



School Counselling Policies and Procedures

September 2021

DEFINITION

This policy follows the BACP's definition of formal counselling and provides a framework for the development of a professional counselling service at the Oratory Prep School (OPS) and contributes to the knowledge base of all those that work with the children at the school.

"Counselling takes place when a counsellor sees a client in a private and confidential setting to explore a difficulty the client is having, distress they may have experienced or perhaps their dissatisfaction with life, or a loss of direction or purpose. It is always at the request of the client as no one can properly be 'sent' for counselling.

By listening attentively and patiently, the counsellor can begin to perceive the difficulties from the client's point of view and can help them to see things more clearly, possibly from a different perspective. Counselling is a way of enabling choice or change or of reducing confusion. It does not involve giving advice or directing a client to take a particular course of action. Counsellors do not judge or exploit their clients in any way"

In the counselling sessions the client can explore various aspects of their life and feelings, talking about them freely and openly in a way that is rarely possible with friends or family. Bottled up feelings such as anger, anxiety, grief and embarrassment can become very intense and counselling offers them an opportunity to explore them, with the possibility of making them easier to understand. and understand. The counsellor will encourage the expression of feelings and as a result of their training will be able to accept and reflect the client's problems without becoming burdened by them. Acceptance and respect for the client are essentials for a counsellor and client, enabling the client to look at many aspects of their life, their relationships and themselves which they may not have considered or been able to face before. The counsellor may help the client to examine in detail the behaviour or situations that are proving troublesome and to find an area where it would be possible to initiate some change as a start. The counsellor may help the client to look at the options open to them and help them decide the best for them".
<http://www.bacp.co.uk/education/whatiscounselling.html>

1. THE ROLE OF THE COUNSELLOR

Counselling within the school environment is an opportunity for the counsellor to provide a safe and supportive environment where pupils and staff can communicate their thoughts and their feelings primarily through the process of talking and listening. This is done without judgement in an atmosphere of respect and empathy and within a

secure and trusting relationship. It is necessary that the counsellor is flexible in her approach and able to incorporate the use of non-traditional interventions and other therapeutic activities to support pupil communication and self-expression. **It is well-known and documented that it is the quality of the client's relationship with the therapist that is the greatest predictor of a successful therapeutic outcome rather than the use of any specific technique or approach.**

The school counsellor can help pupils by addressing the emotional and behavioural difficulties, help them work through feelings of sadness, frustration, anger and conflict, cope with periods of crises, improve the relationships they have with others, develop coping strategies and gain a better understanding of themselves.

The counsellor should endeavour to organise and administer the counselling service in conjunction with the school staff and communicate with the school staff in the best interests of the young person and within the limits of client confidentiality.

The counsellor should also encourage the involvement of the young person's family, **but only when this is beneficial and appropriate.**

The counsellor must act as a resource port of call for all staff members by providing information about what counselling involves and at the same time promote the service where possible and appropriate.

The counsellor must maintain adequate and appropriate records that are confidential and are kept safe in a lockable filing cabinet on the school premises at all times.

It is an ethical responsibility for the counsellor to maintain regular, on-going clinical supervision with a qualified professional to maintain and monitor standards and to comply with the BACP ethical code of conduct. The supervisory relationship is an essential and important opportunity to anonymously consider the case work that is being done, which contributes to the provision of the highest standards of ethical practice to all clients.

2. CONFIDENTIALITY

For a relationship of trust to develop between the counsellor and the client there needs to be a guarantee of confidentiality and a clear explanation and understanding of the exceptions to client confidentiality in keeping with child protection policies and procedures. There is no such thing as absolute confidentiality when working with young people and there will be times when the welfare of the child and child protection concerns will take precedence over confidentiality.

Exceptions to the maintenance of confidentiality is when the counsellor believes that

the client (or another person) is at risk of significant harm e.g. suicidal ideation/suicide attempts or self-harm, a pupil makes an allegation of child abuse (past or current) or there is evidence of a serious crime having been committed such as assault or murder. It is also required by law that the counsellor reports any knowledge or suspicion of terrorism, drug-trafficking or money-laundering. Confidentiality can also be broken if the counselling notes are subpoenaed by the courts (See Record Keeping and Data Protection).

The counsellor will discuss all significant concerns as well as moral and ethical dilemmas with all relevant personnel, which could include the Line Manager, Head of Pastoral Care, Safe-Guarding Lead, The Headmaster and Clinical Supervisor.

Unless there is a strong necessity for there to be a breach of confidentiality such as the examples described above, the counsellor must, at all times, treat all personal information about clients in the strictest confidence. This includes all identifying information, names, addresses and any information where a client can be identified directly or by inference.

The school counsellor will only share information on a strictly 'need-to-know' basis, which will be carefully considered and only done to safe-guard the client.

The counsellor will always endeavour to gain the consent of the child before breaking confidentiality, however if the child refuses to give consent then it will always be that safeguarding the child will take precedence over confidentiality and the pupils right to autonomy. This will be communicated to the client before confidentiality is broken and will be discussed with the safe-guarding lead and head of pastoral care before a final decision is made.

Any decisions that are made will, where possible be communicated to the child so that the child understands the reasoning behind decisions made and actions taken.

The counsellor will seek additional specialist advice and guidance to do with safeguarding and child protection issues when necessary from their counselling supervisor and from the safe-guarding lead and head of pastoral care.

3. PARENT/CARER, CONFIDENTIALITY AND THE GILICK PRINCIPLE

Confidentiality in a counselling setting is of prime importance in providing the space for a child to explore challenging and difficult issues within an atmosphere of privacy and trust. Confidentiality facilitates a trusting relationship between the child and the counsellor, it enables the child to share feelings of guilt, blame, reprisal or judgement and it encourages other children to come forward for counselling. Breaches of confidentiality will compromise pupil's privacy, place children in harm's way, damage

the therapeutic relationship and diminish the value of counselling.

The strict boundaries upheld in the counselling relationship may not be fully understood by the teaching staff who are more accustomed to having an inclusive, team-based approach towards the sharing of information between themselves and with parents. Teachers may also wrongly assume that parents always have the right to give or to withhold consent for their child to have counselling and to know of the content of the counselling session. **These assumptions would be in direct conflict with the Gillick principle, which affords confidentiality to young people under 16 of 'sufficient understanding'**. Whether the Headmaster or any other members of staff are automatically informed if a child is having counselling is decided by the institution and is a crucial matter of policy and practice of the counselling service. Young people under the age of 16 have as much right to confidentiality as any other person and they have the right to access counselling without the consent of their parents **if they are considered to be Gillick-competent**.

"It may be decided that the child's right to confidentiality as established by Gillick also extends to the right of privacy of information concerning his or her actual attendance at counselling. This right to pupil confidentiality can be seen to include privacy of information regarding attendance at counselling unless there are overriding reasons, such as a risk of self-harm, which requires that this information is shared directly with senior management. Where information revealing the identity of pupils attending counselling is passed on to the headteacher, disclosing such information clearly only applies to attendance at counselling sessions, and not to the actual content of the counselling sessions". (Good Practice Guidance for Counselling in Schools-4th Edition, Page 19).

In the Primary School setting, the children are much less likely to be Gillick-competent. With this in mind there is usually an understanding by the child that while the majority of the information is confidential, there may be some sharing of information and conversations between parents and school staff but the most important factor is that **all communication is done with the child's knowledge and consent**.

This is particularly relevant to situations where teachers and parents have some knowledge or information about the child's situation and why they were referred. School counsellors recognise the importance of being part of a pastoral care structure and should establish protocols for providing general feedback to the referrers within the school system. The child needs to agree on what may be shared and may be as simple as an acknowledgement of the referral either written or verbal.

An assessment of Gillick Competency in a pupil takes into account the maturity of the pupil, the intelligence to understand what is being proposed, the intelligence to understand the consequences of their actions and an understanding of the consequences of a possible deterioration in their mental health if they do not access counselling.

There is a likelihood that when working with children who have special educational needs, the counsellor may have to liaise with parents. **This must be done in consultation with the child.**

In practice, the school should make every attempt to gain the consent of the parents for a child to have counselling **except in circumstances involving alleged abuse by a parent or a guardian.**

The counsellor will on occasion be presented with complicated ethical dilemmas. It is the responsibility of the counsellor to discuss these with the relevant school staff members and to reflect on situations with the clinical supervisor to ensure that the guiding principle, which is the protection of the child, is always taken into account and maintained.

Additional information on Gillick Competency can be found below.

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-protection-system/gillick-competence-fraser-guidelines>

4. PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The school counsellor should make every effort to inform parents and to gain consent for counselling **unless it is detrimental to their safety and well-being.**

It is usual and important for the school counsellor in a prep school to endeavour at all times to seek written consent from one of the parents after a child has expressed a desire to engage in counselling.

In order to keep parents informed about the counselling process, the counsellor should ideally meet with the parent first or if this is not possible then to send information to the parent, which could be in the form of an introductory pack and include an introductory letter, a leaflet describing the counselling that is offered at the school and a Parent/Carer Consent and Confidentiality Agreement.

When a pupil makes a specific request that parents are NOT to be informed of their involvement in the counselling process, the counsellor will work hard to have the pupil understand the potential benefits of working with parents **unless to do so would place them at risk of harm.**

If the child is insistent that parents are NOT to be informed or involved in the counselling process, the school counsellor will, together with other relevant members of the school pastoral team, complete an assessment, using Fraser Guidelines to decide if the pupil is Gillick Competent and therefore able to have counselling without parental knowledge

or consent. If it is decided that the **pupil is Gillick Competent**, then neither the pupil or the counsellor need to inform the parents that counselling is or has taken place. If a decision is made that the **pupil is not Gillick Competent**, then written consent must be gained from the pupil's parent before counselling can take place. If the counsellor makes the decision that the pupil is Gillick Competent then it is up to the counsellor to decide if counselling would be appropriate for that child.

It is good practice for the counsellor to be available to parents prior to the start of counselling to allay any fears or concerns parents may have around counselling.

It is not always beneficial to the counselling process for the counsellor to encourage on-going contact with parents or attend too many meetings about their child. Research and experience have proved that even though the child might agree to this contact, the perception of counselling being 'their space' is reduced and this can lead to the pupil being less trusting of the counsellor.

Parents should be informed about the counselling service via the school newsletter, pamphlets and any other medium the school might deem to be appropriate in order to make the information widely available to staff, pupils and parents.

5. ACCESS TO COUNSELLING

Anyone who, on behalf of the pupil, wants to make a referral for counselling, **must discuss this with the pupil first**. The participation of children and young people to participate is spoken about in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states that:

"parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child".

This has been abbreviated by UNICEF to say:

"You have the right to say what you think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect you, and to have your opinions taken into account".

The counsellor must always take the approach that values the young person and respects their right to be informed and involved in any decisions that are being made that include them. Counselling is NOT compulsory, and a pupil can stop anytime they wish.

Referrals for counselling can be received from the pupils themselves, teachers, parents and others. It is always a good idea to have an informal discussion prior to a formal

request for counselling taking place.

For a young person to engage with counselling, he or she must understand the nature of counselling, have an understanding of confidentiality and how this can be overridden if the young person is allegedly at risk of harm from self or another.

Requests for counselling will be entered into an appointment system (subject to discussion and the organisation and planning of the school timetable) and the pupil will be seen at the earliest convenience subject to communication with the counsellor and all involved persons. It is very important that the counsellor be informed if the young person has had counselling in the past or is currently working with another agency e.g. CAMHS or Social Services.

If there is any doubt as to a pupil receiving counselling then there should be a discussion between all relevant persons to clarify the issues involved and establish the best way forward.

6. COUNSELLING SESSIONS

Pupils will only benefit from counselling if they want to be in counselling. Counselling is entirely voluntary and takes place only with the agreement of the pupil. This will be referenced in the contract that is prepared between the pupil and the counsellor.

All pupils have the right to withdraw from their counselling sessions at any time and this should be explained to them in a way that is clearly understood by the student.

It is acceptable for pupils to be encouraged and supported by adults while having counselling, but it is never acceptable for pupils to be pressured or coerced into counselling.

Counselling should never be seen as either a reward or a punishment. It is often the case that when a pupil presents with behaviour that is problematic, this is because there is a degree of internal stress and distress being experienced by the pupil and it is at these times that counselling can be most beneficial.

If a pupil presents with erratic attendance the counsellor will speak with the pupil to find out how they feel and their wish to continue.

7. CONTACT TIME

The needs of individual pupils and the structure of the school timetable will generally dictate the length and frequency of the counselling sessions however counselling sessions for young children generally last for thirty minutes and happen once a week.

Older pupils might need longer sessions to gain the most benefit from counselling.

In keeping with the person-centred ethos of the counselling, the service offered is flexible and open - ended. Pupils can attend counselling for as many sessions as they, the counsellor and their parents agree, providing **the counsellor is reassured that progress is being made and the pupil is benefitting from the counselling.**

Counselling is an ongoing process and the counsellor should consistently review the process and encourage pupils to reflect on whether the counselling is meeting the desired outcomes.

The counsellor should work with teaching staff to arrange sessions around both pupil and teacher preferences and to try to ensure that it is not the same lesson that is missed every week. For some pupils it will be important that the same schedule is maintained through the duration of the counselling program.

It is important to contract around a set number of sessions and then to review and re-contract when these sessions are completed. Being within a more established framework can help pupils to feel more safe and secure during counselling.

8. SUPERVISION

Supervision is a formal arrangement the counsellor has with an outside supervisor who is both experienced in counselling and qualified in supervision. The function of supervision is to oversee the work being done by the counsellor and serves to protect both the client and the counsellor. The exchange of information is subject to the same requirements with regards to confidentiality and the limits thereof that are observed in a counselling practice. Great care is taken not to disclose the name of the pupil or any identifying information. Supervision is a BACP requirement and serves to ensure that the counsellor maintains an ethical competence and confidence in the work that is being done with all clients. Supervision is an essential requirement in counselling and is clearly described in the BACP's *Ethical Framework*. The accreditation criteria for BACP currently specifies 90 minutes supervision time per month. This is relative to the caseload and school counsellors generally require considerably more than this per month. ***Counselling without supervision is considered unethical*.**

Counsellors will require administrative supervision to assist with administrative requirements and accountability **with specific reference to the development of a new service.** This is not the same as clinical supervision as the two function quite differently.

9. RECORD KEEPING AND DATA PROTECTION

Counselling information is kept with the knowledge and consent of the pupil and they must be made aware of who will have access to the information and why. Information should be kept to a minimum, is strictly confidential and is exempt from disclosure to other parties unless there is a legal requirement to do so.

Information that includes any safeguarding or child protection issues must be recorded clearly and succinctly together with all discussions had between the different parties, key decisions reached, action/s taken and the subsequent outcome.

Pupil records are kept in a locked filing cabinet secure from unsupervised access and should never be removed from the building.

Completed pupil records are shredded when the pupil leaves the school or at a time that is stipulated by the institution.

Case history information should be filed separately and must not have any identifying information.

The counsellor will make process notes that may be referred to in clinical supervision. These notes do not identify the pupil in any way and are important as they provide an effective monitoring service of the counselling that is taking place.

It is a legal requirement that sensitive data is protected. **The Data Protection Act (DPA)** updated on the 23rd May 2018 sets out measures that schools should adopt to maintain data security. The purpose of this act is to protect the individual rights and freedoms with a special focus on the right to privacy with respect to the processing of personal data. The DPA is particularly stringent with regard to sensitive data, which includes pupil characteristics, religious beliefs, ethnic background and would include any information that concerns mental health. The DPA includes all personal data that is held on either a computer system or on paper.

Under the DPA pupils and parents have the right to access information at any time. **Any requests for information from either a pupil or a parent must be made either verbally or by email to the Headmaster first.** This will involve a process of discussion prior to the information being released. An exception to this would be if the disclosure of certain information could cause harm to a pupil.

The retention of counselling records is informed by current DPA legislation and good practice within the education sector.

It is possible that pupil notes can be subpoenaed and used as evidence by the court. The school should contact their legal representative immediately to establish a protocol and decide upon what would be in the best interest of the pupil before a court hearing.

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