#)

The blocks are also useful to balance in a row to demonstrate consequences of actions or decisions, for better or worse. Then the child can tip them into a domino style movement as they knock each other over to arrive at a new visual display of reality.

This domino effect can be used to show a poor or positive decision by worker, parent, child, or anyone else of significance in the child's life and history.

The retractable coffee cup is a good device as it along with the bear cards [see further down] is a good way of checking in on how a child's week/day/hour has been. The circular face on the top appears to be all that is there until you let out the rest of the cup to show there is a brain behind with feelings, thoughts and distractions. Explain to the child that distractions or worries can

stop enjoyment and learning . Ask the child to show you with their fingers how full the cup is with these worries or distractions. It is a way of acknowledging how they have been feeling in the present.

The empty tissue box I have found to be popular with children. I ask them to decorate it like a post box and between my visits advise that they might want to put any questions, worries or thoughts in picture or written form in to share with me if they want to or with their parents. I find this also releases them from holding onto them as they know they have safely stored them for later attention. Here is how it might look once worked upon.



While I might think I created the post box tool, I expect I was influenced by the Worry Monster children's toy out in the shops.

A range of minatures: Dinosaurs, Fossils, Farm Creatures, Domestic Pets, Wild Animals, Mythical creatures and Sea

Sand Tray Expressions

The little dog was brave and asked the big animals to play hide and seek with her. Some of the animals said no but the unicorn stepped forward and said: 'I will play with you' and all the others followed and played the game the dog wanted and they had a wonderful time. The ambulance was there to help if anything went wrong and someone got hurt.

Sand play tells so much more than direct conversation



For a fascinating insight and there is little available on You Tube do see this <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BTIKJ-7JDrl>

Homes and Transportation



Do add planes, trains and boats to what is seen in the picture. Emergency vehicles [police, ambulance, fire engines] are helpful to. These minatures all show change of location, change of experience,, new beginnings and goodbyes and there are symbols of rescue, danger and safety here too. You can link these by drawing on wallpaper a river of life, a track of road, a football pitch or wahtever symbolises the child's idea of their life journey best. I like this example which lasts five minutes as it shows how well the young people respond to metaphor in story. [Bing Videos](#)

Art Materials and a roll of Wallpaper for freedom to express



Exploring Culture, Ethnicity, Belief, Location in the world



It is so important to prompt these discussions and can lead to greater awareness of gaps in knowledge, misunderstandings about roots and the blend of subjectivity and fact around some of these topics. A white child recently asked me if she was Somali as she had spent some time at the start of her life in a Somali foster home and this led to some interesting discussion about what it is that makes us belong to a culture, race or belief system. A child likewise who has never spent any time living with people of their race or a child whose racial or ethnic origin are unknown may all be needing more exploration of their feelings of absence or puzzlement on these profound subjects.

The child's own beliefs about life and the universe are always important to explore and talk about if they enjoy such conversations.

Using Cards to build up communication: Yoga Cards, Kids Need Cards, Bear Cards, Tree Vision, Mood Cards



All these cards are useful in their own right and are child dependent in terms of choice and what you find speaks to them. The tree cards can be so helpful with finding a type of tree in nature that a child is drawn to and from this creating their own family trees [or important person and friend trees] or trees of likes and dislikes. They can be used at tracing roots of behaviour and feelings too in a setting of trust and curiosity and never with an aim of reprimanding or educating.

The bear cards are fantastic for showing multiple levels of feelings without any words to get in the way.

The Kids Need cards are brilliant for generating discussion on the controversial topic of what is good and bad parenting. I scan several on a page and ask all in the room and up for a debate to

choose one statement and picture they strongly agree or disagree with but they must find the reasons why. This leads to animated discussion as people potentially find a new way to view a behaviour.

Talking about Stories and the Language of Parts



Where children have had a vulnerable start I like to bring up the idea of a baby pet [symbolised by a cuddly animal] being left untended and alone in a park near their house. I ask what the child would do if they found one. The child offers what the pet now needs to happen to it to be safe and what they could give them to manage a human environment. Parallels at some point can be drawn to vulnerabilities experienced by babies and children but possibly only at a later point as it just gently leads them into thinking about caring for the vulnerable. I often congratulate them on their thoughtfulness and care.

The Russian dolls shown here can be drawn on and are fantastic for reminding children of the complexity of all our emotional parts: how a big doll can have a little angry baby still left inside. Children can decorate the dolls, wipe out and change the expressions of all dolls showing the changeability of all feelings.

Finally the bear with a mark on its head, hand and heart is known as the Think Feel and Do Bear. This shows how the three parts of ourselves interact all the time, speeding up or slowing down progress if not in harmony. You might be able to say Your mummy had lots of love in her heart but her thinking part could get very muddled and then her doing part could not do all the things needed to keep you safe. Or 'Love is what you feel in your heart but it is also your doing and thinking part and these can get so confused!' It can pretty much provide a metaphor for talking about any sort of behaviour or feeling that the child is going through.

There are many more but this is a starting point!

Finally **The Roots Tree** is something to think about; only to be used if it is not used as a device to reprove, belittle or punish but can be a wonderful way of generating insight if used with empathy warmth and understanding. The roots metaphor shows where ideas/feelings and behaviour can come from and what is unseen.



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