

Counselling techniques

Introduction

You need many years of practice and usually a qualification to become an accomplished counsellor. However, anyone, regardless of qualifications and training can become a more effective helper by learning to apply the basic techniques of counselling. These are as follows:

Getting the environment right

If you feel that it is safe to do so, create a space to talk which is private and quiet and where you know you will be free from interruptions (always seek the advice of a colleague about the safety and appropriateness of this action). Where possible, make sure the seating is comfortable and make sure that there is appropriate heating and ventilation.

Get the message across that you have time to attend to the issue that you want to address.
Get the message across that the conversation is private and that you will not be passing on what the child/young person says to any third party*.

* You have to also make it clear that if the child/young person gives you information that suggests that they or others are in danger (for example a disclosure of abuse or threat of Self-harm) you cannot keep this confidential. *Make sure that you are fully aware of your organisation's child protection policies.*

Getting the listening right

One way of encouraging a child or young person to talk is to make sure that they know you are listening. You can do this by just being attentive and by showing with your body language that you are listening. Sometimes this will be by facing the child and making good eye contact. Sometimes sitting side by side (for example during a journey) will be less threatening. Try not to interrupt when the child/young person is talking. By occasionally nodding or quietly saying "yes" or "aha" the child/young person should be encouraged to open up. Reporting back to the child a short summary of what they have just said and asking them if you have got it right is another way of doing this. Make sure you look and sound calm, unhurried and caring.

Asking the right questions

Try to ask more open questions than closed questions.

An open question is one which cannot be answered with yes or no and which encourages a more detailed answer, for example:

- "What are your feelings about this?"
- "What are the advantages of doing things the way you have suggested?"
- "What are the disadvantages?"

Avoid closed questions such as:

- "Are you sad?"

- "Are you looking forward to the school holidays?"

Another disadvantage of closed questioning is that the desired answer might be implied within the question and you might inadvertently steer the child/young person to give an answer that they wouldn't otherwise have given. An example of this would be:

"Are you going to stop speaking to that boy who has been upsetting you?"

The implied expected answer here is quite clearly "yes".

Being affirming

To encourage the flow of conversation it is important that you show respect by taking an accepting attitude. The message you are trying to get across is "I have respect for your opinions and your view of the world at this present time". This is not the same as saying that you agree with the child's opinions or actions and it is okay for you to make it clear that your opinions and moral view are different, as long as this is done in a respectful way.

"[child] seemed to really bond with [worker] - she spoke to him as if he was a person rather than focusing on his behaviour. If he had done well she praised him, which he responds to"

Carer

Limiting the advice

Try to limit the direct advice that you give during your conversation. This is more important for older than for younger children who clearly need more guidance. This is especially the case at the beginning of a piece of problem-solving conversation. For example, it is usually better to start with "What do you think is the best thing for you to do next?" than to say, "What you should do next is..."

How to make it work

- Do not turn your conversation into an interrogation. However good you are at counselling some children/young people will not be ready to talk to you or want to talk to you. This does not mean that you have failed. It might be that they will talk later or that they will talk to a colleague of yours who they know better or a colleague of the opposite sex.
- Make sure that you recognise when you are getting out of your depth. If your conversation with a child/young person uncovers clear evidence of abuse or serious mental distress/ill health, seek immediate advice from your local mental health specialist team.
- After your conversation with a child/young person make sure that you take time out to reflect with a colleague or supervisor about the interaction that you have had.