

Same or different?

When considering counselling for adults or counselling for children and young people, what are the similarities and differences? Is there agreement?

Mike Trier and **Sue Lewis** offer some ideas

Counselling for children and young people (CYP) has come of age, with the BACP Children and Young People division having more than 4,000 members and counselling being available to pupils in all secondary schools in Wales and Northern Ireland and many in England and Scotland. Nevertheless, the field is still changing and developing rapidly, with the arrival of CYP IAPT¹ and an increase in the provision of specialist training courses for CYP counsellors. In the face of so much rapid and largely positive change, we'd like to press the pause button for a moment, consider the assumptions behind these changes and look at some possibly unintended impacts.

We are experienced counsellors of both young people and adults. Between us, we have co-facilitated counselling courses at different levels, including diploma courses, and have offered individual and group supervision to trainee and qualified CYP counsellors. We recently attended a seminar where we discussed

the differences and similarities between counselling adults and counselling children and young people, and were both left with feelings of unease about how the profession supports the development of CYP counsellors. We decided to explore some of these issues in this article, and to try to highlight some of the key questions relating to nurturing the development of CYP counsellors.

We believe that this discussion is timely, particularly given the valuable work BACP has recently done on developing competencies for counsellors working with young people from 11 to 18 years. This provides an ideal opportunity to reconsider the needs of developing CYP counsellors and re-evaluate issues and decisions that affect their development and support.

The key areas that we would like to explore are:

- 1** The impact of fear on the field of CYP counselling
- 2** Issues related to training and appropriate training routes for CYP counsellors
- 3** The importance of placements in nurturing

and supporting the acquisition of relevant skills and knowledge

- 4** How key decisions about placements are made
- 5** Prerequisites for counsellors wanting to work with CYP.

Fear related to counselling CYP

There seems to be an element of fear around offering counselling to CYP. This is unsurprising given the media focus on high profile child protection cases. The area of confidentiality and consent can also appear complex².

The risk of 'getting it wrong', combined with the pressure of busy lives, can lead training institutions and potential commissioners of services to decide to avoid the area of CYP altogether. This can result in a lack of opportunity for potential clients, as well as limiting placement opportunities for trainees and qualified counsellors. But it can also encourage a move towards a more specialised training route for CYP counsellors. Whilst these fears are very real and need attending to, it is

important to be reminded of the place of 'Courage' amongst the personal moral qualities in BACP's *Ethical Framework*: the capacity to act in spite of known fears, risks and uncertainty³.

Issues relating to training

Potential CYP counsellors may ask themselves: 'Will a generic counselling course be appropriate, or do I need specialist CYP training?' There will be a range of views about this, but looking at the varied pathways taken by existing effective CYP counsellors, there are clearly several possible routes; no single route needs to be prized above others. One of us (Sue) completed a generic counselling course followed by specialist CYP postgraduate training; the other took a generic course and has followed this with regular short courses. Both of us had been teachers, so we had prior experience working with CYP.

At the heart of the issue about the suitability of different possible training routes is the question of how different counselling CYP is from counselling adults, in terms of ways of being with clients, skills, and necessary knowledge. If they are very different, then specialist training may be the most appropriate route for *all* wishing to work in this field. If there is significant overlap, then generic courses may be appropriate for some, with specialist knowledge being acquired through additional training and experience.

The subject of difference between adult and CYP work is a broad one. Here we offer a perspective on this. We would be interested to hear others' views.

The Counselling MindEd online curriculum, due to be launched in March 2014, will have a session on this subject, as well as exploring some of the other areas touched on in this article⁴.

Whilst there are differences between working with adults and working with CYP, there is no neat cut-off point where the skills required are different. Human development from childhood to adulthood is a gradual process, a continuum. The reality is that we will work with clients with widely differing levels of emotional maturity and styles of communication, whatever their chronological age. Some clients who have experienced trauma and abuse at an early age may become 'stuck' at a particular developmental stage and be experienced as childlike, particularly as they begin to explore their traumatic experiences. The beliefs people hold about experiences occurring early in their life can come from a very 'young' place – so in

working with adult clients, we are frequently working with the child within. Counsellors who have not had the opportunity to explore what working with CYP might be like may feel deskilled when an adult client presents in a childlike state.

Similarly, it is important for those working with adult clients to have knowledge of safeguarding issues, in relation to both children and vulnerable adults who may be at risk. We are concerned that, as more specialist courses for CYP counsellors become available, this could lead to ordinary diploma courses choosing not to address these areas at all, or doing so superficially.

Most generic diploma courses aim to provide trainee counsellors with a basic level of awareness of many of the client groups and issues they may face when working as a counsellor. There is usually some exploration of issues around race, culture, sexuality, gender, bereavement and sexual abuse, for example. Whilst some diploma courses offer opportunities for trainees to explore issues relating to working with CYP and to have placements with this client group, this is by no means the norm. We are not aware of any other sector of the population that

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is so often unnecessarily seen as being outside the remit of a normal diploma course.

There are differences in verbal skills, which mean that when working with younger clients, particularly those below age 11, a familiarity and comfort with communicating through play or other media is beneficial. This could also be beneficial with adult clients, helping them to access different parts of themselves in more spontaneous, less logical ways. This is another example of how skills which may be seen as more relevant to CYP work can deepen work with adult clients.

An ability to tune in to an individual client's style of communicating and to work to understand their view of the world (empathy) is fundamental to any client work. Whilst background knowledge about developmental stages is helpful, our clients can teach us much about what it is like to be seven, 17 or 70.

Given that the main aim of the counsellor is to build a relationship of trust with the client and help them explore what is troubling them, there are many fundamental similarities with adult work. Differences in emotional maturity and styles of communication will be on a continuum and not necessarily age specific.

Looking at the competencies BACP has recently developed for working with young people (11-18)⁵, it is interesting to note that many are generic therapeutic competencies. Of those which are specific to working with young people, some are linked to the context for the work – both organisational and societal (including the legal context); others relate to the ability to form a therapeutic relationship with young people.

How to acquire the appropriate skills and knowledge

Whilst CYP-specific skills and knowledge may be developed on a training course, there is no substitute for experience in applying the skills and knowledge *in context* in a counselling placement or workplace. The *Ethical Framework* defines competence as the effective

deployment of the skills and knowledge needed to do what is required³.

There are additional skills and knowledge required to work safely and ethically with younger clients, as indeed there are with many specific adult client groups. Many of those wanting to work as CYP counsellors will already have valuable skills in building helping relationships with CYP, or an understanding of the contextual

factors impacting on the work, or both. For people in this position, learning how to adapt generic counselling skills to work with CYP may effectively happen on a well-supported placement on an ordinary diploma course.

One important area of knowledge and understanding for CYP counsellors is child protection and safeguarding. In addition to being aware of the legislation, counsellors need to be aware of the latest DfE guidance in *Working Together to Safeguard Children*⁶, the local Safeguarding Children Board's procedures manual⁷, and their agency's own guidelines. These guidelines have implications for contracting and confidentiality. There are occasions when counsellors may have to break confidentiality for young people; this occurs less often with most adult client groups.

Some of these additional skills and knowledge will be developed in advance of starting client

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work, either on initial training courses, or additional courses offered by training institutions or counselling agencies – specialist training need not be the only route to becoming an effective CYP counsellor. This is particularly important for counsellors who begin a generic course without knowing what area they want to specialise in, then decide to explore working with CYP when the time comes to choose a placement. We believe that placement learning, both for specialist knowledge and sensitivity in applying it, is very important, and can be supported either by a CYP course or a generic diploma with effective in-placement mentoring and supervision.

Issues related to placements

Assuming that suitable, supportive CYP placements can be found for a trainee counsellor who wants to work with this client group, there are some important questions to ask. First of all, what needs to be in place for safe CYP placements? Again, this is a broad area, but the following seem crucial.

Currently, the responsibility for finding placements can be left to trainees. Given that placements are sometimes hard to find and that some trainees have limited experience, this can lead to trainees working in inappropriate contexts with little support (eg a trainee working as the only counsellor in a school, with no appropriate mentoring). Ideally, the placement experience should be a partnership between placement agency, trainee and training institution. This will get off to a much better start if training institutions are involved at an early stage in ensuring the placement is appropriate. Some training institutions do this very well, but

by no means all. Training courses must have rigorous specifications, vetting and monitoring procedures for placements. It is the role of the awarding bodies to monitor these procedures, and their application.

In order to safeguard their clients and practitioners, placement agencies need to have rigorous selection procedures for trainees, aimed at assessing their readiness to work with the particular client group.

Effective support systems are vital, particularly for counsellors who are new to the work. If placements are to support the development of specialist knowledge and the ability to apply it sensitively in context, they must be geared up to supporting trainees and meeting their needs. For this reason, when a practitioner (trainee or qualified) begins working with CYP, it is helpful if they have a supervisor who has experience and knowledge in this area. Valuable learning comes from shared reflection on experience.

A second and vital question is: what proportion of the placement hours can be spent working with CYP for counsellors completing a generic diploma course? This is arguably the most controversial question raised in this article. Bearing in mind that to produce ‘balanced’ counsellors, some experience with adults is probably necessary, how can the decision about the balance between the two be made? Is it appropriate to have seemingly rigid rules about this balance, or is there a place for discussion between counsellor, tutor and supervisor, and therefore some flexibility?

Understandably, tutors on generic counselling courses who lack experience of CYP counselling will welcome specific guidelines

from awarding bodies. Awarding bodies, and therefore training courses, seem to suggest that counselling trainees wanting to work with CYP can spend between 30 and 50 per cent of their training hours with under-18s, and the rest with adults. That might be a helpful range in many situations (for example on a generic course, where tutors have limited experience of issues relating to counselling CYP, and where the trainees have had no prior experience with the age group), but it might be too restrictive in certain situations (for example where the trainee already has experience and competence working with CYP and could benefit from spending a higher proportion of their training working with CYP). In this case 70 per cent might be a more appropriate proportion.

A common compromise in youth counselling agencies, where the clients’ ages range from 11 to 25, is for trainees to spend a certain proportion of their work with under-18s, and the rest with over-18s, who are adults, but actually share many of the issues presented by younger clients. Unfortunately, this won’t apply in secondary schools, where most of the clients are 16 or under, or in primary schools, where all the clients are 11 or under. In those cases, it will be necessary to find other placements to provide experience of working with over-18s.

Prerequisites for counsellors wanting to work with CYP

This is another thorny issue. It is likely to come to a head when a trainee is looking for a suitable placement with CYP. Such placements are scarce and there is likely to be competition between prospective trainees. Between us, we have worked for more than half-a-dozen agencies

offering counselling to CYP, and have supervised CYP counsellors in four agencies. There seems to be a consensus that prior experience working with the particular age group is important. This often comes from teaching, youth work, social work and other related fields. Is this a rigid prerequisite, though? There are many cases where a trainee has developed into an effective CYP counsellor without this previous experience: they tend to have an open mind, and are understanding, non-judgmental, non-critical, and above all, not fearful of that age group, or the institution! It is important, therefore, that those managing placements are themselves open-minded about potential trainees.

One of the challenges of working with CYP – and therefore another prerequisite – is to be able to apply the ethical principle of ‘Autonomy’ to the work, despite the fact that children and teenagers often have less opportunity than adults to be self-governing. This requires us to respect the right of any young person to live life *their* way and make their own mistakes (provided they are not at risk of significant harm). It is really important for counsellors beginning work with CYP to examine thoroughly their attitudes and beliefs about children and young people (particularly so if they have previously worked in a different capacity with CYP, where perhaps the role has involved much more directivity than is usual in counselling).

Who makes the key decisions?

There are a number of stakeholders affected by the quality and effectiveness of CYP counsellors, who should therefore be considered when important decisions are made – first and foremost, young clients; their parents and carers; other adults; agencies offering counselling to CYP (including schools and teachers); training

institutions; awarding bodies; support networks (including supervisors and mentors); the counselling profession as a whole (including BACP); and of course the counsellors themselves.

Client autonomy is a key part of BACP’s *Ethical Framework*³; ideally, trainee autonomy mirrors this. Any major decision that affects the trainee’s development should preferably be made by the trainee, in conjunction with tutors, trainers and supervisors.

This is particularly true of the percentage of training hours to be spent working with young people that we mentioned earlier. BACP does not impose rigid guidelines, but some awarding bodies appear to (guidance is often interpreted as ‘rules’). For example, CPCAB (Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body) recommends that at least 70 per cent of the total client hours should be with adults to allow trainees to ‘demonstrate competence with adults and ... meet the learning outcomes and assessment criteria’⁸. ABC Awards does not recommend trainees have placements with under-18s ‘unless ... they have received formal training and can demonstrate that they are conversant with current legislation and organisational, local and national policies for the client group’. They will allow candidates to have up to 50 per cent of their placement hours with 13- to 18-year-olds if they have ‘at least three years’ experience of working in a professional supportive capacity with this age group’. They do not allow trainees to work with under-13s at all⁹.

We believe that the awarding bodies’ guidelines have been formulated in good faith, and are aimed at protecting trainees and vulnerable clients. Nevertheless, these could sometimes be more flexible, particularly in terms of specifying percentages. It would probably benefit the development of future CYP

counsellors if the wording of the guidelines could be revised, taking into account views and experiences across the profession. Sometimes, regulations can be over-influenced by a few difficult experiences which are nevertheless atypical. BACP might perhaps have a role in facilitating such discussions.

We would like to foster discussion about the issues raised in this article:

- What are the similarities and differences between working with adults and working with CYP?
- What are the alternative appropriate training routes for prospective CYP counsellors?
- What are the different ways of acquiring knowledge and expertise specific to working with CYP – what are the relative roles of training course and placement?
- Who should decide the balance between under- and over-18 placement hours?

Please feel free to contact us or the editor with your experiences and views. ●

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References

- 1 www.iapt.nhs.uk/cyp-iapt/
- 2 In 2004, there was media criticism of a school health worker who gave advice and medical treatment to a pregnant 14-year-old without her parents being informed. See Jenkins P. A parent’s right to know? CPJ. 2004; 15(5):26-27.
- 3 BACP. Ethical framework for good practice in counselling and psychotherapy. Revised edition. Lutterworth: BACP; 2010.
- 4 For the full curriculum, see www.counsellingminded.com
- 5 To be published

- 6 Working together to safeguard children. A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. DfE; 2013. (Available at www.workingtogetheronline.co.uk)
- 7 Each area has its own manual, which can be found on the website of your local Safeguarding Children Board.
- 8 Guidance to workplace experience. Level 4 diploma in therapeutic counselling. CPCAB; September 2013.
- 9 Level 4 diploma in therapeutic counselling: qualification guidance. ABC; April 2013.