

KATHRYN GELDARD & REBECCA YIN FOO

COUNSELLING CHILDREN

a practical introduction

**6TH
EDITION**

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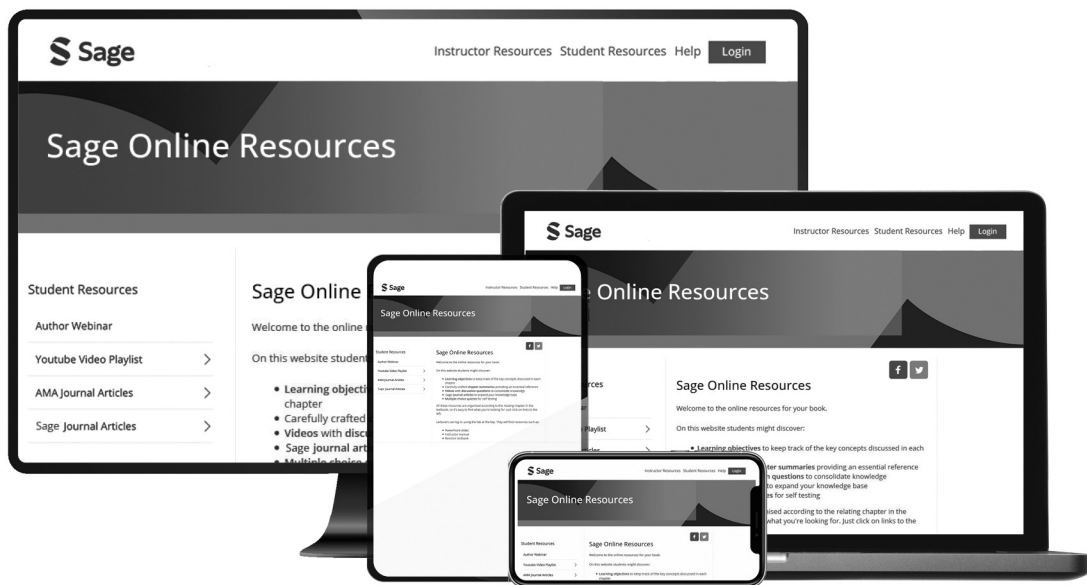
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ONLINE RESOURCES

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

Dr Kathryn Geldard is now retired from clinical practice. She continues to conduct training workshops for counsellors and organizations and facilitate professional development supervision groups. Her academic career as senior lecturer in Counselling at Queensland University of Technology and in the faculty of Arts and Business at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC), Australia includes programme leadership of the Counselling programme as well as development of the postgraduate Master of Counselling degrees. She is the author of several textbooks founded on her extensive clinical counselling background with children, young people, and their families.

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BOOKS AND STORIES

In this chapter we will consider the following:

- The use of story books when counselling children
- Helping children to create therapeutically useful stories
- The use of books for educational purposes within the counselling process

Books and stories are useful for achieving a variety of goals as will be explored in this chapter and can be used in any of the phases of SPICC process (see Figure 8.1, p. 85).

However, they are particularly helpful in phases 3, 4, and 5 when the child is changing self-perception and beliefs, looking at options and choices, and experimenting with new behaviours.

THE USE OF STORY BOOKS IN COUNSELLING CHILDREN

We invite you, the reader, to think for a moment about the nature of children's stories. Do stories have special qualities which make them suitable tools for use in counselling children? We think that they do. Children's stories involve people, animals, fantasy figures, and all kinds of inanimate objects such as trains, rocks, clocks, and flowerpots. The people, animals, fantasy figures, and objects are given personalities, beliefs, thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Most importantly, as a story unfolds, themes develop, issues emerge, and the characters and objects in the story respond with particular thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. When a child listens to a story, they may identify with a character, or a theme, or an event within the story. If they do this, then they are almost certain to reflect on their own life situation. Their interest in the thoughts, emotions, and behaviours of the characters in the story allow them, at some level, to share the experience of the characters and to project beliefs, thoughts, and emotional experiences of their own onto these characters. Thus, they can projectively work through their own emotional turmoil. Additionally, a

child will often recognize the relationship between events and themes within a story and events and themes in their own life. When this occurs, they have an opportunity to work directly on their own issues.

CREATING STORIES

An alternative to reading a story from a book is to invite the child to create their own story: the child is certain to project ideas from their own life onto the characters and themes in the story. The child may even include themselves as a character in the story or may describe events which have occurred in their own life in the story. Once again, as when reading a story book, the child is provided with an opportunity to explore their own issues, thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, either projectively or directly.

BOOKS FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES

Sometimes, as counsellors, we may explore new behaviours with the children we support which are more appropriate than the ones they have previously learnt. Consider, for example, children who have been sexually abused who have often learnt to be trusting and to have open boundaries. Additionally, they may have been taught to be polite to adults and to be compliant. One way in which children can learn about appropriate boundaries and realize that it is appropriate and necessary to say no when their boundaries are at risk is through books and stories. Books can be used in an educational way with regard to a number of other issues and/or areas of knowledge, including abuse, violence, social skills, anger management, sex education, separation, divorce, and death.

GOALS WHEN USING BOOKS AND STORIES

There are a number of goals that can be achieved by using books and stories. These include general goals, goals specific to the use of story books, goals specific to creating stories, and goals when using books for educational purposes.

General Goals when Using Story Books or when Creating Stories

- Helping the child to recognize their own anxiety or distress by identifying with characters or situations in a story.

- Helping a child to discover themes and related emotions which recur in their life from time to time. For example, the child may discover that they have a fear of being left alone, a fear of betrayal, or excessive feelings of responsibility for others. By becoming aware of such feelings, the child can work through them and move towards a resolution of related issues.
- Helping a child to think about and explore alternative solutions to problems. This goal can be achieved by changing stories so that they have different outcomes.

Goals Specific to the Use of Story Books

- Helping a child to normalize events in their life by letting them know that others have had similar experiences. This goal can be achieved by reading stories which have themes similar to their own experiences.
- Helping reduce stigma related to socially unacceptable experiences. Children who have experienced sexual abuse or domestic violence feel better about themselves when they know that other children have been through similar experiences and have had similar feelings. They can discover this by reading stories about other children having similar experiences.
- Helping the child to recognize that some events are unavoidable. For example, a child who has become ill and has to go to hospital may be helped by reading a book about another child going to hospital and may thus identify with some of that child's fears and hopes.

Goal Specific to Creating Stories

- Helping a child to express wishes, hopes, and fantasies. This is particularly useful for children who are experiencing painful life situations and are telling untrue stories to avoid the pain of facing reality. For example, a child who has no parents might be ashamed of being different from their friends and might find it too painful to tell them the truth. Consequently, they might tell their friends that their parents are famous people who are working overseas. By using storytelling, the counsellor is able to support the child to recognize that their stories are not true but may be expressions of wishes.

Goal when Using Books for Educational Purposes

- Helping educate children in appropriate beliefs and behaviours. Books commonly used in this way are those related to protective behaviours, anger management, and social skills.

MATERIALS NEEDED WHEN WORKING WITH BOOKS AND STORIES

We make use of a variety of story books which cover different themes and situations, including:

- Making friends
- Families
- Rejection
- Magic
- Monsters
- Fairytales
- Fables

We also have story books which are useful for helping children to identify and own their feelings. For example, we have books on cheating, bullying, and temper tantrums.

Additionally, we have a collection of books which we use for educational purposes on topics such as:

- The development of skills which reflect self-esteem issues
- Sexual abuse
- Protective behaviours
- Domestic violence
- Sexual development

For creating stories, we use the following materials and equipment:

- Large sheets of white paper
- Felt pens of assorted colours
- An exercise book with widely spaced lines
- A voice recorder

HOW TO USE BOOKS AND STORIES

Storytelling is an interactive process between the child and the counsellor. Usually, children don't like writing in counselling sessions. Many of the children who come to see us have previously had unsuccessful experiences when attempting to be creative by writing stories. Because of this, we try to make story writing an easy, enjoyable, and positive creative experience. Usually, as a child develops a story, we write the story down using a felt pen and a large sheet of paper. Often we also use a voice recorder to record the story.

Children generally benefit from modelling by the counsellor before they fully understand the process of story making. We usually begin by saying to the child, ‘Today we are going to be telling stories to each other’, and ‘I will begin, and sometimes I might stop, and when I stop, you can, if you like, fill in the gaps.’ This allows the counsellor to choose a theme and to invite the child to explore pertinent issues for themselves.

The counsellor can then continue by saying, ‘The story will have a beginning, a middle, and an end’, and ‘I will begin. Once upon a time there was a prince and this prince liked ...’

The counsellor can then stop in mid-sentence and invite the child to say what it was that the prince liked. The child might respond by saying ‘to ride his horse in the country’. The counsellor could then continue, ‘As he rode around the countryside, he realized that ...’

Once again, the counsellor can stop in mid-sentence so that the child fills in the next part of the story. The storytelling can continue in this way until there is an outcome or an end.

When the story is complete (it has usually been recorded) we like to play it back and to ask the child to identify with any character in the story by asking, ‘Who would you most like to be in this story?’

The child can be further encouraged to explore their own behaviour if we ask, ‘If you were a prince, would you have done the same as him or something different?’ and ‘What would you have done?’

Finally, the counsellor can thank the child for the story they have told.

An alternative is to encourage a child to tell stories about a picture they see. The counsellor might present the child with a picture from a magazine or a photograph and ask the child to tell a story about the people, animals, or objects in it. It is useful, once again, to remind the child that stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. However, these stories can be short and brief.

For children who find it difficult to make up stories, it is better to use story books, fairytales, or fables initially. This can help to familiarize the child with the way in which stories develop and can help them to recognize the way in which stories can relate to their own personal experiences.

The classic fairytales and fables such as ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, ‘The Three Little Pigs’, and ‘Hansel and Gretel’, although very dated, can sometimes be useful. Caution is needed though in using such stories as they may be troubling for some children. However, when they are deemed suitable, they encourage the child to work projectively in the first instance and then to talk directly about themselves, their family, and significant others.

The tale of ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ can be very useful for some children because it raises issues of disempowerment, fleeing, helplessness, and rescue. We might read the

story to the child and then invite them to identify with one of the characters. After this, we might invite the child to think of alternative solutions to different situations in the story. For example, after reading 'Little Red Riding Hood', if the child identified with Grandma we might ask, 'How could Grandma have been more powerful so she could have outwitted the wolf and not have been pushed into the cupboard?'

We might then encourage the child to think of several different alternatives by asking, 'What else could Grandma have done when the wolf tried to push her into the cupboard?' and 'If you had been Grandma, what would you have done?' We might then be able to affirm the child's bravery, courage, and resourcefulness.

Story books written around topics such as domestic violence or sexual abuse can be used to support the realization that other children have similar experiences. This enables a child to feel the same as some other children and to feel less of a victim. Such stories allow the child to identify with, or to reject, similarities between themselves and characters in the story. They may also invite the child to disclose more information about their own experiences.

We often use books as a way of educating children with regard to important beliefs and behaviours. Books can be used to address a wide range of issues such as protective behaviours, stranger danger, secrets, and inappropriate touching. They can be used by the counsellor to help the child to explore choices and options about future behaviour. For example, a book might encourage a child to say no to a stranger. The counsellor can then check out whether the child believes that they have the ability to say no and can help the child to practise saying no in a loud voice. The child and the counsellor can then engage in role-plays to practise helpful behaviours.

When using books for educational purposes, we like to give the child a copy of the book to take home and to share with family members or caregivers.

SUITABILITY OF BOOKS AND STORIES

Books and stories can be used with children of pre-school age through to late adolescence. They are particularly suitable for young children, who are used to listening to stories and find them comforting.

Books and stories are most suitable for use in individual counselling or in parent-child counselling. They enable children to be expansive in their thinking. However, work can be focused by selecting specific topics or subject matter.

Helping children to make up their own stories is very useful when working with children who are naturally creative and have good language skills. This approach will not appeal to children who are less gifted in these areas.

CASE STUDY

Macy and colleagues (2003) made use of storytelling as part of a programme to support children who had experienced a natural disaster (two severe earthquakes). They found that following the programme, children reported lower levels of anxiety and depression and increased self-esteem and ability to manage their feelings. (For more information about the evidence-base for play therapy techniques, see Chapter 21.) Imagine you have received a referral for nine-year-old Brent whose North Queensland town was hit by a cyclone. Brent and his family weren't physically injured during the cyclone; however, their home was destroyed and is currently being rebuilt. How might you make use of storytelling to support Brent in processing his experience? At what stage during the SPICC process would you consider introducing books or stories?

KEY POINTS

- Children will often identify with a character, theme, or event in a story and by doing so they are almost certain to reflect on their own life situation
- When a child creates a story, the ideas from the story are likely to come from the child's own life experiences, enabling the counsellor to draw parallels and help the child to address their own issues
- Educational books can be used to work through specific problems such as self-esteem, sexual abuse, protective behaviours, domestic violence, and sexual development

FURTHER RESOURCES

The Little Parachutes website (www.littleparachutes.com) provides a database of books that are suitable for counselling, particularly when using books for educational purposes.