

Children and counselling

Counselling is a process that happens between a child and a counsellor that explores the trauma of sexual assault and helps children to make sense of what has happened to them. It aims to assist children recover their self esteem by recognising that the assault was not their fault, and to address the fear and anger that they may feel. During counselling, a child is encouraged to explore his or her feelings and to express them. Thoughts and feelings that remain unsaid tend to become very powerful and can cause long term problems. For example, many children fear they have been damaged.

Counselling offers a safe place to talk about difficult things. Children often find it hard to talk to the adults who care about them because the child wants to protect the adult. They feel responsible for the adult's reactions. A counsellor is 'safe' because they do not get upset or angry about what the child says. A counsellor does not feel responsible for the child's behaviour so a child can, for example, get angry and swear or throw things without fear of 'getting into trouble'.

Counselling offers an opportunity to make internal beliefs and feelings external and therefore more manageable. A 15 year old boy was unable to tell anyone in his family that he was scared at night because he thought they would laugh at him. Once he had told a counsellor he was reassured that what he felt was normal.

Counselling can provide children with a relationship that in itself is valuable. A child can experience a sense of control in the counselling relationship which is crucial for children who have been subject to an adult's negative power. In the counselling relationship they can have some power and be able to make choices.

Counselling gives a child a relationship with an adult where they can relearn how to trust. When children are sexually assaulted they learn that adults can wield terrible power over them and therefore see the world as a dangerous place. In a relationship with a counsellor they can realise that it possible to trust again.

Counselling gives a child the opportunity to achieve a sense of 'mastery' over what has happened to them. This can happen through play where children can act out the trauma and develop ways of overcoming it eg a 4 year old girl was convinced that there were spiders inside her tummy put there by the offender. In her play with the counsellor she repeatedly performed operations on a doll to remove the spiders. When they were all removed she and the counsellor buried them in the garden. Another child was scared in her own home and spent her time in counselling making the dolls house safe from intruders. This gave the counsellor clues to share with her parents as to how to make her feel safe again in her own house.

Counselling offers a safe place to be angry and provides constructive ways to handle that anger.

Children have a chance to explore their feelings about difficult topics such as sexuality, family relationships or the criminal justice process.. It can provide activities that address specific feelings, for example expressing anger towards a picture of the offender or sharing revenge thoughts.

Counselling offers a direct and open relationship. It directly counteracts the behaviour of the offender by being private, not secret; honest, not manipulative. It is not about an adult's gratification but exclusively for the child's wellbeing. Counselling is able to reduce a child's sense of shame and low self esteem by demonstrating that the child is valued and cared for.

How long does a child need counselling?

Each child is different but most would need six sessions at minimum and some may need ten times that depending on the trauma experienced and who the offender is.

Most children need to have 'top up' counselling at later stages of their lives when significant events occur eg puberty, first consensual sexual experience, childbirth, offender coming out of jail, etc. If children have a positive counselling experience when they are young they will be more likely to be able to use counselling at other time of their life.

Where should counselling take place?

Sessions for children usually last about 30 to 60 minutes. They normally take place at the counselling agency and although there may be exceptions it is generally not helpful for a child to receive counselling at home. This is because a child may feel inhibited in their own space and may be reminded of the assault by unknown triggers around them. In a counselling agency a child gets a sense of not being the only one in this situation. They see other children's drawings and are able to recognise that there are other kids who have been hurt by adults. They are able to identify the counselling room as a safe and neutral place.

Similarly it is most beneficial if the child is seen alone although for very young children it may be necessary for their parent to be present. Parents often feel obliged to correct their child's behaviour if they are present and children tend to acutely aware of their parents reactions.

It is vital that a child knows that while counselling is strictly confidential, the counsellor will tell someone else what has been said or done in a session if the child is in danger of harm from him or her self or other people. It should be explained to the child that there may be things that a parent needs to know, but that the child needs to give permission for

the counsellor to tell the parent. The counselling time belongs to the child and their permission should be sought if any of their time is to be spent with the parent.

Sometimes, parents can feel excluded from the counselling process, and they can wonder what goes on in the sessions. It can seem that it is all play, and they feel puzzled when they see their child coming out of sessions with heaps of drawings, or talking about making play-doh picnics. Counselling does include a lot of fun as well as hard work, and children are more likely to tell parents about the fun. In fact, fun is part of the healing too.

What happens in the sessions.

Counselling with children involves a wide variety of tools which are designed to help children express their feelings about themselves and what has happened to them. Some of this expression is conscious and overt, while others will be unconscious, eg drawing the offender with a visible penis. All of it contributes to the child's healing. The first task of the counsellor is to establish a relationship with the child that is safe and empowering. Through activities and talking the counsellor works towards the child sharing their trauma and their feelings. The focus of the sessions is what has happened to the child but will also involve fun. Children quickly pick up the combination of 'work' and play. Children often find that a weekly session which concentrates on the assault frees them up for the rest of the week, and that the trauma can belong in the counselling session.

Children can discuss specific fears and feelings and with the counsellor, and they can be assisted to develop strategies to cope with them. Sometimes just the saying of difficult things can be enough to lessen anxiety, eg a 10 year old girl assaulted at 4 years had believed since the assault that she would never be able to have children. Her relief at being able to ask the question was immense.

Most children's counsellors will have a dolls house and a range of toys, puppets, a doctors set, drawing materials and play-doh. Anatomically correct dolls are not always used but can be useful for initial disclosures.

A combination of play, activity and talking allow the counsellor to discover how the child feels, and to focus on the issues the child feels most important which may vary from week to week. For example, during one session a child may feel paralysed with fear. This is discussed with the child and then with the parent, who can address the fear at home. The next week the same child may feel much less scared and then have 'room' to feel angry.

Should Parents have counselling too?

Counselling for parents can be very helpful. If they are feeling overwhelmed by their own responses to their child's sexual assault it may be a good idea for them to have some counselling. They have also experienced significant trauma that may be easier to cope with if they have counselling. If they also experienced sexual assault as a child, counselling is particularly recommended. Effective counselling can make a significant difference, both in their coping and in their ability to support their child.

Counselling can also be beneficial for assisting parents and non-offending family members in understanding the needs and behaviours of the abused child. There are groups for parents whose children have been assaulted which are advertised in local newspapers, doctors rooms and community health centres. Many parents find contact with parents in the same situation very helpful.