

KATHRYN GELDARD & REBECCA YIN FOO

COUNSELLING CHILDREN

a practical introduction

**6TH
EDITION**

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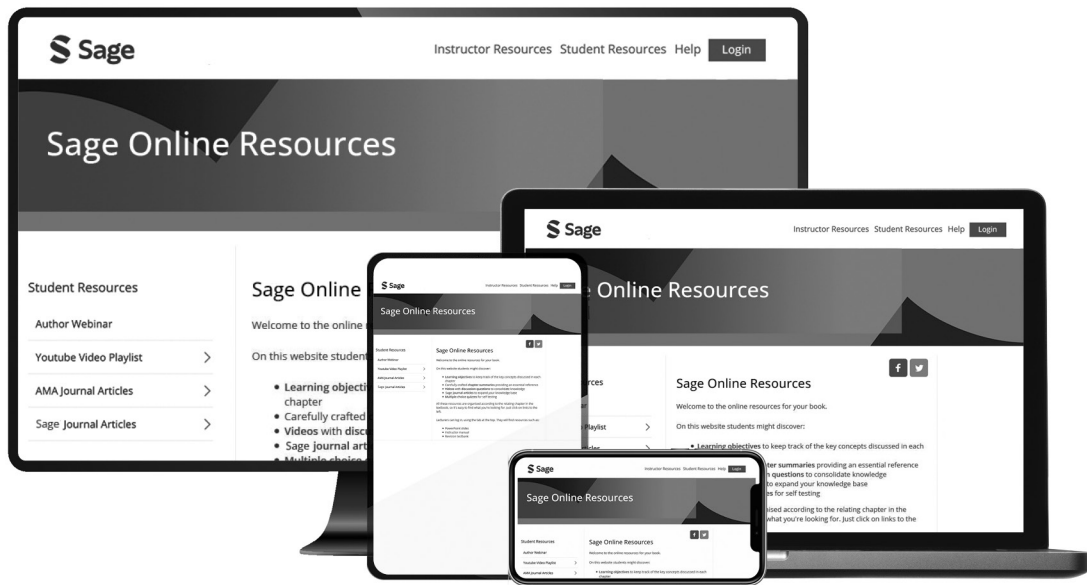
CONTENTS

<i>Online Resources</i>	vii
<i>About the Authors</i>	viii
Introduction to the Sixth Edition	1
Part 1 Counselling Children	3
1 Goals for Counselling Children	5
2 The Child–Counsellor Relationship	10
3 Ethical Considerations when Counselling Children	21
4 Attributes of a Counsellor for Children	32
Part 2 Practice Frameworks	37
5 Historical Background and Contemporary Ideas About Counselling Children	39
6 The Process of Child Therapy	63
7 The Child’s Internal Processes of Therapeutic Change	75
8 Sequentially Planned Integrative Counselling for Children (the SPICC Model)	84
9 Counselling Children in the Context of Family Therapy	102
10 Counselling Children in Groups	120
11 Counselling Children in a Post-Pandemic World	128
Part 3 Child Counselling Skills	135
12 Observation	137
13 Active Listening	142
14 Helping the Child to Tell Their Story and Express Emotions	151
15 Understanding Resistance and Transference	161
16 Understanding Self-Concept and Unhelpful Beliefs	170
17 Actively Facilitating Change	178
18 Termination of Counselling	188
19 Skills for Counselling Children in Groups	191

Part 4 Play Therapy – Use of Media and Activities	201
20 The Play Therapy Room	203
21 The Evidence-Base for Play Therapy and Counselling Children	210
22 Selecting the Appropriate Media or Activity	217
23 The Use of Miniature Animals	229
24 Sand-Tray Work	237
25 Working with Clay	247
26 Drawing, Painting, Collage, and Construction	256
27 The Imaginary Journey	268
28 Books and Stories	276
29 Puppets and Soft Toys	283
30 Imaginative Pretend Play	292
31 Games	304
32 Technology	312
Part 5 The Use of Worksheets	323
33 Building Self-Esteem	325
34 Supporting Social Skills	332
35 Education in Protective Behaviours	343
Part 6 In Conclusion	353
<i>Worksheets</i>	355
<i>Bibliography</i>	393
<i>Index</i>	405

ONLINE RESOURCES

DISCOVER THIS TEXTBOOK'S ONLINE RESOURCES FOR STUDENTS AND PRACTITIONERS



Counselling Children is supported by a wealth of online resources for students and practitioners, available at <https://study.sagepub.com/geldardchildren6e>. Resources include digital picture books, worksheets and a list of further resources.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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14

HELPING THE CHILD TO TELL THEIR STORY AND EXPRESS EMOTIONS

The skills of active listening described in the previous chapter are useful in phase 1 of the SPICC model in helping to create a counselling relationship and enabling the child to tell their story as explained in Chapter 8 (see p. 85). Indeed, much of the information that a counsellor needs to know about a child will emerge naturally and spontaneously when the counsellor uses active listening skills. Having used these skills to build a relationship with the child and to hear their story, the counsellor can consider phase 2 of the SPICC model. In phase 2 it is useful to continue to use observation and active listening while introducing additional skills, particularly those taken from Gestalt therapy, to help raise the child's awareness and to enable them to get in touch with, and express, emotions. The additional skills important in phase 2 include the use of questions and statements. As in phase 1, the counselling skills are used in conjunction with the child's involvement with media and activities.

Unfortunately, many children who come to counselling have issues which are too painful for them to confront without help but which intrude in daily life. Sometimes these issues are known to the child but often they are hidden, or partially hidden, in the child's unconscious. Some children have memories or impressions about past events which have been repressed but if explored may help them to feel more emotionally comfortable. If a child is to become aware of issues which are partially or fully buried in the unconscious, then the counsellor may support the child while raising their awareness of these issues. This support is provided with skill and care so that the child is allowed to explore at a pace which is acceptable to them and which does not raise further discomfort. It is important to recognize that some children who attend counselling may not be ready to explore issues and need to be respected by not being pressured to do so. Having acknowledged

this we also recognize that children can deflect emotional pain and avoid issues which cause them distress. Because of this a counsellor might make use of counselling skills which will enable the child to explore and resolve difficult issues. It can be useful in some instances to raise awareness of difficult issues with the child so that they can express the associated emotions.

Because children often find it difficult to talk freely with an adult about troubling issues, the counsellor attempts not only to join with the child and to invite the child to tell their story, but also to create an environment in which the child is enabled to continue telling their story even when to do so is difficult. This environment often includes use of:

- Observation and active listening skills
- Questions
- Statements
- Media

USE OF OBSERVATION AND ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

Observation and active listening have already been discussed in Chapters 12 and 13. They are useful in inviting and enabling the child to tell their story. However, use of these skills alone will usually not be sufficient to raise the child's awareness of the underlying issues so that the child can get fully in touch with the related emotional feelings.

USE OF QUESTIONS

Children generally live in a world where adults ask many questions. Observing young children at play, we have noticed that as well as ask each other questions they make statements about what they are doing or what they observe their playmates doing.

Inquisitive aunts and uncles, school-teachers, mothers and friends of the family, all with the best of intentions, ask children questions. Many children, in response to such pressure for answers, produce what they think to be the 'right' answers. These are answers which the child thinks will satisfy the questioner. They are not necessarily what the child believes to be true and they may not fit with the child's experience or with what the child is thinking. Consequently, if a counsellor relies on asking too many questions they may never discover what the child is really thinking and/or experiencing.

A further problem with asking questions is that the counselling session may be influenced by the questions the counsellor asks, instead of following the direction in which the child's energy leads. Asking too many questions may alert the child to expect questions and perhaps wait for more questions to be asked instead of thinking for themselves and talking about what is important for them, resulting in the child being less likely to be open and communicative.

If, as a new counsellor, you find yourself repeatedly asking questions, then it is important for you to discover what your goal is in asking these questions. Often, reflective counselling skills will encourage a child to continue telling their story without the need for questioning.

Cultural considerations are worth bearing in mind when using questions with children in counselling. Ivey and colleagues (2012) suggest using questions very sparingly until a sense of trust has been developed. This will also give you time to observe how the child uses questions, therefore providing a model for the frequency and type of questions you do ask.

However, questions can be a powerful tool for raising awareness if used sparingly. There are two major types of questions: *closed questions* and *open questions*.

Closed Questions

Closed questions are questions which lead to a specific answer. Usually, the answer will be very short because closed questions invite answers such as 'Yes' and 'No', or answers which give a small piece of specific information such as 'twenty-three'. Let us look at some examples of closed questions:

- Did you come here by car today?
- How old are you?
- Would you like a pencil?
- Are you frightened of your brother?
- Are you angry?
- Do you like school?

The answers to the above questions might be as follows:

- Yes
- Six
- No
- No
- No
- Yes

Obviously, some children might choose to expand on these answers, but other children might not. The problems with asking closed questions are that:

- The child may give a short factual answer and may not enlarge on that answer
- The child may feel limited and not feel free to answer the question in a meaningful way
- The child may wait for another question instead of feeling free to talk openly

Sometimes it is appropriate to ask a closed question to obtain some factual information. However, generally our intention as counsellors is to encourage children to talk openly without feeling restrained. This is where the open question is useful.

Open Questions

Open questions are usually very different in their effect. They give the child lots of freedom to explore relevant issues and feelings instead of inviting a single-word answer. Open questions elicit longer answers. They usually begin with 'What' and 'How'. An open question invites opinions or feelings. 'Tell me' and 'Describe' can also be used in the same way as open questions. Consider the following open questions:

- What is it like living with your brother?
- What can you tell me about your family?
- How do you feel?
- What can you tell me about your school?

Each of these open questions allows the child to think freely about the question and invites the child to give a full and expansive answer without being restrained by the counsellor's agenda. For example, answers to the question, 'What can you tell me about your school?' could include:

- My school is big with lots of classrooms
- Some of the boys at my school are bullies
- My school is a long way from home
- School is good fun
- My school is very hot in summer

Notice that with the open question, a wide range of different answers is possible. Compare these answers with the answer to the closed question, 'Do you go to a big school?' With the closed question, the answer may simply be 'Yes' or 'No'. Sometimes open questions can be followed by a closed question to encourage the child to reveal more information.

For instance, 'What can you tell me about your school' can be followed up with 'Can you tell me more about that?'

Not only are the answers to the open questions likely to be rich in information, but they often include information which allows the counsellor to use reflection of content and/or feelings to encourage the child to continue. Open questions allow the child to talk about those things which are of most interest or of most importance to them, rather than those things which are of most interest to the counsellor. For example, in responding to the open question, 'Tell me about your brothers and sisters', a child might focus on one particular sibling. Such a response might give rich information, which the counsellor did not directly seek, about the significance of that sibling in the child's life.

If we were to ask you the closed question, 'Are you finding this book useful?', your answer would probably be less helpful in providing us with feedback than if we asked you the open question 'What can you tell us about this book?' However, both the open and closed questions might equally stimulate an open and informative response.

There are times when closed questions are *more* suitable than open questions. Closed questions lead to a specific answer, confine the child to a limited response, help the child to be more precise, and are useful in eliciting specific information.

We have found that it is generally wise to try to avoid asking questions that begin with 'Why'. The problem with asking 'why' questions is that the child may respond with an intellectual answer, rather than giving an answer which is centred on what is happening to them internally. 'Why' questions tend to generate answers which relate to matters or events external to the child. However, asking about the child's perception of an event may reveal a projection of theirs about a certain situation or reflect an internally held belief. For example, if you have been exploring the impact of parental discord on the child you might ask, 'Why do *you* think Mummy is very cross at night when Daddy gets home from work?'

When working with children, we are generally most successful in enabling them to tell their stories if we:

- Ask questions that give the child an opportunity to reveal information that is pertinent
- Use open questions in preference to closed questions whenever appropriate
- Avoid using 'why' questions unless we seek the child's stance on a particular event/interaction

When questions are used sparingly and appropriately, they can be powerful in helping to raise the child's awareness of important issues so that they can move forward around the spiral of therapeutic change towards resolution.

Questions to Raise Awareness

Gestalt therapists have a holistic view of human beings. They believe that the body, emotions, and thoughts are interrelated and interdependent. Using this paradigm, we believe that somatic or bodily sensations are directly related to emotional feelings and thoughts. Consequently, it can be useful when helping a child to become fully aware of troubling thoughts and emotions for a counsellor to use questions or feedback statements which will enable the child to make connections between the way they feel internally, physically, and their emotional feelings and thoughts.

Here are some examples of suitable questions that can be useful in helping to raise a child's awareness so that they get more fully in touch with the issues involved and the related emotional feelings:

- Can you tell me how your body feels right now?
- Which part of your body is most uncomfortable?
- When you think about what happened how does your body feel?
- Where do you experience the tightness (or other feeling) in your body?
- Now that you notice that your body is uncomfortable, how do you feel emotionally?
- If your uncomfortable body (the tightness in your chest) could say something to you what would it say?
- If your tears could talk, what would they say?
- Can you tell me what you are thinking right now?

These questions from Gestalt therapy can often be used to help the child to get in touch with, and express, emotions that are connected to troubling issues.

USE OF STATEMENTS

Statements made by a counsellor can be valuable in helping a child to stay on track in telling their story and in helping to raise the child's awareness of important issues and associated emotions. Statements can be used in a number of different ways:

- Statements help a counsellor to float ideas about what might be happening for the child at a particular moment. For example, a counsellor might suspect that a child is experiencing embarrassment and say, 'If that happened to me, I'd feel embarrassed'

- Statements provide counsellors with a tool with which to affirm a child's strengths. For example, the counsellor might say, 'You must be really brave to have done that'
- Statements can be used to highlight significant events during an activity. For example, if a child is having difficulty in choosing objects for the sand tray, the counsellor might make a statement like, 'It's sometimes hard to choose the best object' or 'It's really hard to find the objects that you want.' By making this statement, the counsellor gives the child feedback about the difficulty they have in making choices, and the opportunity has been created for the child to explore this aspect of their behaviour
- Statements can be used to give feedback without judgement about what the child is doing. For example, the counsellor might say, 'I see that you have made a cave with the clay.' In a similar way to reflecting content, this feedback invites the child to talk about what they have done
- Statements can be used to raise the child's awareness of an element of their activity, and/or to float an idea which the counsellor has about the child's issue. For example, if a child was working with puppets, and a mouse puppet was hiding, and the counsellor suspected that the child was feeling vulnerable, the counsellor might say, 'That mouse is hiding. I wonder if he is afraid of being caught?'

Statements to Raise Awareness with Regard to Important Issues

Earlier in this chapter we explained that in Gestalt therapy there is a recognition of the way that the body, the emotions, and the thoughts are interrelated and interdependent. As a consequence of these interrelationships, counsellors can use questions like those we suggested earlier in this chapter in order to raise the child's awareness of important issues and related emotions. Often, before asking such questions, it can be useful to give feedback statements such as:

- I notice that your fists are clenching (or doing something else physically)
- You look sad (or any other emotion that is relevant)
- That animal disappeared in a hurry

These statements can be used on their own, but often it is useful to follow them up with a question related to somatic experience, emotional feelings, or thoughts. For example, if

we were using the feedback statements listed above, we could follow up with questions, as in the following examples:

- I notice that your fists are clenching and I am wondering how you are feeling as you do that? (The question raises the child's awareness of their physical behaviour and then enquires about the related emotion.)
- You look sad. Can you tell me what you are thinking? (This question moves from raising awareness of an emotion to enquiring about the related thought.)
- That animal disappeared in a hurry. What would you like to say to that animal?

The last question 'What would you like to say to that animal?' might encourage the child to be expressive in talking to the animal. For example, the child might say something to the animal in an angry voice in which case the counsellor could follow up with another feedback statement by saying 'You sound angry.'

Can you see that by using either feedback statements or suitable questions we can help a child to get more fully in touch with their emotions and hopefully express them?

USE OF MEDIA AND ACTIVITIES

In Part 4 we will discuss the use of media or activities in some detail. While doing this, we will also consider the ways in which counselling skills and activities are used together to help the child tell their story and to raise the child's awareness of both current and past unresolved issues.

The activity provides the child with a task to hold their interest and to help them stay focused. Through using activities, the child tells their story either directly or indirectly. They may do this by talking directly about issues which are troubling them, or indirectly by projecting elements of their story onto the activity. Various media may also allow the child to connect with their emotions and may act as a vehicle through which they can express these emotions. This is a two-stage process: the child first gets in touch with their emotional feelings and then expresses them.

During the therapeutic process, the counsellor may initially invite the child to talk about how it feels to use the media and will also focus directly on what the child is doing with the media. Later in the therapeutic process, the focus will move away from discussion of the content of the activity involving media and instead will focus directly on the child's life situation and unfinished business. Sometimes, when a child is working with media and telling a story through the media, it is appropriate for the counsellor to ask directly, 'Does this happen in your life?' or 'Does this sound like something that might be happening to you?'

Sometimes, though, a child will spontaneously recognize the association between the story they are telling through the media and their own life story. At other times a child may suddenly become very silent. When this happens we might ask them: 'You're suddenly very quiet. What happened?' The child may then begin to talk about something they have remembered which relates in some way to their present life.

Often it is easier for children to share the happy experiences in their lives. Once they have told us about the happy ones, they can then often talk about the sad ones. A question might invite the child. For instance, asking, 'Are there times when things are not so happy or exciting?' followed by 'What can you tell me about those times?' invites the child to reveal more about their circumstances.

As the child continues to talk, they may find that they have expressed contradictory feelings related to their memories. They may become puzzled, troubled, or confused by the variety of different feelings which they have expressed. Helping the child to recognize that it is OK to have differing, varied, and apparently contradictory feelings can help the child express themselves more clearly and accurately.

It can be useful to invite the child to engage in a dialogue between different parts of their story, or their drawing, or whatever other activity they are involved in.

Looking out for cues from the child's tone of voice, body posture, facial and body expression, breathing and silences can give the counsellor information. For example, the child may be censoring, remembering, thinking, repressing anxieties or fears, or becoming aware of something new. As a counsellor, if you observe the nonverbal behaviours mentioned, you may be able to use these as cues to promote further expression. For example, if a child sighs while telling their story you might say, 'I noticed that you just gave a big sigh. What's it like when you let all that air out at once?'

Many children who experience emotional difficulties seem to have some disrupted contact functioning. The tools of contact are looking, talking, touching, listening, moving, smelling, and tasting. Sometimes by focusing on a contact function we can encourage a child to put their feelings into words. Helping the child to get in touch with bodily feelings and sensations may enable them to connect with the emotional feelings they may be experiencing. For example, we might say to a child, 'Watching you move around quickly and being very busy makes me feel exhausted. I wonder if you feel tired, being so busy?'

To summarize: we can help the child to tell their story and get in touch with important issues and emotions by using media and activities, together with appropriate counselling skills. In this process we might do any of the following:

- Encourage the child to talk about what they are currently doing in the therapy session
- Help the child to relate current experiences in therapy to current and past life issues
- Encourage the child to explore unresolved issues

- Encourage the child to fully experience and express their emotional feelings
- Explore opposites and absences in the child's story
- Give permission for contradictory feelings to exist
- Focus on contact functions to help the child to access emotions
- Give the child affirmation

As a result of this process the child may get in touch with their emotions (see Figure 8.1, p. 85). We will then help the child to move further round the spiral of therapeutic change to manage unhelpful beliefs, explore options and choices, and rehearse for subsequent action, as will be discussed in Chapters 16 and 17.

KEY POINTS

- The child will be enabled to continue telling their story, and get in touch with and express emotions, if the counsellor uses observation, active listening, appropriate questions, and feedback statements in conjunction with the use of media and activities
- Closed questions usually invite a one-word answer
- Open questions usually invite the child to talk freely and to expand on what they are talking about
- Statements can be used to give the child permission to feel and express an emotion, to help the counsellor float ideas, to affirm a child's strengths, to highlight significant events during an activity, to give feedback, and to raise the child's awareness
- Media and activities enable the child to be interested and stay focused while they are telling their story either directly or indirectly

FURTHER RESOURCES

In certain counselling settings, questioning also brings with it ethical considerations in terms of what type of, and how, questions are asked. It can be useful for counsellors to be mindful of the types of questions they ask, particularly those that may lead the child to answer in a certain way. For more information about working with children, including when using questioning, readers are invited to read this article:

Krähenbühl, S. & Blades, M. (2006). The effect of interviewing techniques on young children's responses to questions. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 32(3), 321–31.