

Communication with children and young people

Introduction

Good communication is central to working with children and young people. It helps build trust and is an important way of demonstrating respect. It is key to establishing and maintaining relationships.

Young people's reservations

It can be difficult for children and young people to communicate with adults. There is a concern about not being listened to or understood. Children and young people fear that adults may be judgemental, trivialise or over react to what they say, and that adults are incapable of understanding their experiences and concerns, especially if there is only occasional contact. Children and young people who have experienced psychological trauma may have difficulty expressing their experience directly or effectively in words, and expressing sensitive, embarrassing or stigmatizing behaviours can be particularly difficult. It is a common perception that adults make little effort to listen and that they misinterpret a child or young person's experience and feelings. Furthermore young people have concerns about confidentiality and that information divulged will be shared without their consent. A substantial minority of children are reticent about sharing their experiences and anxieties with anyone.

Using media other than words

When communicating with children, a key skill is being able to enter the child's world, to view the problem from the child's frame of reference and to consider first and foremost how the situation must feel for them.

When young people experience difficulties, have concerns or worries it may be hard for them to express their thoughts and feelings in a verbal way, therefore it can be helpful to have different methods to enable communication. It is impossible to work with children without making effective use of media other than words.

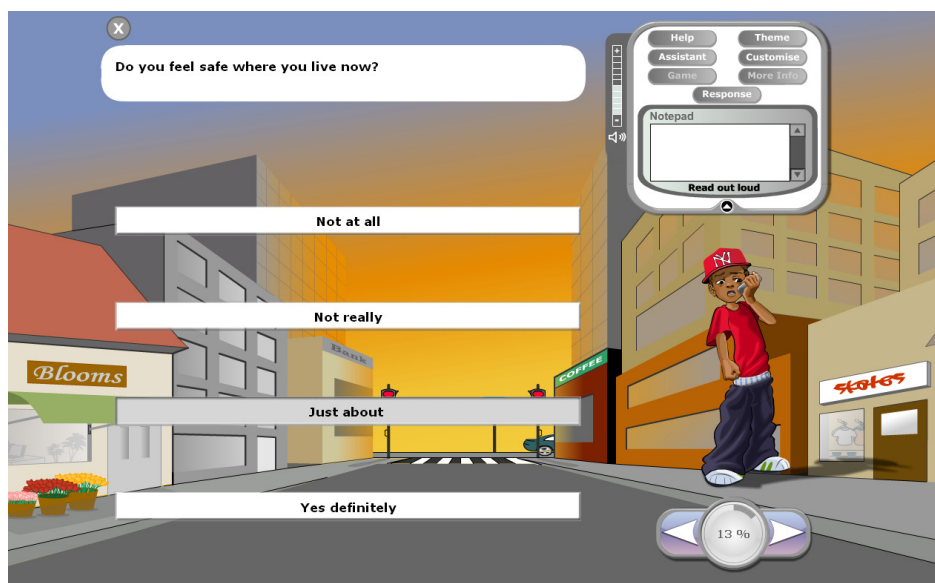
Children use play as a primary medium of communication, a medium for conveying emotions, thoughts, values and perceptions. This medium can aid the communication process with children and young people. Art Therapy is another different medium involving the use of art materials for self-expression and reflection and permits thoughts and feelings to be expressed in images as well as words. At times young people are quite relieved that they are going to "do stuff," and not just sit and talk about "it."

The medium of the computer provides another alternative method to understand a young person's emotional life and concerns, to enter the child's world and to empathise with their predicament. It offers an opportunity for expression and communication and can be particularly helpful to children and young people who find it hard to express their thoughts and feelings verbally.

Computers can provide a neutral environment to engage children and young people. On-screen assistants who do not trivialize or over react, who do not comment or judge, can be available. It is a safe way to express strong and sometimes sensitive feelings because the young person is able to move at their own pace, to reflect on topics or issues before responding and to control the information that is expressed. Young people can move forward at their own pace, having questions repeated as many times as they like, reflecting on responses without external pressure.

They can reveal as much or as little as they choose, and they can change responses without previous responses being recorded. They are in control of the process. They can test out an adult's interest in them by giving 'clues' or 'signals' in their responses for adults, if they are being attentive, to follow up. Being attentive to non-verbal communication is important, particularly attending to the way a young person has answered a particular prompt or question?

The Viewpoint ACASI (audio computer assisted self interviewing) methodology provides a structured series of questions with a range of response styles. It is an interactive questionnaire tool, delivered on a computer. In the full, interactive version, all text that appears on the screen is read out loud by animated characters, aiding literacy difficulties. Respondents can choose from a selection of animated characters and can choose from a selection of animated and colourful screen backgrounds. The computer can appear to be responsive to answers given by a young person by linking responses to different follow up questions.



As a result of completing such questionnaires the research evidence is that young people are willing and feel able to reveal more about themselves, their concerns and experiences, providing responses to be taken up by practitioner. The methodology provides enhanced confidentiality – answers are stored electronically, not immediately spoken or heard and unlike paper not visible or accessible to anyone else.

Purpose and being careful

Research evidence shows that the ACASI methodology will help young people communicate, and share their experiences and anxieties. Practitioners need to understand why they are using the methodology, what's the purpose.

The computer mediated environment provides a method to enhance communication with a young person. It is not an end in itself, it is a process. There is an interaction between the child or young person and the practitioner in which they work together to understand the child's world through the process of ACASI. A "triangular relationship" is formed between the practitioner, the child and the computer in which the young person feels freer to express themselves and the practitioner is able to 'listen', to clarify, to understand and reflect this back to the young person in a way that may help them. It is used to explore the change needed to address negative experiences or eliminate anxieties.

The process provides an opportunity to build relationships with young people. It provides a process to increase self esteem, a sense of personal value and learning. The responses to questions are seen as 'indicators' where things may be okay or where a young person has highlighted a concern, however small. The process may have released a secret that may have been painful or worrying. This detail has been revealed by the child or young person and it has been recorded. It could have been changed, not shared or deleted. The young person has not kept it secret and does not want response to be ignored.

The indicators, responses to questions need to be addressed by practitioners not by adult prescriptions about required actions but by working with children and young people to clarify and develop a shared understanding and an agreed way forward. The process of reflective thinking will provide more understanding for the young person. It enables the young people to become better informed, to clarify what they need to do, to consider actions, and to work out plans. They have a better understanding of their circumstances and options.

It is clear that designing responses relevant to the needs of young people depends on the social worker or other professional agency having an accurate and realistic understanding of the issue which is shared with the child or young person

Reflective practice

A fear for young people is that adults will take the problem from them, giving their own adult and professional interpretation to the young persons account and responding in ways that fit their own perceptions and concerns rather than the young persons. They become passive recipients of adult decisions and they become more wary of placing their trust and confidence in others. Children and young people experiencing difficulties and anxieties want adults to help them understand and make sense of their experiences and anxieties and provide them with ideas and information on which they can make informed choices. Children and young people want to feel that they have actively influenced and directed the courses of action they are taking in their lives.

Reflective practice with young people involves helping them to thoughtfully consider the experiences and life events currently affecting them, to gain understanding and learning which can inform and influence change. Through this process young people can actively inform plans and programmes of work.

Supervision

Practitioners engaged in relationship-based practice need to be able to cope with the uniqueness of each individual's circumstances and unpredictable problems. If relationship-based practice is to become an established and effective approach to practice, practitioners need to develop their reflective capabilities.

Staff care is critical if staff in turn are to care for their clients, children young people and adults. The role of the supervisor is crucial in this process. The supervisory relationship is concerned with respect for the individual practitioner, listening to his or her needs and responding to these. If an individual practitioner feels that his or her needs are being met in their role, that they are motivated in their practice then they are more likely to respond by listening to the needs of others. If practitioner needs are being frustrated energy is more likely to be diverted into seeking satisfaction of personal needs, maybe by battling within the organisation or colleagues and having little energy or motivation to attend to the needs of others.

If practitioners do not have the support and time needed to maintain effective contact with children and young people they will find it very difficult to have the to assess the family environment through the eyes of a child or young person in order to achieve positive outcomes