

Book Review

Plummer, Deborah M. (2017). Inspiring and Creative Ideas For Working with Children, How to Build Relationships and Enable Change. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, ISBN 978-1-8495-651-9

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At first look, from a children's services worker's perspective, this looks like a 'pick up and play' kind of book. It has a colourful illustrated cover with lots of child-style drawings and words — myriads of which I had when I worked in schools — that contain bite-sized activities any group worker can pick up, quickly read and deliver a fun and engaging activity for children. Close attention should be paid to the tagline 'How to Build Relationships and Enable Change' though, because this is the substance of this easy to read and digestible book.

After many years of working in children's services, I'm often cautious about using books that set out a range of activities for working with children, either individually or in a group. While children enjoy the books, and they can be useful for practitioners caught on the hop in a busy social work or school environment, I worry that we risk overlooking the rationale for carrying out activities. We may inadvertently miss the opportunities books can provide to actively reflect on what we are doing, and why, and more importantly, the change that they can enable in our therapeutic relationships with children.

The book starts by introducing us to four children of different ages who are facing a range of adversities in their lives. Different people in their lives introduce them: two are introduced by their parents; one by a speech and language therapist; and one by a specialist support worker. Initially this made it difficult for me to give this book a 'setting'; I didn't know whether to read it from the point of view of a parent who was hoping to help their child, as a social work, education or health professional or as someone who is hoping to develop their understanding and skills in this area. This question was very much at the forefront of my mind as I read the chapter that followed: 'Twelve Principles for Building Relationships and Enabling Change'. This is probably my favourite chapter in the whole book and one that I re-read. It sets out 12 bite-sized, evidence-based principles, which are important in building relationships with

children. It also contains a couple of the 'neuro nuggets' which are scattered throughout the book, which explain in simple terms the neuroscience which frames the rationale for the recommendations. To the experienced practitioner a whole chapter devoted to relationship building principles might seem basic; this is the reason that I liked it. It does not matter how experienced a practitioner is, the importance of returning to the core values, principles and ways of being when working with children, can never be overstated. Conversely, the value and insight that this chapter offers to parents or practitioners who are new to thinking in this way will also be useful. Not just in using the book but also in daily interactions with children.

Having laid the foundation of good core practice in relationship building, the book then moves on to helping us think about why imagination and creativity are important skills to develop in childhood, and beyond. The author acknowledges that this is either not a part of daily life for a lot of adults, or that we do not consciously recognise the skills that we have and use intuitively around this area. This chapter contains an activity which encourages the reader to look inward and poses a question around what imagination means. Taking this further, the reader is then asked to think about not just what creativity feels like for them, but also what creativity can tell us about other people and the children we work with. Specifically, how a child's use or non-use of creativity and imagination help us to meet them where they are, rather than imposing our own preconceived ideas of what they need from us. This is helpful in terms of getting into the headspace for some of the later activities centred on image making, storytelling and puppetry. At this point one of the children is reintroduced. We are told, from the perspective of the person who introduced the child, how the activity worked with them and what insight their 'helper' gained from it. These examples were the only part of the book that I found difficult to read.

Because the children are introduced near the start of the book and reintroduced at various times throughout, depending on what activity was being explained, I found myself flicking back and forth to try and re-familiarise myself with where they were in their story. Although the idea of the children moving on in their story and beginning to overcome their challenges through the activities being described is a nice sentiment, the practicality of following their journey, while learning about new ways of working, interrupted the flow for me.

The sections on oral storytelling and the range of ways that we can use stories to build relationships and nurture children and then to build confidence and self-esteem have a nice progression. I think these sections are the ones that would be most useful to a therapeutic practitioner. The author recognises that to be able to use the activities meaningfully with children that a lot of reflection, preparation and skills practice will be required. These are encouraged, not only

to aid in the proficiency of their use, but also to remind readers that these are behaviours crucial to good practice when working with children and families.

There is a section on puppetry. I can see the value of introducing this as a practice tool, though I felt that in order for this to be effective in engaging children and enabling change, it would need more time and depth. I have thought a lot about why I found it difficult to imagine me using the activities in this chapter with children. As a practitioner, I have used puppetry in the past and I admit it is not one of my 'go to' activities. There is undoubtedly value in its use and I think when done well, it can be a lovely way to work with children. I am also mindful though of the skill that it takes to do puppetry well. I think I am aware of my limitations in this area but I worry that some people, although well intentioned, would not be able to do these activities properly and while it is unlikely that they would cause harm, they may not create the change that they or the child is hoping for.

When I had finished the book - and re-read the chapter on principles for building relationships - I felt it did not have a concrete 'setting' or a specific age range. I offer that as a strength rather than a criticism. By not defining any age of children for its activities, the book reminds us that we should meet children where they are and start the journey towards facing challenges at a place that is comfortable for them. In Scotland children go to school at around age five, then go to another school at about 12, then leave school between 16 or 18, generally regardless of readiness, and use a range of other services based on age, so it is heartening to read a book which promotes the use of these types of activities based on children's needs. I think that reading this book will help enrich any interaction between adults and children regardless of the practitioner's role.

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