

IN FOCUS

Phyllis Kilbourn

*What does
the Lord
require of
you?*

*To act justly
and to love
mercy and
to walk
humbly
with your
God.*

*Micah 6:8
(NIV)*

In my early days of preparation for ministry, many people held the conviction that all needs were spiritual and should be dealt with only at a spiritual level. Counseling, therefore, was not necessary—nor spiritual. We, however, are created with not only spiritual but also physical and emotional needs.

Interestingly, the secular side, where physical and emotional needs are traditionally emphasized, admits to a growing realization that people also have a spiritual dimension that must be addressed. When I returned to war-torn Liberia, the United Nations was begging the church to work alongside them. The director told me, "These people are religious and we are not allowed to address these issues. Yet we cannot truly help the people unless their spiritual needs also are met." His statement points out the importance of a holistic ministry to children—addressing all needs.

Children today are being abandoned, neglected and exploited as no other generation of children. They suffer from a multitude of hurts caused by a wide range of abuse and

pressures. Usually they also bear the pain of changing cultures. Children live in an age of changing values, changing structures and changing families. As divorce, single-parent families, poverty, drug and alcohol addictions, exploitation and even parental abuse of children escalates, the emotional needs of the children are largely ignored. The neglect even reaches into Christian ministries. While most churches offer adult-focused counseling services, the children are often left out.

Physical, mental or emotional needs can hinder children from coming to spiritual wholeness. As we read the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, we note He spent much time in talking with needy people. Often Jesus healed a sick person's body before that person responded spiritually in total commitment to follow Him.

As long as people are hungry, there is no sense attempting to minister to them spiritually. They need food. (For this reason our summer team daily carried food to the children living on the streets in Russia.) Similarly, if someone is emotionally hurt or experiencing deep feelings of pain and anger, those emotions must be worked through before one can be spiritually free.

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Counseling on the true nature of God and His unconditional love (love without demanding favors in return) is essential to true healing and release from the hurt, anger and bitterness . . . abuse generates.

Counseling Children

David C. Goodwin

Adults often mistakenly think back to their childhood and remember only the happy times. The concept that childhood is the happiest time in a person's life, however, is an error. How many of us, I wonder, would really like to go back to being told what to do, where to go, what to wear, what not to wear? Children are punished for things they are blamed for when often the blame belongs to the adults who gave confusing messages about expected behavior. Childhood can often be a confusing, bewildering and even dangerous time.

Most changes are *imposed* on children whereas, being adults, we *choose* most of our changes.

Developmentally, children are still changing. Children's counseling is not just for children with special problems. Counseling is also for normal children who just want to talk about themselves. Developmental counseling will help children understand what is happening to them so that normal problems do not become serious problems.

A twelve-year-old boy came to me one day in tears. I let him tell me how he was feeling. I soon realized his problem had to do with puberty, the changes that were taking place within himself. He feared that he could not control his own feelings, not knowing what they were about and believed that he was dirty. The cause of this boy's problems was fear of the unknown. I spent some time reassuring him that what he was experiencing was normal for his age. Feelings are not wrong. We all have them. They become wrong when we handle them in a wrong way. This boy needed teaching on what was happening to him and how to deal with the changes taking place in his life.

Difference Between Counseling Children and Adults

Principles of counseling children are the same as counseling adults with the following big differences.

The children's counselor must—

A. See the world as a child sees it. You don't know exactly the feelings of the child you are counseling because:

- you are not a child;
- you are not living in that child's environment;
- the child's reactions will be based on his or her past experiences, and the values and beliefs they have learned, not yours.

Learn to listen to a child. All counseling is listening, but with children there is a special kind of listening. It is listening to what the child actually means. It is being able to see beyond the vocabulary to the child's perspective and, in particular, how the child you are talking to sees things. This process takes time and time and more time. Have you ever thought about what it feels like to be a four-year-old child and have your parents abuse you? How would you feel? How could you describe it to someone else?

B. Be aware of the child's cognitive or learning level, emotional and social development and physical abilities. As with adults, each child must be seen as a unique individual with unique characteristics and needs.

C. Educate and teach. A lot of counseling children is teaching. Children who have had their boundaries of right and wrong removed through circumstances not of their own doing will need to be taught or be re-taught: what is right and what is wrong, how to make and keep friends, how to deal with feelings, how to deal with anger in a healthy way. These are just some of the things that counselors need to teach children.

Aims of Counseling Children

- To help children become skilled in problem solving.
- A re-educative process—replacing boundaries.
- Giving the child strategies on how to handle problems, changes, stress.
- To help bring about positive behavioral change.
- To assist in problem solving, decision making, self awareness, personal growth, self-esteem.
- Training in life skills such as communication, assertion, effective study.
- It may involve finding meaning and purpose in life or it may cover more specific areas of problem solving.

When counseling children, we cannot guarantee that the problem (e.g., verbal abuse at home) will not happen again. Counseling must therefore help the child to cope. What will he or she do if it happens again?

From Kids in Crisis: Christian Counselling for Children by David C. Goodwin; published by Kids Reach Box 305 Waikane, New Zealand. Used by permission. This book can be purchased from the publisher for \$29.95 (NZD) plus postage.

What is listening?

Phyllis Kilbourn

Listening is not just being silent! It is an active process by which we express a genuine desire in connecting with the child. We say, "This is your time...I am here for you...to hear you and learn where you are... to know you and share part of me that you may use." To a child who is distressed, GOOD LISTENING is actively taking in what is being said.

The listener acts as a receiver, a holder of the child's feelings, so that the emotional tension in the child can be released in a constructive way. While doing this, you also increase your understanding and knowledge of what the child has experienced, as seen through the child's own eyes.

This understanding is important for planning appropriate interventions for children and families. It also enables you to give some help to the child immediately—comfort, relief of guilt feelings, an understanding of why the event happened and what it meant. The child also feels that he or she has been "seen" and his or her feelings recognized and understood. Maybe the children won't feel so alone anymore.

When you are being a good listener, you may act as a model for important people in the child's life, who may not have realized the child's need for being heard, for being comforted. They see you model listening with a loving, caring attitude.

Listening can serve many functions:

- to gain information
- to give the child emotional support
- to provide a tool

"Supporting conversations" become a tool to build up a trusting "working relationship" with children and, if present, families. Such relationships should be the base from which other rehabilitative actions develop.

It is important to remember that children need time to open up and develop trust. Often children have held their pain for a long time; they have not had the opportunity for "Critical Incident Debriefing"—immediately after the trauma.

Remember, spending time genuinely listening to someone is at the core of building a relationship, and to do so with someone who has not had these experiences in his or her life can be healing. Abusive parents, pimps, and society don't listen. Listening

is a mark of a concerned helper.

By listening, the helper is validating the basic humanity and importance of the individual person, a direct contrast to the usual negative message, "I am a bad kid."

Good listening and talking with children involves the following:

- (1) gaining an understanding of the ways in which children react to loss, distressful events, violence, family disruption.
- (2) having a genuine desire to support children and families in such circumstances without taking over parental roles or creating dependency.
- (3) taking time, concentrating and making yourself available to the child.
- (4) fully accepting (versus being judgmental) of what the child is expressing. Maybe it isn't OUR interpretation, but we validate this is the way the child sees it.
- (5) being able to identify with—but not be overwhelmed by—the child's expression of his or her feelings. Differentiate between the child's feelings and your own; but let your own feelings show to some extent.
- (6) demonstrating PATIENCE! Children who are shy, distressed or small sometimes take time to find words, to express their thoughts. Give them time to do this without showing through words or your own body language that you are impatient.
- (7) reading the expression on the child's face which often reflects very clearly what a child is thinking, and his or her body language in general. Is the child about to cry? Feeling embarrassed? Guilty or ashamed (difficult to establish eye-contact, hanging head, over-active)? Is she anxious (twining fingers, sweating, can't relax); afraid of close contact (will not look at you, or sit near you; stiff body, does not like to be touched)? Match your conversation with the child, taking into account the child's body language.
- (8) tolerating pauses, tears, anger. Children are valuable and necessary parts of the conversation. Prepare yourself for strong expressions of emotions from the child. You

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A young girl physically or sexually abused by her father will find it difficult to accept God's unconditional love for her, particularly as God is often pictured as Father. The idea of whom or what a father is will often block a child's ability to accept God's love. Counseling on the true nature of God and His unconditional love (love without demanding favors in return) is essential to true healing and release from the hurt, anger and bitterness such abuse generates.

I am not trying to underestimate the power of prayer. Prayer is an absolute necessity for any ministry with children or adults. What I am stating is that Christian counseling, together with prayer, is usually needed to bring about a healing solution for deeply wounded children. Children need to be able to tell their stories to a caring, attentive adult who can understand and identify with their pain and sorrow, then help them work through the issues.

Many times I have heard workers lament, "I don't know how to talk to children who are troubled." The first step is to listen. In fact David Goodwin states that, "All counseling is listening." Good listening helps us grasp the situation causing the children's trauma and become knowledgeable about their feelings and reactions. Such information guides us into the necessary next steps of counseling.

In this issue David's article focuses on the similarities and differences between adult and child counseling. While some principles are the same, they come with some BIG differences! I build on David's premise that "all counseling is listening" (although I might modify that to state "the starting point of all counseling is good listening") by clarifying what we mean by "good listening."

If you have areas of concern you would like addressed in future editions of Barnabas, please let me know!

And, keep those resource ideas coming in, too.

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cannot take away such feelings from the child, or make him forget, but you can share these feelings. You also can be a sounding-board, helping the child with the meaning of his feelings and guiding him to an understanding of himself. (Clarify to the child what he is saying by statements such as "You feel . . . You think . . .")

(9) correcting a child's poor self-image.

(10) reexamining guilt feelings with the child and perhaps arriving at a more realistic interpretation of the traumatic experience or event.

As David Goodwin said, "All counseling is listening, but with children there is a special kind of listening." Through good listening we learn more about the problems, wounding and needs of children than through any other way.

(From personal teaching notes, derived from various sources.)

Resources

Helping Children Find God by Helen Oppenheimer, Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1994 (\$12.95).

Oppenheimer explains major areas of Christian faith, using layperson's language but retaining a strong theology. She argues that we cannot assume that children will never have troubles, and we need to equip them with the "tough" stories about Jesus' suffering and sacrifice on the cross. Then she states, "To try to explain some of these ideas in simple words, even in words simple enough for children, far from being an irrelevant exercise, could be the best way to grasp them oneself.

(Reviewed by Carol E. Lytch in *Journal of Family Worship*, Summer 1997) Order from your Christian bookstore.

The following series is recommended by WEC's Euro MTC (Missionary Training College). Audio cassettes or videos have one or more accompanying books.

Growing Kids God's Way: Biblical Ethics for Parenting; Audio (19 cassettes) \$64.95; video \$299.00, plus postage. *Preparation for Parenting (Newborns)*; Audio \$34.95; video \$149.95, plus postage.

Preparation for the Toddler Years (5-15 months); Audio \$29.95; video \$129.95, plus postage.

All are by Gary and Anna Marie Ezzo, published by Micah 6:8, Chatsworth CA 91311

Order from: Growing Families International
9259 Eton Avenue
Chatsworth CA 91311