

PROFESSIONAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Overview

The foundation of good practice in counselling is the therapist operating within professional guidelines, and to a set of ethical principles. Therapists need to be able to draw upon the relevant codes of ethics and conduct that apply to all professionals, as well as those stipulated by the National Counselling Society (accessed [here](#)). The use of professional guidelines and ethical principles will help the therapist make decisions in everyday clinical practice, and can also provide a language and a framework to discuss a variety of issues within clinical supervision.

Therapists who work with children and young people will need knowledge of:

- the range of legal frameworks that are pertinent to their practice (see GPG 2 'Legal Frameworks')
- local and national codes for confidentiality and consent (see GPG 3 'Capacity, Consent and Confidentiality')
- child protection processes (see GPG 5 'Risk Assessment and Child Protection')
- data protection (see GPG 4 'Contracting and Record Keeping')
- mental health legislation relevant to their work (GPG 2 'Legal Frameworks' and GPG 10 'Mental Health Difficulties').

Ethical principles

Ethical practice with this particular client group will involve counsellors¹:

- acting in accordance with the trust placed within them by their clients
- respecting their clients' rights to autonomy, despite their young age
- acting in the best interests of their clients to promote their well-being
- striving to mitigate any harm to clients
- being committed to providing fair and equitable services for all of their clients.

Many of these principles can be challenging to apply when working with children and young people, given that their age and circumstance (e.g. being within a school setting) can often seem to be at odds with these values. However, counsellors who strive to work to this ethical stance will be serving their clients well, often empowering them as they experience this 'different' relationship with an adult.

Competence

The National Counselling Society believes that all counsellors who work with children and young people must have specialist knowledge, skills and abilities. These attributes are usually gained from specific, dedicated training, focused on counselling children and young people, and subsequently supplemented by relevant continuing professional development (CPD).

Counsellors must be able to continuously self-monitor their practice and recognise the limits of their own competence. When an individual counsellor finds themselves in a situation that is outside their level of competence, they must be able to explain this to the client and work with them to find more appropriate support. This may be an onward referral to another service or agency that is more suitably equipped to deal with the client's specific needs. Many counsellors find that talking through these issues in supervision is very helpful. Not only can the different options for the client be considered, but the supervisor and supervisee can then consider other aspects of the case such as whether the initial referral for counselling was correct,

and if further CPD or training would be useful for the counsellor. More information about referral to other agencies is in GPG 6 “Working Within and Across Other Agencies”).

Supervision

Clinical supervision is key to monitoring counsellor competence and the standards of service being offered to children and young people. The National Counselling Society (NCS) believes that all practicing therapists ought to engage in regular clinical supervision, at a minimum of 1.5 hours/month (see [NCS Supervision Guidance](#)). However, we acknowledge that working with children and young people can be more demanding than adult work for a variety of reasons, for example:

- important legal considerations, such as capacity to consent
- the developmental age of the clients and the challenges of verbal engagement
- the stresses of the setting, such as a busy and fast-paced secondary school.

Issues such as these suggest that an increased amount of time spent in supervision may be appropriate for counsellors working with this client group, and our experience tells us that many therapists working in this sector do indeed undertake more than the minimum of 1.5h/month to support them in their work.

Given that clinical supervision is generally accepted as a way to protect clients, the Society believes that therapists should be in supervision with supervisors who have experience and knowledge of working with children and young people, in order to support the counsellor in their, often complex, work.

Many counsellors, new to working in schools, find the setting and the relational dynamics complex, and as such appreciate having supervision from a supervisor experienced in schools’ work.

Minimising potential for harm

Despite all best intentions, occasionally clients can inadvertently be put at risk by their therapist. When such an event occurs the therapist must behave professionally by taking action immediately to try and correct the situation, report the incident to the relevant authorities, and co-operate with any investigation into the incident. Supervisors have a responsibility to help supervisees monitor their own limits of competence and try to ensure that the supervisees work within appropriate boundaries.

Consent

Counsellors working with children and young people must be knowledgeable regarding the concept of capacity to consent, and sufficiently skilled to make judgments about the capacity of individuals to give consent. ⁱⁱ Counsellors need to be able to describe the counselling intervention to their young clients in a way that they understand, ensuring that both potential benefits and any associated risks are explained. Issues of consent are discussed more fully in GPG 3 ‘Capacity, Consent, and Confidentiality’.

Contracting

Children and young people who attend counselling should be given very clear information about what can be expected in relation to the service being offered: its possible benefits and risks, the timings and number of sessions, and the extent of confidentiality. This ‘contract’ should be fully understood by the young client.

More information is available in GPG 4 ‘Contracting and Record Keeping’.

Confidentiality

Issues relating to confidentiality when counselling children and young people can be complex, and differ in a number of ways to counselling adults. Counsellors working with this client group need to draw on knowledge of confidentiality and information sharing, and be able to explain the boundaries and limits of confidentiality to children, young people, and their families (when relevant).

More information relating to confidentiality is available in GPG 3 'Capacity, Consent, and Confidentiality'.

Conduct

As in all professional roles, counsellors need to demonstrate appropriate standards of conduct. This is especially pertinent when working with children and young people who, by definition, do not have equal 'power' in their relationship with adults.

Counsellors will need to maintain professional boundaries with service users, and their families; and treat their young clients with the same dignity, respect, kindness and consideration shown to adult clients.

Record-keeping

Counsellors working with this client group must be able to create and maintain accurate records of their contact with their clients and other professionals, whether that be in face-to-face meetings, 'phone calls, texts, or emails; and store these records securely.

More detail about record-keeping can be found in GPG 4 'Contracting and Record keeping'

Insurance

All therapists have an adequate level of professional insurance, either provided by their employer or directly themselves.

Summary

Counselling children and young people involves complexities that aren't always present in adult work. By working in an ethical manner and adhering to professional codes, counsellors can be supported by recognised frameworks which will underpin and guide their practice.

Sources and suggested further reading

ⁱ British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2014) *Competencies for Humanistic Counselling with Young People (11-18)*. Lutterworth

ⁱⁱ Mitchels, B. and Bond, T. (2010) *Essential Law for Counsellors and Psychotherapists*. London: SAGE.

Online ResourcesMindEd Sessions

CMD 412-002 Key Differences Between Counselling Adults and Children

CYP IAPT 413-022 Confidentiality, Consent, Capacity and Ethics

CORE 410-053 Legal and Ethical Frameworks

CMD 412-044 Supervising Counselling

Department for Education (2016) *Counselling in schools: a blueprint for the future*. London

Welsh Assembly Government/British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2011) *School-based Counselling Operating Toolkit*. NB The document is bi-lingual with the English language section after the Welsh

Department of Education (2012) *Independent Counselling Service for Schools: Operating Handbook*

National Counselling Society Code of Ethics

National Counselling Society: Guidelines for Continuing Professional Development