

Supporting Your Child Through the Counselling Process

How do I explain what counselling is to my child?

It is important that you are very clear and transparent about what counselling is. It is unhelpful to tell your child that they are meeting a “new friend” or that they are going somewhere “just to play” – this can be confusing for them. Using age-appropriate language, you can explain that counselling is a safe place for them to express their feelings, and to help them feel better. You could tell them that they won’t be forced to talk about or do anything they don’t want to. You could also describe to your child that counselling isn’t just talking; that it involves playing and making art. In the first session, the Counsellor will also be making clear to your child what a Counsellor’s role is and what counselling is about.

What if I want to discuss any issues or incidents regarding my child before the counselling session?

It is not beneficial for your child to discuss anything about them when they are present. We are also unable to leave your child unsupervised in another room to chat privately, due to health and safety reasons, so if there is something you would like to discuss with your Counsellor, please phone them in advance, or arrange a time to have a session on your own, so you can talk freely without your child listening.

Can I ask my child questions about how they are going in counselling?

It’s understandable that you want to know how your child’s session went. You can ask general questions such as, “Did you have fun?”; however, it is not appropriate to ask your child what they said or did in their counselling session, as this is an invasion of their safe and private space. Your child will share with you what they want to. It is not helpful to push for information as this contradicts their feelings of safety in the counselling process.

What if my child’s behaviour worsens during counselling?

It is very normal if your child’s behaviour seems to get worse when they start counselling. Counselling can bring up lots of feelings for your child when they begin to work through their issues, and some of these feelings may be negative. When children are feeling angry, confused, upset, scared, or sad, they may act out and misbehave at school and/or at home. It is important to remember that this will pass over time, and to be patient, as it can be a very difficult time for your child. Your Counsellor can help you to use strategies to address these difficult behaviours in your child if they arise.

What do I do with the artwork they bring home?

The artwork that your child creates in counselling needs to be treated as special and private. Again, it is not helpful to ask them what their artwork means, and especially not to criticise what they have created – sometimes children will create “ugly” pictures in counselling to reflect how they feel – it does not help for you to judge their artwork if it does not appeal to you. You can help your child feel special if you make an effort keep their artwork in a “safe place” at home, so that their siblings or any pets cannot damage them. Some parents put their child’s artwork in a folder or a box, to make sure that it is kept safe.

How much feedback will I get from my child’s Counsellor?

Due to confidentiality and privacy reasons, Counsellors can only share with you themes or issues that emerged in sessions, and progress in counselling. Unless we are concerned for your child’s safety, we will not disclose to you specific information divulged in sessions by your child. A Counsellor’s role is not to investigate and obtain information; rather, to create a safe space for your child to express themselves freely without the fear that all their information will be shared with their family.

How does Play Therapy and Expressive Therapies work?

Play is children’s first and natural language, and provides a safe and self-guided way for children to express and process their feelings. Expressive Therapies can include Sandplay, Drama/Movement Therapy, and Art Therapy. The toys and art resources in the therapy room are carefully chosen to engage the child’s interest, and to allow facilitation of creative and emotional expression without verbalisation. Children often do not have the verbal skills to express how they are feeling. If your child has experienced trauma before their narrative and language skills were developed (i.e., before age 3), they only have visual memories or bodily sensations to remember their experiences by. Furthermore, current literature indicates that trauma is stored in the right-hand hemisphere of the brain, which is the side of the brain that is creative and non-verbal. Therefore, through play and art, children are able to express themselves through a medium that is natural and accessible for them.

Lastly, consistency is important.

Counselling can be a long-term and ongoing process that requires routine and consistency. It is important that you try your best to bring your child to their session every week, so that a strong relationship can form between your child and their Counsellor, and so that your child has an opportunity to work through their issues in a structured and safe way. In the circumstance that you make the decision to cease counselling, it is not beneficial for your child to finish counselling without a closing session. It is important that your child has the chance to have a positive goodbye with their Counsellor and to reflect on all the hard work they have achieved during the process.