



Skills *in* Counselling & Psychotherapy

with **CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE**

Lorraine Sherman

Counselling &
Skills *in*
Psychotherapy

Series Editor
Francesca Inskipp



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Skills in Counselling and Psychotherapy is a series of practical guides for trainees and practitioners. Each book takes one of the main approaches to therapeutic work or key client groups, and describes the relevant core skills and techniques.

Topics covered include:

- How to establish and develop the therapeutic relationship
- How to help the client change
- How to assess the suitability of an approach or technique for the client.

This is the first series of books to look at skills specific to the different theoretical approaches and is now developed to include skills specific to particular client groups. It is an ideal series for use on a range of courses which prepare the trainees to work directly with the clients.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lorraine Sherman is a humanistic psychologist, supervisor, therapist, relationship counsellor and youth worker. She is clinical supervisor of school-based counsellors across West Wales. She has extensive experience in counselling and psychotherapeutic practice with young clients and adults. Lorraine designs and teaches courses to train counsellors and therapists to counsel children and young people. She lectures on counselling courses at Trinity St Davids University, Wales and has had many years of experience lecturing on the BACP accredited counselling courses based at Coleg Sir Gar, Ammanford. Lorraine includes mindfulness in her therapeutic work, she offers compassion-based approaches that include self-awareness, poetry and play and enjoys learning from her practice.

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INTRODUCTION

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

This book is for counsellors, psychotherapists and others in helping professions who are in practice or aim to practise with children and young people. The contents have emerged out of many conversations and dialogues with others, including young people, in searching for the best way to counsel young clients.

A journey

Within the book is a journey you are invited to take:

- ◆ Meet a young client and begin a counselling relationship in Chapter 1.
- ◆ Consider how to assess and ensure clients are in the best place for them in Chapter 2.
- ◆ Examine counselling skills with children and young people in Chapter 3.
- ◆ Develop the particular modality you were trained in, so that you are able to counsel young clients skilfully, in Chapter 4.
- ◆ Discuss professional issues in Chapter 5, including the thorny issue of confidentiality with children and young people.
- ◆ Explore ethical dilemmas with young clients in Chapter 6.
- ◆ Discover skilful play in counselling in Chapter 7.
- ◆ Finally, make best use of supervision in Chapter 8.

A lifelong journey

For me, learning how to be with children and young people has been a lifelong journey. I have been a play leader, youth worker, college counsellor and a Relate counsellor before becoming a college lecturer in counselling and a supervisor. My time with Relate developed into being a trainer in the community, facilitating courses such as 'Parenting for Parents of Teenagers'. This allowed me to get a wider perspective on young people within their families.

My career with children and young people began as a 16-year-old play leader making up games in a hut in a London park. Aged 18, I began youth work and was fortunate enough to be taught communication skills from Transactional Analysis (TA) on a training day – skills I still use today.

Questioning assumptions

Members of the youth club where I worked showed me how to score at darts. I marvelled at how, although they were considered to be 'non-achievers' in school, they were so good at subtraction. Thus began my questioning of assumptions made about young people.

I worked in Tottenham on a play scheme. I met children who were called 'vandals' for piling up stones in a car park who would have been seen as having creative fun if there had been a river or beach for them to play the same games on. I shouted at people who were rude to 'our kids'. I was young and feisty, we played 'dirty word' scrabble, had serious water fights and painted with hands and bare feet on rolls of old wallpaper we had begged for from local shops.

Invisible baggage

I realised early on that lots of youngsters couldn't take advantage of opportunities offered to them because of invisible baggage they carried around. Beliefs that they were useless and worthless dogged their every step, often reinforced by adults around them. I knew about their glue sniffing and shop-lifting and the knives they carried. Taking knives away from fighting teenagers was normal then, though I would be more cautious now.

I didn't judge and I wasn't deluded into thinking they were angelic. We just got on, we fitted together. My early childhood had been a difficult one despite loving parents. At first shy and withdrawn and later angry and defiant, I became the street-wise rebellious teen that parents dread. When I played truant from school, I walked out of the front gate past the head's office and forged letters with my dad's signature. I didn't care what happened to me. I liked to be alone.

Despite the warning of my school's deputy head that I would fail my exams, I passed everything, luckily having a photographic memory that meant I could read one day, write it in an exam the next and then forget it all.

Eventually I ended up at university aged 22, and by this time I had met the ideas of Carl Rogers. I discovered a degree in 'Independent Studies' at Lancaster University and wrote my own syllabus called 'A Study of Human Potential'. A Philosophy tutor and a Politics tutor agreed to supervise my work. I studied Carl Rogers' writings at university in the early 1980s and I loved what I learnt.

Immediately after university, I qualified as a humanistic therapist; still in my twenties, I didn't practise as a therapist straightaway and continued my work with challenging young people.

Discovering mindfulness

At this point I discovered mindfulness. A visiting tutor on my Humanistic Psychology diploma asked us what our daily practice was to replenish ourselves. No one reported a daily practice. I wanted one and needed to solve some problems left over from childhood. I studied and practised mindfulness then and I do so now. Mindfulness practice has sustained me for 30 years and is my teacher, central to my ability to continue being with young clients who have suffered abuse and neglect. I teach mindfulness to counsellors and am constantly learning and trying to live up to my own high standards! The book includes mindful moments, offering the opportunity to pause and refresh ourselves, whether we are reading or practising as counsellors and therapists.

Compassionate focus

Now, as a mature adult in my fifties, parent and grandparent, my aim is to be as responsible and compassionate in my everyday life as possible. I enjoy the change from being a rebellious risk taker but have not forgotten or suppressed the early experiences that formed me.

Twenty years ago, after moving to Wales with my partner and daughter, I began to counsel in a youth drop-in centre. This was the first time I had been given the opportunity to bring together my therapeutic skills and my experience with young people. I counselled courageous young people who had been abused and neglected, many of whom reported that they had not met anyone they could talk to or who would listen to them before.

Facilitating others

I was given the opportunity to develop and teach a Post-Qualifying Certificate in Counselling Young People. There is a session on the course where everyone becomes their inner adolescent and meets each other. It is not necessary to have had a misspent youth to complete this activity; to know the youth we once were is the aim!

Recently, whilst facilitating a supervision group, I offered to role-play my 10-year-old self so a counsellor could demonstrate a technique with emotional literacy cards. I arranged for one group member, a supervisor herself, to de-role me at the end of the exercise. I was amazed at how my 10-year-old self felt the urgency to speak to someone. I felt both the terror and relief of having someone to 'tell' and be with me non-judgementally.

The difference counselling makes for children and young people

My observer-self knew I had to monitor myself carefully in this exercise as I felt my inner 10-year-old's wish to disclose. During the role play, my 10-year-old self told the

counsellor that there was 'something in one of the cards that she needed to talk about but couldn't say right now'. The counsellor kindly said, 'well, we will put that one aside and talk about it next time'. Relief swept over me. My 10-year-old self knew the opportunity to speak out was not lost.

As I de-rolled, I realised the power of what had just happened and knew that I had experienced the difference that first contact with a skilled counsellor can make to children and young people.

Respect and the therapeutic alliance

It is the deep respect for and ability to join with children and young people that makes the difference. The therapeutic alliance is prioritised in this book, along with encouraging full comprehension of the legal and ethical aspects of counselling young clients in order for safe practice to take place.

Skills with different age groups are identified. The book covers counselling with children and young people starting at 5 years old and going on to 18. Stories of young clients in counselling moving through the different age groups of childhood and adolescence show us how to put the skills into practice.

The heart of practice

Helping children and young people through counselling is at the heart of this book. It is vital that the particular skills involved are recognised and practised.

There is no one kind of person that makes a good children and young people's counsellor. Whether your life experience is similar to mine or not, we will be able to come together and develop practice for the benefit of young clients.

The term 'counsellor' is used throughout to refer to the practitioner – it is hoped that psychotherapists and allied professionals will find the subject matter useful and recognise that, as the majority of readers will be counsellors, this is the preferable term to use.

Participative process

The reflective activities and mindful moments are designed for participation, either individually or in practitioner groups. Skills will be discovered through joining in and finding out what suits each of us and our particular circumstances in practice. Examples are based on experience and there is an invitation to engage with activities and processes used throughout the book.

1

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we will consider what is needed to begin counselling children and young people. To be with a young person in the counselling room is both a privilege and a challenge – a privilege as there is the opportunity to know the intimate reality of a young human being's life and a challenge to make best use of the counselling and offer each young person the potential for growth and change.

At the heart of practice are the therapeutic processes and therapeutic alliance. On first meeting a young client, we need to consider how the therapeutic relationship is formed. What will be different in this relationship from being a parent, teacher or friend of the young person?

The creation of an alliance with young clients takes skill and practice.

HEART OF PRACTICE – THE THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE

CASE EXAMPLE: MAKING AN ALLIANCE WITH JAN

Jan, aged 13, comes to your counselling room and begins by telling you she is 'fed up with do-gooders trying to help her'. How do you respond?

There are many possible responses to a statement like this one. What is the best approach to gain an alliance with Jan who has clearly had enough of the helping professions of which you are a member?

Three possible responses are:

1. 'Oh yeah, they are useless those social workers/teachers/mentors'. (child-to-child response) COLLUSION
2. 'Sounds like lots of people are trying to help you but you don't feel helped at all'. This response shows you have heard Jan and are giving her permission to express her dislike of what she perceives as 'do-gooders'.
3. 'Please don't speak like that here about people who want the best for you even if you are fed up with them'. (parent-to-child response) JUDGEMENT

Let us consider each of these responses in the light of establishing a therapeutic alliance. Would we feel tempted to offer the third or first response? What is wrong with doing so?

Response 1: here we are isolating ourselves from other professionals. When counselling children and young people, we may at times find ourselves blaming a teacher for shouting or a social worker for calling our client a 'drama queen'. It is easy to believe the client has a right to have an adult on 'their side' and this validates statement 1. If you believe an adult is acting in an inappropriate way towards your young client, it is vital to act. This needs to be done with calm and clear empathetic responses and not by joining in with a client's anger or rejection of authority.

Response 3: challenging young people who behave in rude and sullen ways invites 'critical parent' responses. If we do respond in this way, it is probably the last time we will see Jan, having been written off by her as someone trying to reform her behaviour, rather than get to know her empathically.

Response 2: we need to get alongside Jan, finding in us the place where we can really connect with what it is like to be her. This is what the second response begins to do.

What comes next? Jan is still eyeing us with suspicion, waiting to be told off or for you to attempt to help her. How do you build the therapeutic alliance from this place?

A useful strategy is to stick to honest and clear facts, for the first few minutes, about the possibilities and limitations available in counselling. This helps to deal with the 'bullshit detector' that young people often have in abundance. Honesty includes explaining the counselling contract to Jan at this early stage. This is part of being empathic in that it shows the client you know what it is like to BE them. Jan will probably appreciate clarity and honesty, both of which are often in short supply in a young person's life.

Emotional literacy

We have the potential to open a door to a whole new world for a young person. The 'norms' of the counselling room may be very distant from a young client's everyday life. Emotional literacy is still not very widespread. You may find that a minority of

your clients are exceptionally well versed in the language of feelings. A child or young person who has grown up in a home that allows and encourages expressions of anger, sadness, happiness and joy will have developed emotional literacy. A young client who is emotionally literate can say, for example, if they feel envious of a sibling or sad at the death of a pet. More often, there has been selective permission to feel some feelings and not others. Sadness is acceptable, but anger is not or anger is expressed so unskilfully as to be linked to aggression. Sometimes substances are used in families as ways to suppress feelings, and these may be legal or illegal.

Some children and young people will have already learnt in their early years that the expression of how they feel about anything puts them in danger of punishment. These young people have become able to hide how they really feel and sometimes will have lost connection with what it means to genuinely express emotion. A safe survival response to the circumstances in which they have grown up could be to hide feelings, manipulate situations or close down emotional responses. Young clients may have learnt to try to give adults what they think is wanted by them rather than express their real needs or wants. Conversely, they may have decided that any attention is better than none and act in odd or defiant ways to be noticed.

Suddenly, as the young client enters the counselling room for the first time, they enter a place where feelings have value, openness is encouraged and privacy respected. The newness and difference from everyday life should not be under-estimated.

Skills and qualities

There are various skills and qualities that the young people's counsellor needs to bring to a first session to establish a relationship. An acronym for these is: H. E. A. R. O. S.:

Holding the Overview

Empathy

Age-appropriateness

Resilience

Openness to Difference

Self-care

Some of these skills will be familiar ones to all counsellors. They need to be practised in a new manner within the context of counselling children and young people.

Considering each in turn with examples can help to clarify and illuminate how to use these skills.

Holding the overview

This is an area that illustrates that counselling with children and young people is clearly different from counselling adults. When we counsel adults, we allow them to