Received:
07/10/2026
Accepted:
14/10/2026

Keywords:
trauma recovery, play, communication, children and young people

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00097672

Book Review

Communication tools for working with traumatized children and teens

By Richard Rose

Publisher: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
ISBN: 978 1 80501 290 0
Year of Publication: 2025

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About the book

Communication Tools for Working with Traumatized Children and Teens by Richard Rose is a playful collection developed through the author's 40 years undertaking therapeutic work in children's social care. Aimed at parents, caregivers and practitioners working with children and young people who have experienced early life trauma and loss, this book presents tools and activities for use in direct work with a child, often in the company of a caregiver, or for the caregiver to undertake as part of the therapeutic work. The purpose is to support play, and thus attunement, between child and caregiver, and provide the time and space for reflection and conversation around a child's narrative of their life. Rose uses 'child' to include references to adolescents, service user, or client and this review uses the same convention (p. 14).

The tools detailed within the 50 chapters can be used as stand-alone activities, yet they also represent a progression. Initial chapters contain foundational activities to build trust and situate a child in their present relationships, encourage open communication, or use stories and metaphors to help children consider how they deal with emotions and make decisions (chapters 1 to 20). The middle chapters present tools for discussing the concepts of early trauma and loss, healthy attachment, emotional literacy and expression, and recalling and sharing memories

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ISSN 2976-9353 (Online)
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(chapters 21 to 28). Later chapters provide tools to support children to identify and solve problems and understand their learned behaviours, recognise the role of the nervous system in behaviour or communication, and how to manage thoughts and actions (chapters 29 to 38). The book culminates in activities to support recounting memories, understanding one's life trajectory, and therapeutic life story work (chapters 39 to 50).

The activities

Rose's descriptions of the activities and approaches are clear, and the chapters are enriched by underpinning theory and clinical illustrations demonstrating how activities are generally experienced by children or have benefitted individuals. The way that Rose presents the tools as flexible, with options for differentiation to meet the needs of children in different developmental stages, while exploring the same core concept, is invaluable. While not all activities in this collection are designed as play, particularly in the later chapters, they are all engaging and easily combined or sequenced to build on a theme. Although the book's clinical examples situate the trauma as stemming from early abuse and neglect, these tools would also be useful when working with children with other experiences of trauma (e.g. those affected by climate disasters or armed conflict), as well as for discussing emotionally charged topics. I would have found it helpful if the book had included general expectations for the time required to undertake each activity, yet recognise that factors such as the time of day, a child's mood, how an activity is framed, or the relationship between the child and adult can influence engagement. Readers should be mindful that activities may take longer than they think and plan accordingly when using these tools therapeutically.

As a parent with work and volunteer experience in early years and youthwork ranging from birth to 25 years old, including issue-based projects on sensitive themes, I found myself thinking about how the activities might be used within my own family and how to adapt them for use with groups or to engage with different issues. During the school holidays, I found myself with plenty of opportunities to introduce various activities to individuals and small groups of children while family and friends were visiting. Doing so helped to give me a sense of how children might understand the activities, allowing me to think about how they responded and the impact that the activities had on our time together. I have chosen three activities to illustrate our experiences.

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For 'The Boat' activity (chapter 7), a visual approach to discussing hopes, fears, and safety, the facilitating adult talks the child through a series of steps to draw a boat, adding components to the scene as prompted and ultimately discussing the child's 'anchors' to safety. I introduced this activity after a child-initiated beanbag toss and pillow fight, sensing that there was willingness to shift the energy of our activities. Knowing that this style of activity usually did not sustain the child's attention, I was surprised at how long he engaged, taking time to draw each detail and volunteering a narrative on the additions. Rather than explaining that therapeutic work can vary between calm and stormy like the weather, as proscribed in the activity, I used the metaphor to reflect on life in general and found it effective. Because this child wasn't yet confident in how others perceived his drawings, he needed reassurance that the only 'right' way to draw an element was how he wanted to draw it in that moment. By the end of the conversation, this child had shared several fears, articulated what made him feel safe, and recognised his emotional limit when he stated he was done and asked for a hug.

'Squiggles' (chapter 8) is a short activity designed for a child and caregiver to undertake together, facilitated by the practitioner, to demonstrate how having trusted support can lead to sense-making or overcoming difficulties. As written, one person draws a squiggle and the other two discuss what it could represent. Once they have decided, an individual from that pair then draws it and the original artist is asked whether they can identify the drawing. I facilitated this as a game pairing cousins, who generally played well together but were in a developmental stage of wanting to have their own way, with their two parents on the other team. The challenge was for collaborative sense-making as a communication exercise. I modified the task so that team members communicated without the other team hearing, with no further communication after the drawing had been decided. Both should have then recognised the resultant drawing. We undertook several rounds before the cousins changed their communication to ensure true agreement prior to completing the drawing. The drawings were silly, laughter-inducing, and creative. The children enjoyed the challenge and, importantly, changed their communication and later engaged in the wrap-up discussion on teamwork and communication. One of them asked to play the following day.

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The 'Magical Thinking Cycle' (chapter 37) has been developed to help identify a child's internal and external world view in order to engage in conversation 'without the interruptions or misinterpretations that often happen when we don't listen well' (p. 169). Children are provided a circle containing four quadrants and asked to identify: what they understand as the truth about something, the things that are said about it ('stories'), their hopes and wishes, and who can help them in relation to their hopes and wishes. Having used this with my own child when he was struggling to articulate an issue experienced at school, I can attest that it is indeed helpful for deep listening. In our conversation, it enabled us to collectively recognise his overwhelming response to the 'stories' being told, create space between his feelings, thoughts, and the views of others to support a calmer discussion of his truth, and focus on one aspect of the issue at a time in order to come up with a plan.

In all instances, I introduced the book's activities in the same way I would use games or playful tasks in everyday life at home and with groups of children. I introduced activities intentionally, often spontaneously in response to a developing situation, when I thought they would benefit a group or individual, such as helping to diffuse tension in a group, change communication dynamics, re-inject fun into the interaction, draw out a child's views, or collectively reflect on experiences and perceptions.

Key takeaways

After undertaking various activities with multiple children, I appreciate how they are flexible, varied, fun, and lead to honest reflection, open conversations, and observable impact for the children involved. As Rose notes, play is the key to the success of these interactions:

> We need to capture the voice of the child in the work that we do. Therefore, we need to be able to engage the child so that we can get their perception and allow their story to be heard. Play is our first language…Play can be used as a 'relationship maker'…it's all about the conversations you share with the child. Play is engaging, play is non-threatening. Play is also the passport to attachment (p14).

Whether parent, caregiver, or practitioner, this book contains a range of playful and engaging tools for one's 'bag of tricks' for building trust and opening communication with children around difficult topics.

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The publisher (Jessica Kingsley Publishers) supplied a copy of this book for review.

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