## CHILDREN AND COUNSELLING

Margaret Crompton

# Children and Counselling

**Margaret Crompton** 

Edward Arnold
A division of Hodder & Stoughton
LONDON MELBOURNE AUCKLAND

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First published in Great Britain 1992

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Crompton, Margaret Children and Counselling I. Title 362.7

ISBN 0-340-55435-5

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Typeset in Great Britain by Saxon Printing Ltd, Derby Printed and bound in Great Britain for Edward Arnold, a division of Hodder and Stoughton Limited, Mill Road, Dunton Green, Sevenoaks, Kent TN13 2YA by Biddles Ltd, Guildford & King's Lynn

## Children and Counselling

## Samotny Król – Lonely King



I found this picture in a flat in Warsaw in a collection of several paintings by children suffering from a variety of serious illnesses. My friend, whose wall houses this collection, asked which had in my view been painted by a dying child. I had no hesitation in choosing Samotny Król.

This pen sketch is based on a painting by an 8-year-old Polish boy who was suffering from leukaemia, not very long before his death at 9.

The painting is in heavy black on a background of intermingling blues and browns. The castle (zamek) is slightly larger in the original and is, perhaps, echoed by the "ghostly" zamek in the bottom left-hand corner.

Permission to use this copy has been given by my friend Zbigniew Sendułka, for which I record my thanks.

## **Preface**

I think that the faith of the counsellors has implicitly retained the notion of an unanalysable proclivity and need to love and to be loved (Halmos, 1965, p. 194).

Shortly before publication of Attending to Children (1990) I was invited to offer a proposal for a book on counselling children. The resulting Children and Counselling bears little resemblance to that proposal for, in the 16 months of preparation, I have read many books, met many people, thought many thoughts and written many words, a few thousand of which follow this Introduction.

This is not a guidebook to either counselling or children. It is a series of linked papers on aspects of the topic which particularly interest me and which seem to receive relatively little, or no, attention in other counselling literature.

Interpretation of *children* and *counselling* is very broad and I have drawn on material from, for example, *therapy* and *casework*.

As counselling is about every individual's story, so this book is a chapter in my own story. As we are all 'tall children' so this reveals the author as a child in woman.

As with my other books (1980, 1982, 1990) I have chosen to refer to a wide range of literature, using autobiography, fiction, writing for and by children, and professional texts from such disciplines as counselling, cultural history, education, nursing and psychology.

I am convinced that familiarity with literature, in many covers, is essential to developing understanding of oneself and other people. Read attentively, Jane Eyre (Brontë) or The Secret Garden (Hodgson-Burnett) reveal infinitely more about unhappy childhood than the most scientific and elegant textbook. Far from relying on literature, I revel in and reveal it, recognizing the truth of contemporary literary criticism which proposes that all literature is intertextual; in other words, it is impossible to write one book without, however unintentionally, resonating with many others.

I have decided to speak more with my own voice in the present book, including claiming my own work. In *Attending to Children* I used pseudonyms and disguised case examples heavily. But I later thought that this became obfuscating and have, with the permission of children's regular social workers, written in my own name. Where pseudonyms are used, they are in inverted commas at first appearance in any chapter.

Since this topic is immense I have limited study to work with individuals only; any references to family, group or residential work

are incidental. However, I hope that workers in those fields will find interest and relevance in these pages.

Because Attending to Children was published so recently (1990) I have deliberately not discussed again main topics from that text, for example, truth, fear, trust, love, meaning, beginning and ending contacts. I have also avoided discussion of such means of communication as non-verbal and environmental messages. Some authors referred to in that book appear again in the following pages. Although I cannot expect readers of Children and Counselling to have read Attending to Children, I do regard this as in many ways a companion volume.

Chapters on art, music, silence and story/myth develop rather than repeat my work in *Respecting Children* (1980). The chapters on empathy and spiritual aspects of counselling are my first attempts to study these topics.

Children and Counselling begins with some ideas about approaches to counselling, with particular reference to working with children and young people.

The Appendix, a brief study of ChildLine, illustrates some of the main themes.

I have not tried to cover or even refer to every kind of agency or problem, or to discuss every kind of counselling approach and method. This is a book about individuals, inwardness and connections. I hope that my individual inwardness will connect with readers whom I can meet only in print and who will make their own further connections, illuminating their own inwardness.

Many people have helped me.

Richard Holloway, formerly of Edward Arnold, gave me the initial idea for the book.

Gary Hornby, Lecturer in Education in the University of Hull gave generous informal tutorials and encouragement and lent books.

Practitioners in a number of agencies gave time and shared experience. A letter in a magazine (*The Friend*) attracted many responses, including long letters, articles (published and unpublished), a dissertation and books. I have used directly only a fraction of this material but it has all been very valuable in developing the idea of counselling which forms the basis of the present text.

Several authors (for example, Jocelyn Chaplin and Ann Gillespie) have been particularly generous in responding to draft sections quoting their work and in encouraging my work. Robert Holman read the entire text and his understanding, encouragement, and last minute suggestions have been of the greatest help.

The greatest headache has been contact with publishers for permission to quote from books. I have learnt almost as much about the immense (and bewildering) changes in the world of publishing as I have about counselling. Moves and amalgamations rendered attempts

at contact slow and tortuous. Permissions editors have been very helpful and detailed acknowledgements appear after this Preface.

It has not of course been possible to read more than a tiny sample of the ever-growing literature of counselling. Without the Brynmor Jones Library of the University of Hull, I could not even have started.

Writing this Preface, just before Christmas 1991, I long to begin the whole work again. Ideas developed throughout the 16 months of preparation and writing are coming together in new ways and I have to resist the temptation to disturb my almost flawless typescript and add an idea here, a thought there. Fortunately my husband John, always my aid and tutor, holds me to common sense. Enough is enough.

I have written this book with all these people in mind and in gratitude. But, above all, with thanks to the children in whose lives I have been, however briefly, involved. This book is dedicated to 'Luke' and 'Mark' and all the children I have loved, and to John.

December 1991

Apley MC

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## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful for permission to quote from the following publications:

- Counseling Children, 2nd edition, by C. L. Thompson and L. B. Rudolph (c1988, 1983). By Wadsworth, Inc., by permission of Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Pacific Grove, CA 93950 USA.
- The Skilled Helper, 4th edition, by Gerard Egan. (c1990, 1985, 1972, 1975). By Wadsworth, Inc. By permission of Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, Pacific Grove, CA 93950 USA.
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- Material from ChildLine, by permission of ChildLine, 2nd Floor, Royal Mail Building, Studd Street, London N1 0QW.

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- Childhood in the Middle Ages by permission of the author Jeffrey Richards. 1991.
- Feminist Counselling in Action by permission of the author Jocelyn Chaplin. 1988.
- Music: a Way of Life for the Young Child by Bayless K. M. and Ramsay M. E. (1982). By Permission of C. V. Mosby and Co, by permission of Macmillan, New York.
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## 1 A childist approach to counselling

## Acting lessons on being a person

Children who seek contact with, or are referred to, counsellors usually have some presenting problem connected with, for example, impaired health, offending behaviour, poor educational performance, or bereavement. If such contact is to be effective, it should lead to some development of the whole person. Mind and body, emotion and spirit are one. Distress or fulfilment in one part of life affects the rest.

At times of difficulty it may seem impossible to feel like a real person. Lennie, eponymous hero of *The TV Kid* (Byars, 1976), has some trouble in school. The teacher asks him a question:

'let me think'. Lennie had put his hand to his chin at this point to give the impression of deep thought. Lennie always had a hard time arranging his face in the right expression. Looking interested or studious was especially hard for him. He sometimes thought he needed acting lessons on being a person (p. 64).

Lennie lives in a fantasy world of TV games and serials, compensating for the instability of life with his mother who is continually seeking to make a safe and successful home but constantly having to move on. Then she inherits a motel. "'Now we can live like other people", she had said. She had begun to hum. Her favourite songs were about home and going home...They looked like people who moved around, Lennie thought' (p. 32).

All Lennie's life his own feelings had been as hard to get at as the meat in a walnut. His feelings were there - Lennie was sure of that - somewhere inside the hull, probably just as perfectly formed as the rest of the things nature put in a shell (p. 66).

Although he wants 'to be a success', Lennie breaks into an empty house, is bitten by a rattlesnake and nearly dies. Real-life drama saves him since he is brought face-to-face with real feelings and fears, with the consequence of his own action, and with sensible adult assistance for his mother and himself. Gaining contact with his feelings helps him

to feel like a real person. He learns that his life (aided, it must be acknowledged, by some pretty high drama) is 'In a lot of ways...better than the stuff you see on television...It's realler' (p. 111).

A central activity of counselling is discovering what is 'realler' and helping gently to crack the walnut shell surrounding the meat of feeling; for many people, Lennie's fear that it is necessary to act being a person, that there may be no one and nothing inside the shell, itself inhibits the attempt to live fully.

When I was asked to work with children who were, it was feared, at risk of being 'frozen' I felt that their internal meteorological problem was fog rather than frost. In a variety of ways, I tried to help them learn more about themselves, to find safety in an increased range of feelings letting sadness and anger become acceptable and smiles less fixed - and to gain a sense of self-esteem and thus of self.

Richard Gardner (1970) in *The Boys and Girls Book about Divorce* addresses the problem of bewilderment about feelings:

When something happens that's sad and painful usually the best thing for you to do is to try to find out exactly what the trouble is. Then it is easier for you to decide what to do to help yourself feel better. Some children don't do this. Instead, they make believe that nothing's wrong or they try to hide their sadness. When they do this, they are not trying to help themselves, and so their problems usually are not solved, and they may even get worse. It's much better to know the truth about your problems than to hide from them, even though the truth can often be frightening or painful. When you know the truth, you can often do something about your troubles. If you hide from the truth, you can do nothing about your problems, and so things usually get worse (pp. 25-8).

### He writes reassuringly that

Most children who see therapists don't look or behave any differently than other people. They're children who have special problems in a few parts of their lives but who do quite well in most things. Not everything is wrong with them, just a few things (p. 151).

This is a useful addition to the concept of wholeness, of the whole person. Obtaining help for one symptom, one anxiety, one problem, does not imply that everything is wrong, that the child is sick or unusual. Many children (and adults) fear to be thought odd; we like to be unique individuals but not different.

Whatever the context of counselling, whatever the reason for contact, it is crucial and fundamental that both child and counsellor regard themselves as ordinary and equal. They are both special and unique, too, but as individual people, not victim and helper.

## A childist approach

When considering a title for the present book I thought of Child-

Centred Counselling. This I rejected lest it suggest that I was writing exclusively about the Rogerian approach, but the spirit and meaning of child-centredness remain.

The Feminist approach to counselling follows no single model of human development and behaviour but draws on a world of experience, philosophy, religion, myth and analysis within a feminist framework. The symbol of the gently curving serpent, representing natural swing between happiness and sadness, energy and tiredness. activity and rest, is preferred to the pyramid of upward progression where success sits on failure (Chaplin, 1988b).

What would characterize a child-centred approach? Semantic considerations reveal a good deal about our approach to children: the parallel to feminist would be childist, but no such word exists. If it did. what would it mean?

Is the Children Act, 1989 a piece of childist legislation? It is designed to promote the best interests of the child, taking into account the child's own view of her/his life, past, present and future. What part have children taken in formulating and implementing the new law?

implies ways of regarding womanhood and the lives of women as individuals and corporately. It is not necessary to be a woman to be a feminist but it is necessary to value the female in terms of, for example, women, womanhood, the feminine aspect of every personality.

Childism should be easy; everyone has been a child and has experience of childhood. To be a *childist* would not imply regarding children as superior to all other beings but would suggest regarding the world from the point of view of people other than adults. But childist is very close to childish - with perjorative associations of foolishness and immaturity. We even tell children not to be childish, although a dictionary defines this (Old English) word as 'of or proper to a child', continuing, 'puerile, unsuitable for a grown person' (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1982).

Puerile (from Latin) is 'boyish, childish; suitable only for children, trivial'.

Words based on infant (Latin) - infantilist, infantilism - have even worse resonances; infantile has taken the meaning of 'behaving inappropriately as a young child'. *Infantilism* is given as 'state of being mentally or physically undeveloped though of adult age' (but an infant prodigy is 'a very precocious child': it is apparently laudable to be adult-like in childhood).

Greek derivation offers no more help in the search for positive descriptions of the nature of child. Paedophilia is tied indissolubly to 'sexual love directed towards children', with connotations of illegality and disgust. But philia has only the sense of 'love of, fondness for', from 'philos dear, loving'.

A glossary of good, potentially positive words gone to waste; what does contemporary English usage reveal about contemporary British attitudes towards children and childhood? Chaplin draws attention to the study of Dale Spender (1980) which shows how 'our very language is constructed in a way that implies woman's second-class status. The norm is seen as masculine' (Chaplin, 1988b, p. 47). What would a study of language demonstrate about the status of children?

Even the lovely *childlike* has detracting associations in everyday usage, although the dictionary offers 'having good qualities of a child, as innocence, frankness, etc.'

A childlike approach to counselling? Characterized by innocence and frankness? An attractive idea. But I wish my dictionary proposed further good qualities of a child. What adjectives are commonly used to evoke the positive qualities of childhood? What do they suggest about the speaker/writer and our corporate view?

I return to *childist*. But here are aural associations with *ageist*, *racist*, *sexist* – terms usually indicating that the subject is prejudiced by consideration of age, race or sex. Does anyone claim, in anything but jest, to be *ageist*?

Just as the philosophy and practice of counsellors adopting a feminist approach are extended not only to women but also to men and children, a childist or child-centred approach would, by implication, extend to adults; particularly important since there is no point at which we cease to be the selves of our chronological childhood.

The psychologically 'healthy' person is rhythmic not stuck and rigidly split. She recognizes and understands all the opposites within herself. She is reasonably comfortable with both her strong and weak sides, her 'masculine' and 'feminine' sides, her rational and emotional sides, and her 'parent' and 'child' sides. There may be conflict between them. But at least there is a dialogue. They can respect each other. Neither side is completely denied.

Sometimes they fight and sometimes they dance together. Everyone has her own dance, her own rhythms. One day she may be strong and bossy and another day gentle and vulnerable. She alternates between them, when it is appropriate (Chaplin, 1988b, p. 45) (re-paragraphed).

### The idea of *vulnerability* as a positive quality is important:

In our society weakness is seen as inferior to strength, failure is seen as inferior to success. We do not recognize that weakness and vulnerability are a vital part of us...we feel we must be *totally* successful, almost perfect *or* else we must be *completely* useless (p. 44).

Albert van den Heuvel (a theologian) speaking at a conference on telephone counselling, offered 'as a blueprint for being human his "ten words" of which number three is 'You shall overcome fear for your own vulnerability', elaborated as 'Blessed are they who discover the strength of their own" (Salisbury, 1991, p. 1346).

#### Chaplin (1988b) proposes that

We grow and change in more of a spiral than in a straight line. We go backwards as well as forwards. Perhaps we can only go forwards if we go backwards and regress into childlike feelings first. Growth is working with the rhythms, not proceeding from some depressing reality to a perfect harmonious self in the future (p. 45).

Many models of human growth and development reflect an onwards and upwards rather than a spiral movement. The Erikson (1965) eightstage model, for example, proposes opportunities for success and failure at age-related crises throughout life and particularly in early childhood. Failure successfully to complete the task appropriate to the chronological age impairs ability to proceed to the next task and thus all future emotional development.

In so far as this reflects the necessary sequence of physical growth – you cannot become four feet tall if you have never been three foot eleven – it has value. But the value laden connotations of consistent. one way emotional progress, success and failure, are questionable.

## The study of childhood

A childist approach to counselling requires respect for the idea of childhood as well as for every individual child. If feminism involves the study of the feminine in all aspects of culture – for example, religion, politics, dress, art, literature, power, oppression - childism would involve equivalent study about childhood.

Adults training to work with children in health and social care and welfare would be expected to undertake an holistic study of childhood -physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual. Attention would be given to attitudes towards childhood in other times and cultures, and the religious beliefs and practices and political preoccupations which inform and influence whatever are the current attitudes.

A childist counsellor would begin with the idea of a child of whatever age being a complete person rather than an immature version of the adult s/he would become. An acorn is not an immature oak tree; an acorn is perfectly an acorn. It contains everything necessary for growth into an oak tree but neither acorn nor tree contains greater or lesser value and virtue. Each is entire unto itself, both are of use to other forms of life.

But an acorn cannot remain as an acorn forever. In order to become a tree it requires certain nurturing conditions. John Westerhoff (1980) writes of the tree, perfect at every moment of growth: 'a one-year-old tree is truly and completely a tree. As it develops, it doesn't become more truly a tree; it only becomes more complex' (p. 24).

A tree surgeon, hoping to help a poorly growing oak, would need to know about the nature and needs of the tree. To understand the problems of one oak, would require knowledge of soil and weather, plants and creatures living on, in, under and near the tree – perhaps human behaviour in the locality; (oak abuse – sawing off branches, carving initials, poisoning the atmosphere).

Interest might extend to studying the oak in literature, importance in religious ceremonies, legends, famous individual oaks. To heal or strengthen an oak tree demands proper understanding of and respect for the acorn as acorn, sapling as sapling, tree as tree; for oak as oak.

Really to offer a child help, whether through counselling or casework, therapy or guidance requires understanding and respect, breadth and depth of interest and study. Counsellors adopting a childist approach would read books written for, about and by children – fiction and picture books, biography and poetry. They would watch television and videos, listen to the radio, look at comics and magazines.

They would spend time in playgrounds, cinemas, discos and Sunday schools. They would have placements in schools, listening to staffroom conversation, watching classroom behaviour, attending lessons and sharing school dinners. They would identify the images of children popularized in advertising. They would study the history of politics and philosophy relating to children in the legislation of education, employment, religion, health and social welfare. They would learn to deconstruct the messages of authority.

It is essential to encourage counsellors to listen to children. But – listen to what, and in what context? And to do what with what the counsellor has 'heard'? When 'Ena's' father described his daughter, in care, as 'it' we were all shocked; a senior officer found proof in this of the man's callous and abusing attitude. Not one social worker concerned with this family thought to learn about the use of English on the Caribbean island from which first the parents, then very recently, Ena herself, had come.

Listen we might, but what was done with what we heard? We interpreted it in our own familiar, white, middle-class system and even colluded in regarding the man as 'paranoid' and the girl as 'backward'. This took place long enough ago for confession to be easy (although I have made so many other mistakes since). But similar, tragic errors occur daily. Not only may we ignore the different connections of a different racial, national or social group, we may not be concerned to identify the relevant culture and images of childhood.

Nursery nurses in some London day nurseries were found by Asrat-Girma (1986) to be insensitive to the context of the lives of some children in their care. She writes of West Indian parents who 'had often tried to explain the difficulty of getting sand out of their children's hair, yet the staff reaction typically was "Coloured parents don't like their children to get dirty...some of them even ask that their children be not allowed to play with sand or water" and recalls 'an Asian child whose