Skills for Counselling Children in Groups

As explained in Chapter 10 it can sometimes be advantageous to run counselling groups for children. Counselling children in a group requires additional skills to those required when working with children individually, as the counsellor has to facilitate the group process as well as attending to the needs of individual children. Thus the counsellor has to do several things simultaneously while the group is running. While facilitating group activities they have to observe, notice and respond to issues concerning the group as a whole, while continuing to attend to the individual needs of group members. Consequently it is certainly preferable, and we think essential, to have two group leaders who work together in each counselling group.

Leadership

Two leaders offer two sets of observations, two perspectives and a broader expertise. They may complement each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and their relationship can serve as a successful role model for relationships for the children (Siepker and Kandaras, 1985). Having two leaders is especially sensible for those groups where there is a high degree of disturbance in a group. It is a necessity for groups where there is the possibility of disruptive or violent behaviour. For children’s groups in general, there are considerable practical advantages in having two leaders, as one can attend to the whole group while the other attends to individuals with specific needs.

Leaders and sweepers

Where there are two leaders, before the start of a group session it is essential that they agree about their individual roles and responsibilities. Our preferred model is for one leader to take the primary role of leader and the other to take the role of sweeper. Each time the group meets the leaders can, if they wish, reverse roles, so that the group does not associate the primary leadership with one person. We believe that this is particularly important when the co-leaders are of opposite gender.
The leader’s role involves directly organizing and processing group activities. It is the leader who makes decisions about what to do next, and is generally seen to be in charge. The sweeper’s role is different, but equally important. The sweeper’s role includes being supportive of the leader, attending to individual problems when these cannot be dealt with in the whole group setting, fetching and carrying materials, and attending to issues that may arise as a result of a group process. An example of an issue which might be dealt with by a sweeper is dealing with the difficult behaviour of one individual, if dealing with this in the whole group setting might be counter-productive for the child concerned, or might seriously intrude on an important group process.

**Leadership style**

Every leader will have their own personal leadership style, but that style is influenced by the counselling model to be used. For example, when running a group using Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, the style of leadership will tend to be didactic and directive, whereas when running a group using a humanistic/existentialist counselling approach the leader will be more likely to focus on the use of reflection and feedback of observations.

The leadership style also takes into account the needs of the particular group of children involved. For example, when running a group for children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), leaders may need to contain behaviours and be predominantly authoritarian, whereas when running a group for anxious children a gentler approach might be more suitable.

Whatever style is used, the leader’s role is to take action to ensure the emotional and physical safety of group members and to maximize the potential for achieving change.

It is important for leaders to take account of their own personality traits so that the style of leadership they use is authentic and genuinely matches their individual personalities. They can choose to use a predominantly democratic, or authoritarian, or laissez-faire leadership style. However, we prefer to use a proactive approach involving a combination of these. In the proactive approach, the leader is flexible, so that spontaneous movement from an emphasis on one style to another occurs. Thus, during a group session, and over the life of a group, we vary our style to maximize opportunities occurring in the group, and also to suit the mood and activity of the group at any particular time.

Usually our proactive approach to leadership will make use of a democratic leadership style as the predominant style to allow individuals in the group to feel free to make choices within limits set by the group, while at the same time providing safety. However, being proactive allows leaders to be authoritarian when appropriate, in order to ensure compliance with group rules, and to ensure that goals are met. At other times leaders may deliberately use a laissez-faire style for a while to allow children in the group more freedom. During this period of freedom, they can observe the group’s interactions, behaviours and social skills, which can then be discussed or ‘processed’, as described later.
Debriefing and supervision

Naturally, when there are two leaders, it is essential that they have a good working relationship with each other. To achieve this, it is good practice to talk through any negative feelings which arise. Debriefing also enables leaders to provide feedback and support for each other and to deal with issues with regard to group processes. During debriefing leaders can discuss the emerging needs of the individual children and changes which may be required in the way the group is facilitated to meet these needs.

As applies for counselling generally, it is essential for leaders to have ongoing supervision from an experienced counsellor.

Group facilitation

While attending to issues which develop for the whole group, leaders also attend to the issues of individual children. Some individual children may have unexpected and excessive responses to a group programme. For example, they may demonstrate high levels of anxiety, become dissociative, regress, and/or withdraw as a consequence of the programme content and/or the responses of other children. For some of these children, it may be possible to attend to their needs in a whole group setting by using appropriate intervention strategies and counselling skills. For other children this may not be possible. In this case, while the leader continues to address the needs of the group, the co-leader (the sweeper) may need to attend separately to the child in question by exploring that child's personal feelings and issues which have been triggered by the group programme. As a consequence of such an intervention, the child may be able to readjust to the group programme, or the child's membership of the group may need to be reassessed.

When running a group, it is sensible to plan the group programme in advance so that activities can be deliberately selected to encourage the group to interact in ways that will promote the achievement of specific goals. Examples of group programmes for children in specific target groups are given in our book *Working with Children in Groups: A Handbook for Counsellors, Educators and Community Workers* (Geldard and Geldard, 2001).

During group sessions the leaders observe and influence the group processes so that goals for individual children and the group can be met. Central to a leader's role is the orchestration of the group programme in such a way that the children experience a process which has a natural and comfortable flow as they participate in meaningful activity and discussion. Effective facilitation creates an atmosphere of safety and containment so that the children become free to explore, express themselves and gain from their experience. The group leader gives directions and instructions, introduces and organizes activities, facilitates discussion, gives support to individual children when required, teaches, gives advice, and models appropriate behaviour. Additionally the leader also deals with group issues as they arise. For example, when a child drops out of a group or a new child joins the group the leader's role is to help the group to readjust.
Recognizing and dealing with confidentiality issues

In counselling groups for children the participants need to be able to trust that there will be some level of confidentiality. If this is not so, they may not be willing to participate freely and to disclose information which relates to their issues.

The confidentiality issue is complicated, as parents or carers have the right to information about their children. It is therefore sensible for leaders to discuss the issue of confidentiality with parents at the stage where the child is being assessed for suitability for inclusion in the group as discussed in Chapter 10. Also, it is important to acknowledge that group leaders cannot ensure that children in a group will respect the confidentiality of others.

When counselling children in a group there is a possibility that group members may disclose abusive behaviours by parents or others. If this happens, the information may have to be reported to parents/carers, and/or the appropriate authorities, to ensure the ongoing safety and protection of the child. In particular, it is imperative that any legal requirements regarding reporting are observed.

When discussing issues of confidentiality with children in a group it is important to be open about the limits to confidentiality, and early in the group programme to be clear about any conditions and exceptions that might apply with regard to confidentiality.

Introducing and organizing activities

When activities are organized or introduced it is important for group leaders to explain clearly what is expected. Often, some children in a group will be familiar with a particular activity, whereas others will not. While introducing activities, it is usually sensible to explain how the activity relates to the purpose of the group.

Facilitating discussion

To facilitate discussion, a leader’s role includes guiding the verbal exchanges between and among the children in the group. While a discussion is taking place the counselling skills described later can be used to provide the children with the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings and ideas on relevant topics. Leaders may need to deal with monopolizing behaviour and interruptions, and to encourage children who are not participating to contribute. Leaders may also need to deal with diversions and inappropriate contributions from children.

Counselling skills for use in children’s groups

The counselling skills selected for use when running a group will depend on the type of group and the theoretical approach of the leaders. However, the counselling micro-skills most commonly used in counselling groups for children include:

- Observation
- Active listening
• Summarizing
• Giving feedback
• Using questions
• Confrontation
• Giving instructions
• Processing skills

**Observation**

When using observation skills, as described in Chapter 11, leaders may usefully observe not only current behaviours and social skills, but also changes in these over the life of the group. The group programme may then be adjusted, if necessary, to meet changes in perceived needs.

**Active listening**

Active listening skills include non-verbal responses, minimal responses, reflection of content and feeling, and summarizing. These skills have been described in Chapter 12 and are particularly useful when encouraging children to self-disclose and share personal information with a group.

**Summarizing**

The skill of summarizing is especially useful when working in groups as it enables a leader to feed back to the group a concise synopsis of what has been discussed, so that the children are able to grasp the central themes of the discussion. Sometimes, where a child has rather poor communication skills, or has made a lengthy statement, it can be useful to summarize the content of what the child has said so that it becomes clear to other members of the group.

**Giving feedback**

Giving feedback helps individual members and the group as a whole become aware of the behaviours that are occurring in the group. Feedback may be given to the group as a whole by using a comment such as, ‘I notice that there is a lot of interrupting in the group’, or, by saying to an individual, ‘Annette, you are very active’.

Sometimes, feedback will be given with the intention of drawing attention to a group process, which may be affecting two or more people. For example, a leader might say, ‘Ann, I notice that whenever Jack says anything, you give a big sigh.’ This might allow Ann to talk about her feelings towards Jack, might encourage Jack to look at his behaviour, or might give other members of the group the opportunity to comment on their perceptions and feelings related to the group process.

Rose and Edleson (1987) provide sensible guidelines for giving feedback to children who have been rehearsing new behaviours by role-playing. They suggest giving positive
feedback first so that the child receives reinforcement for engaging in the role play and is then more open to receiving criticism. It is important for feedback to be specific, and that criticism is couched in terms of actions or statements that could have been used as alternatives. For example, a leader might begin by saying, ‘Mary, you did well in that role play; it was difficult but you managed it’, and then follow up by saying, ‘You used a gentle approach by hinting at what you wanted. An alternative to what you did would have been to have asked Jimmy directly for what you wanted. That might have been more effective.’

**Using questions**

Whereas questions are best used sparingly when counselling children individually, they can be very useful in group work, where a range of suitable types of question from a number of different theoretical approaches can be employed. Examples of these are:

*Questions to heighten a child’s awareness:* These questions help the child to recognize and own feelings and thoughts. Examples are: ‘What are you feeling emotionally right now?’, ‘What is happening inside you right now?’ and ‘What are your tears saying?’

*Follow-up questions to elicit more information:* Questions such as, ‘Can you tell me more?’ and ‘Is there anything else you can tell me about …?’ are useful in encouraging children to continue in the disclosure of information which might otherwise be censored.

*Circular questions:* Circular questions are directed to one child, but ask that child about the thoughts or feelings of another child or other children. Thus, they invite individual group members to think about other children, and their behaviours, thoughts and feelings. Often, the use of circular questions will promote useful discussion between children and this may enhance group cohesion. Examples of circular questions are: ‘Glenda, what do you think Tom feels when April ignores him when he is talking to her?’ and ‘Keith, if you had a guess, what do you think Billy might be thinking now that he’s handed over the leadership of his team to Kate?’

*Transitional questions:* Transitional questions help children return to the content of a previous discussion which has been interrupted. They are particularly useful in children’s groups where children easily deflect away from topics which may be difficult to talk about. Examples are: ‘Earlier, Brenda, you talked about your Mum and Dad separating; I wonder how you feel about that right now?’ and ‘A while back, Eric was telling us about the time when his brother attacked his father with a knife. Has anyone else in the group had a frightening experience like that?’

*Choice questions:* These questions are useful when processing the outcomes of incidents which arise in a children’s group. Examples are: ‘What would have been a better choice for you to have made at the time when Hannah snatched your pencil?’ and ‘If the same situation arises again, what do you think you will do?’

*Cheer-leading, accenting and amplifying questions:* These questions recognize and affirm that desirable behavioural change has occurred. They make the change newsworthy so that
the child receives reinforcement for the changed behaviour. These questions are particularly
useful following exception-oriented questions. Examples are: ‘How did you do that?’,
‘How did you manage to carry through that decision?’ , ‘That’s fantastic!’ and ‘That must
have been difficult to do. How did you do it?’

Scaling questions: These questions are useful in helping children to set goals and recognize
change in themselves which may occur within the group or away from the group.
When using scaling questions, the whole group can be used to support the goal-setting
of an individual member. Examples of scaling questions are: ‘On a scale of one to ten, one
being as quiet as a mouse and ten being as noisy as a ferocious dinosaur, where do you
think that you would fit right now?’, ‘Where would you like to be on the scale today?’,
‘What can you do to reach this point on the scale?’ and ‘What can the group do to help
you reach this point on the scale?’

Confrontation

At times it is necessary for leaders to be confronting. They may wish to draw a child’s,
or the group’s attention, to incongruities between what is being said and what is being
done or being expressed non-verbally. They may also need to confront a child or the
group with regard to unacceptable behaviour.

A rule of thumb when confronting is that, before confronting a child, a leader tries
to ensure that the confrontation is done as a conscious deliberate act rather than as a
knee-jerk response to unconscious triggers (Spitz, 1987). It is important that confronta-
tion be designed to achieve a specific result, usually in the ‘here and now’. Appropriate
confrontation is simultaneously tough and tender, in an empathic atmosphere of genuine
concern and caring (Rachman and Raubolt, 1985).

Giving instructions

When children join a group they are naturally uncertain about their leaders’ expectations
of them. In order to feel safe, they need to be confident that someone is in charge, and
that the person in charge will take control and give directions and instructions when
necessary. It is also important for children to be clear about group rules and responsi-
bilities and issues related to confidentiality.

Processing skills

We think that processing interactions and activities is an essential part of group work.
You may be wondering what we mean by processing, so we will explain. Processing an
activity, or an interaction or discussion between members of a group, involves verbally
exploring what each child, and the group as a whole, experienced while engaged in the
activity, interaction or discussion. Processing is an intervention that is deliberately used
by a leader in order to bring into focus what has occurred in the group, and to raise
the children’s awareness of their emotional feelings, thoughts, opinions and beliefs with
regard to what has occurred.
There are considerable advantages to be gained if leaders repeatedly, but not excessively, interrupt the normal flow of group work in order to process activities and interactions. Processing may be carried out after the completion of an activity or interaction, or sometimes an activity or interaction may be interrupted to allow for immediate processing.

Processing usually involves the use of counselling skills. What the leader does, to process an activity or interaction, is to ask questions and use feedback of observations to discover what emotional feelings, perceptions, thoughts, opinions and beliefs, each child experienced while engaged in the activity or interaction.

Additionally, processing may bring into the open factual information about behaviours or group and/or individual processes. Through processing, children learn to take notice of their feelings and thoughts and to recognize the influence of these on their beliefs, attitudes, cognitive processes and behaviours. With this increased awareness, changes in beliefs, attitudes, cognitive processes and behaviours may occur. Importantly, children may recognize the influence of behaviours, thoughts and feelings on themselves and others. This, in turn, may influence the ways they communicate and their relationships with others. Processing not only offers the means for group members to learn about themselves as individuals but also to learn about themselves as members of a group (Ehly and Dustin, 1989).

**KEY POINTS**

- It is useful to have two leaders in a counselling group for children, one to act as the primary leader and the other as the ‘sweeper’.
- The sweeper’s main role is to support the leader and to attend to the problems of individual children if these cannot be met in the whole group setting.
- It is helpful if a pre-arranged programme is planned for each session as this will promote the achievement of particular goals.
- Facilitation involves the use of counselling skills, giving directions and instructions, introducing and organizing activities, facilitating discussion, giving support, teaching, modelling appropriate behaviour, dealing with any issues that arise, and processing interactions and activities.
- Processing involves the use of counselling skills, including asking questions and giving feedback of observations to discover what emotional feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and opinions and beliefs the children experienced while engaged in an activity or interaction.