Good Practice Guidance
Working with Children and Young People

RISK ASSESSMENT AND CHILD PROTECTION

Overview

Assessing risk within therapy must be an ongoing process. Evaluating risk, as part of an initial assessment, will influence the boundaries and limits of the counsellor’s contract with the client; and thereafter, the counsellor will continue to monitor issues of risk throughout the time the client attends counselling. A child-centred approach throughout risk assessment will help the therapist to see the issues from the child or young person’s view, and enable the client’s thoughts and wishes to be taken into account when deciding upon any actions. When assessing risk, and only when it does not further endanger the young person, the counsellor must be prepared to address any concerns they have relating to general or specific risks with the client, and if necessary, other adults – be they other professionals or those with parental responsibility.

All therapists who work with children and young people must be suitably experienced and qualified, work within their own competence, and have supervision with someone who is experienced in dealing with child protection issues.

Counsellors must make themselves aware of relevant legislation, and national and local child protection standards when assessing risk; as well as paying due regard to ethical codes and contracts of employment.

This Good Practice Guidance can only outline the main issues to consider in risk assessment, and counsellors are strongly encouraged to maintain an appropriate level of competence by further reading or training. Some useful resources are listed at the end of this document.

Background

Comprehensive statutory guidance now exists across the UK to help and support professionals working with children to promote their welfare and protect them from harm. Following a series of significant child abuse cases in the courts, there is now an extensive child protection and safeguarding agenda operating across all four nations. Whilst each country of the UK has its own country specific legislation and guidance relating to safeguarding and child protection there is a principle that exists UK wide which is that all adults share responsibility for protecting children – that is, it is ‘everybody’s business’. Therapists who work in local authorities, health services, and any other agencies or services regulated by child protection legislation have a duty to comply with child protection procedures. Therapists who work in private practice, and often by definition have less professional support and guidance around them, should make themselves familiar with national and local safeguarding and child protection provisions, and practice according to these.

Private practitioners who don’t have access to immediate support or guidance from anyone other than their supervisor, could usefully undertake specialist training in this area, and develop their own policies relating to safeguarding and child protection.

Assessing risk

Assessing risk is one of the most important tasks of the child and young person therapist. The therapist must put the welfare and safety of the child or young person first, balance the perceived needs of the client, and consider why they have disclosed information that they or someone else is at risk. Have they done so, within a relationship of confidentiality, in order to be supported while they process their own thoughts and
feelings; or rather, have they consciously or subconsciously decided that they want the counsellor to report on their difficulties?vi

Child abuse

Child abuse is any action by another person – adult or child – that causes significant harm to a child. It can be physical, sexual or emotional, but can just as often be about a lack of love, care and attention. Research shows that neglect, in whatever form it takes, can be just as damaging to a child as physical abuse.vii There are many types of abuse that counsellors will need to be alert to in their practice, including domestic abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, grooming, bulling and cyber-bullying, child sexual exploitation and trafficking, and female genital mutilation.

Identifying risk

Counsellors may become aware of risks to clients (or others) in a number of ways, for example:
- listening carefully to what a young person is saying
- attending to the young person’s body language (including paying attention to any incongruity with what the client is saying)
- noticing any signs of deterioration week by week when attending counselling
- paying attention to any signs within play or creative therapies that suggests risk or abuse
- noting any significant change of scores on an outcome measurement form (e.g. Question 4 on YP-CORE ‘I’ve thought of hurting myself’)vi
- asking questions to clarify what the young person is saying/has written to illicit further necessary information.

This list is not exhaustive.

When assessing risk counsellors will need to consider:
- who it is that may be at risk – their own client, or another person?
- probability - how likely is harm to occur?
- severity - how serious might the harm be?

The subsequent actions following the assessment of risk will be determined by the likelihood of harm occurring and its severity.ix

Support from others

When counsellors have concerns about a child and are considering reporting on these worries, it is accepted practice for the counsellor to talk with other professionals. The most obvious choice for a counsellor is their supervisor, but others may be able to support the counsellor’s thinking and decision making process. Each school has a designated member of staff responsible for child protection.iv Often school counsellors can successfully discuss individual cases with this teacher in confidence, or describe ‘hypothetical’ situations with them in order to help them plan their next steps. Similarly, a conversation with a duty officer at a local social care services, or a CAMHS duty worker may be important in helping the counsellor decide upon their course of action. When making a decision to disclose information to others it is good practice to make a written note of the decision making process and final decisions made. More information on this can be found in GPG 4 ‘Contracting and Record Keeping’.
If a child protection disclosure to the authorities is necessary, counsellors are encouraged to discuss their processes within supervision, thus examining their actions as well as their thoughts and feelings. This can be particularly helpful if the disclosure was against the young client’s wishes.

**Risk management when not a child protection issue**

Once a counsellor has identified a level of risk, they will need to create a risk management plan in collaboration with their client. The counsellor and the client need to identify factors which are likely to increase risk, and also factors which are likely to decrease risk (i.e. protective factors). Then the counsellor and client should collaboratively agree actions to be taken by the young person, their family, and other services should an acute increase in risk occur. This plan will explicitly weigh up the potential benefits and harms of choosing one action over another. It will detail the actions or interventions that reduce risk, and also explicitly state what support or interventions are to be used that enhance the child or young person’s strengths and resilience. The plan will include a timescale for re-assessment (which may be daily if the child or young person is in a setting like a school), and all of the above will need to be accurately recorded. The plan will need to be shared with other relevant adults such as parents, school staff, other services and agencies, etc. Underpinning this process will be the counsellor’s knowledge of how to escalate the case at short notice should the need arise.

**Risk of significant harm**

If a counsellor believes someone to be at risk of significant harm, then action is needed immediately. The counsellor will (in most cases) explain this to the child or young person, consider with them exactly which information needs to be disclosed (only that pertinent to the risk or danger will be passed on), invite the child or young person to be involved in the reporting on of such information, and attempt to gain their consent for the passing on of information. Should the client not give consent to the sharing of information, or is not capable of giving informed consent, then the counsellor must decide whether to ask for consent from someone with parental responsibility, or report on to the authorities without consent.

If a counsellor believes they will be put the child at greater risk by informing the client or their family that they are about to refer to the authorities, then the counsellor is protected when breaching confidentiality, because they have put the best interests of the child first.\(^{xi}\)

**Summary**

Assessing and managing risk is an ongoing and complex task for a counsellor, particularly when working with children and young people. However, if the counsellor is working within their competence, practises collaboratively with their clients, is willing to seek guidance and support from other professionals, observes statutory guidance, and works within an ethical code, tensions can be minimised and the client supported professionally and effectively.
References and suggested further reading

i Legislation relating to Children: Key legislation outlines professional duties to ensure the welfare of children is paramount, and our responsibilities to ensure that they are protected from significant harm. These are The Children Act 1989, 2002, 2004; the Children (NI) Order (1995), The Children (Scotland) Act (1995) and supported by Working Together to Safeguard Children (2015).


iii NSPCC: Child protection system across the UK

iv What to do if you’re worried a child is being abused (2015)


vi NSPCC (2013) No-one noticed, no-one heard

vii NSPCC: Child abuse and neglect

viii Information relating to YP-CORE

ix BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) (2014) Competencies for Humanistic Counselling with Young People. Lutterworth: BACP.


Online Resources

Corum Children’s Legal Centre

MindEd Sessions

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