



COUNSELING CHILD VICTIMS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE



Helping a child express his/her feelings and heal from sexual abuse requires not only specialized knowledge and skills, but also the ability to communicate with children, many of whom are in despair. When counseling children, it is important that sexual assault counselors/advocates remember they are not small adults, even if by virtue of their victimization they seem more mature than their years. It is also important to remember that a child may still have an emotional connection to his/her perpetrator. He/she may lack the language necessary or feel too embarrassed to discuss the abuse with the counselor. To provide the child with the best possible services, it is imperative that the sexual assault counselor/advocate be skilled in the techniques of child counseling.

Guidelines for Counseling Children

When working with children, it is recommended that the counselor/advocate:

- ◆ become acquainted with the child
- ◆ introduce the child to the physical environment of the counseling area
- ◆ outline the rules and rights of the session, including signals for the end of the session
- ◆ discuss confidentiality in an age-appropriate manner, avoiding the phrase, "keeping a secret"
- ◆ focus on feelings rather than details of the case
- ◆ limit counselor/advocate-directed questions: let the child talk
- ◆ listen reflectively
 - ◆ reflect content: "You covered the whole paper with red paint"
 - ◆ reflect feelings: "It looks like you're feeling angry"
 - ◆ support, clarify, and connect

Developmentally Appropriate Interventions for Children

It is imperative that counselors/advocates use interventions that are congruent with the child's developmental level. It is recommended that they use specific developmentally appropriate counseling strategies for younger, transitional, and older children.

Therapeutic Needs of Younger Children: Play

Young children are concrete thinkers. Their expression of feelings and processing of information is predominantly non-verbal. They may exhibit magical thinking. They typically attain mastery through repetition. One of the most important roles of the counselor/advocate is to help the child understand and accept his/her feelings. The counselor/advocate needs to allow the child to explore, perform repetitive tasks, and only intervene to avoid harm.

To address the needs of younger children, the counselor/advocate should:

- ◆ Use reflective listening

- ◆ Provide honest answers
- ◆ Provide an opportunity for expression through art
- ◆ Provide an opportunity for play

Therapeutic Needs of Transitional Children: Games and Rules

Transitional children are moving from concrete to abstract thinking, from non-verbal to verbal expression, and from a random to logical understanding of the world. They are task-oriented, and work well when they can "verbalize" and "do" at the same time. Children in this developmental stage need the opportunity to express themselves through art. Additionally, they desire social interaction, may identify with role models, are able to engage in group activities with rules and directions, and take action by helping others.

To address the needs of transitional children, the counselor/advocate should:

- ◆ Provide an opportunity for the child to ask questions as well as be heard
- ◆ Use reflective listening
- ◆ Provide accurate information and honest answers

Therapeutic Needs of Older Children: Words

Older children have the ability to form and understand abstract thoughts. They express their feelings and process information verbally. Children at this stage begin to break away from their parents to a certain extent and their peer relationships become increasingly important. Older children generally work well in peer groups. The counselor/advocate should assist older children in making informed decisions about their counseling as well as provide a forum in which they can talk honestly and express their feelings.

To address the needs of older children, the counselor should:

- ◆ Provide opportunities for self-expression (drawing, art, journaling, music)
- ◆ Provide opportunities to take action
- ◆ Provide opportunities for interaction with peers

Animal Assisted Therapy

Historically, animal assisted therapy has primarily served children with mental and/or physical disabilities. Today, it is recognized that animals can be integral to the healing process of a wider range of victims of sexual violence. Animal assisted therapy can provide psychological comfort as well as a non-threatening avenue for communication for child victims of sexual violence. For more information, rape crisis centers may wish to contact their local animal rescue or the Pa. Humane Society.

Whatever therapeutic intervention the counselor/advocate chooses should not only be developmentally appropriate and goal directed, but it should be child-centered. The counselor/advocate has an opportunity to play a vital role in the life of a child victim of sexual abuse—a chance to plant the seeds of healing that can help that child transform from victim to survivor throughout the course of his/her life.

Resources

- ◆ Comfort Caring Canines: <http://www.comfortcaringcanines.org/>; 1-215-483-5334
- ◆ National Children's Alliance/Regional Children's Advocacy Centers: <http://www.nca-online.org/rcac/>
- ◆ Online training program in animal assisted therapy: <http://www.animaltherapy.net>.
- ◆ Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape: 1-800-692-7445; www.pcar.org
- ◆ Patricia Levenberg, Network of Victim Assistance: 215-343-6543

References

Delta Society Pet Partnership Programs. (2005). *Pet partnership skills*. Retrieved September 20, 2005, from www.info@deltasociety.org.

This Technical Assistance Bulletin was developed with the assistance of Patricia Levenberg, Counseling Coordinator, Network of Victim Assistance, in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.