

FACT SHEET — *This fact sheet is for parents, carers, educators and members of community groups.*

## Children and counselling

Counselling helps children make sense of what has happened to them. During a counselling session children are encouraged to explore their feelings and to express them. Thoughts and feelings that remain unsaid tend to become very powerful and may cause long term problems. For example, many children fear they have been damaged. Counselling helps children to recover their self-esteem by enabling them to recognize that the assault was not their fault.

### **Children may feel it easier to talk to a counsellor rather than their parent or carer**

Children often find it hard to talk to the adults who care about them because they don't want to upset the adult or feel responsible for the adult's reactions. A counsellor is 'safe' because they do not get upset or angry about what the child says. Also, a counsellor is encouraging of internal feelings and will not react if the child gets angry, swears or throws things.

### **Counselling is a chance for children to hear that what they're feeling is normal**

Counselling offers an opportunity to make internal thoughts and feelings external. This process makes managing those feelings easier. For example: a 15-year-old boy felt 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 his counsellor he was reassured that what he was feeling was normal and felt more confident about telling his siblings.

### **Counselling is a safe place**

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. Counsellors provide activities that address specific feelings. For example: expressing anger towards a picture of the offender or being able to share revenge thoughts in a private setting.

### **Children can feel in control in a counselling session**

A child can experience a sense of control in the counselling relationship as they have some power and can make choices. This is crucial for children who have been subject to an adult's negative power. When a child is sexually abused, they have experienced how adults can wield terrible power and begin to see the world as a dangerous place. Counselling offers a child a relationship with an adult where they can re-learn how to trust adults.

## **Counselling offers a direct and open relationship.**

This directly contrasts to the behaviour of the offender by being private, but not secret, and honest and safe. It's not a situation created for the adult's gratification but exclusively for the child's wellbeing. Counselling reduces a child's sense of shame and low self-esteem by showing that the child is valued and cared for.

## **Counselling can start to undo the trauma**

Counselling gives a child the opportunity to achieve a sense of mastery over what has happened. This can happen through play where children act out the trauma and develop ways of overcoming it. For example: a 4-year-old girl was convinced that there were spiders in her tummy that were put there by her abuser. 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 during her counselling sessions made a doll's house safe from intruders. This gave the counsellor clues to share with her parents as to how to make the child feel safe again in her own house.

## **What happens in a counselling session?**

The first task of a counsellor is to establish a relationship with the child that is safe and empowering. Through activities and talking, the counsellor encourages the child to share their trauma and feelings. A counsellor uses a variety of tools which are designed to help children express their feelings and explore what has happened to them. Most children's counsellors will have a dolls house and a range of toys, puppets, a doctor's set, drawing materials and playdoh. Anatomically correct dolls are not always used but can be useful for initial disclosures. Some of this expression is conscious and overt, while others will be subconscious. For example: drawing the offender with a visible penis.

Children can discuss specific fears and feelings, and they can be assisted to develop strategies to cope with them. Sometimes just saying difficult things out aloud can be enough to lessen anxiety. For example: a 10-year-old girl who was assaulted at 4 years old had believed that she would never be able to have children. Her relief at being able to talk about that and explore those feelings was immense.

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. This may vary from week to week. The focus of the sessions is what has happened to the child but will also involve fun. For example: during one session a child may feel paralyzed 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. Children often find that a weekly session that concentrates on the assault, frees them up for the rest of the week. The trauma can be relegated to the counselling sessions.

## **Where should counselling take place?**

Sessions normally take place at the office or rooms of the counsellor. It's generally not helpful for a child to receive counselling at home. This is because a child may feel inhibited in their own space or may be reminded of the assault by triggers around them. In a counsellor's own setting a child can get a sense of not being the only one in this situation. They see other children's drawings and can recognize that there are other kids who have been hurt by adults. They can then see the counselling room as a safe place.

### **Should a parent or carer be with the child?**

it's most beneficial if the child is seen alone, unless the child is very young. Parents often feel obliged to correct their child's behaviour during sessions and children tend to be acutely aware of their parents' reactions. For example: a child may not fully offer their feelings in case they upset the parent or carer in the room with them.

### **How long does a child need counselling?**

Each child is different, but we say a minimum of six sessions that last between 30 minutes to 60 minutes each. Some children may need ten times that depending on the trauma experienced, who the offender is and their support networks.

Most children need more counselling at later stages of their lives when significant events occur. For example: puberty, their first consensual sexual experience, childbirth, or the offender being released from jail. If children have a positive counselling experience when they are young, they're more likely benefit from counselling at other times in their life.

### **Confidentiality**

It should be explained that there may be things that a parent needs to know, but that the child has control and is able to grant or deny permission for the counsellor to tell their parent or carer. The counselling time belongs to the child and their permission should be sought if the parent or carer wishes to sit in on a session. Although it's vital that a child knows that while counselling is confidential, the counsellor will tell someone if they believe the child is in danger of self harm or from other people.

Sometimes, parents can feel excluded from the counselling process, and they can wonder what goes on in the sessions. The counselling time belongs to the child and their permission should be sought if the parent or carer wishes to sit in on a session. 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 playdoh picnics. Counselling does include a lot of fun, but hard work as well. Children are more likely to tell parents about the fun aspect as it is easier to talk about things we have enjoyed. Fun is part of the healing process too.

### **Should parents and family members have counselling too?**

Counselling for parents can be very helpful. If they're feeling overwhelmed by their own responses to their child's sexual abuse it may be a good idea to for them to have some counselling as they too have experienced significant trauma. If they also experienced sexual abuse 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 child. There are support groups for parents whose children have been abused. Many parents, carers and family members find contact with other in the same situation very helpful.