

# Counselling for young people – what parents need to know

## What sort of Psychologist should my child see?

This depends on the needs of the child or young person. A Psychologist who is legally permitted to use the title 'Clinical Psychologist' usually holds advanced doctoral or masters level training and expertise in the area of mental health. Some Clinical Psychologists who specialise in children and adolescents have additional qualifications, training and/or experience in working with this age group in what is a specialised area of mental health. Other (non-Clinical) Psychologists who specialise in working with children and adolescents may have skills in counselling this age, but may have limited expertise in diagnosis and management of mental health problems.

## Is the gender of the Psychologist important?

Yes and no! Some young people have a preference for the gender of the Psychologists they see, so if this might make the difference between seeing someone or not, then this is probably a very important issue. Generally people will wish to see someone of the gender they feel most comfortable with or able to trust. This can be an important for engaging a young person. Deciding that the child would benefit from "having more male relationships in their life" for example may not be a good reason to choose a male Psychologist - unless the child or young person has that preference.

## What rights does a parent (or carer) have if their child is seeing a Psychologist?

Under law, only one parent's consent is required for a child to be seen by a Psychologist. Generally, a child 14 years or older has a legal right to consult a Psychologist without the knowledge or consent of the parent should the young person choose to do this. A young person of this age, in effect has nearly the same rights as an adult, including the full rights surrounding confidentiality. Further, Medicare may not provide information to a parent about the health services their child has received without the consent of the young person if they are over 14. If the young person is 15 years they can apply for their own Medicare card and number without their parents' consent or knowledge if they wish. Generally, Psychologists will seek to involve a minor's parent(s) in their therapy as better outcomes are often achieved when this occurs. However, there may be times when this is not in the best interests of, or is not agreed to by the young person. So, despite their opinion on the matter, a Psychologist may be restricted in what they can inform parents about, including the fact that they have been consulting their child. There are other rights young people have beyond those listed here. Further advice can be sought from the Australian Psychological Society or a solicitor.

## What if the parent is paying the fees of the Psychologist?

When a parent is paying the fees for their adolescent child to receive services from a Psychologist, they are paying for an independent professional to utilise her or his objective opinion and expertise to serve the best interests of that young person. It must be understood by all parties that the Psychologist has a *duty of care* and an ethical/legal obligation to the young person first and foremost, over and above the views and preferences of the parent. In effect, it is this independent role and view that the parents are paying the Psychologist for. Generally, parents seek to be guided by the advice and expertise they are paying for from the Psychologist. However, at times there may be conflict between the wishes of the parent, their adolescent child, and, or the Psychologist. This can be a difficult situation for all. Psychologists however, are ethically and legally required to act in accordance with their opinion of what decisions promote the best interests of the young person.

## Importance of **boundaries & confidentiality** in Psychological counselling/therapy

It is important to establish clear and agreed expectations between parents, young people and Psychologists about the flow or protection of information discussed between the Psychologist and adolescent client or the Psychologist's opinions about the young person. Some general principles are important in considering what boundaries should exist and what type of information flow is appropriate and in the best interests of the young person. Obviously each case is unique and the issues can be quite complex. A perfect solution may not be possible, so circumstances may require the Psychologist to weigh up all the factors and decide on an outcome that may seem less than ideal to some parties. To this end, the following principles are important:

- A relationship based on confidentiality enables the Psychologist to gain and maintain the young person's trust. This condition enables the communication of sensitive personal information and disclosure of difficult feelings that will maximise the effectiveness of psychological counselling or therapy.
- Importantly, as young people are developing – and expecting – increasing independence, it is important that they feel a high level of "ownership" of the therapeutic relationship and the process of seeking and receiving professional help.
- The creation and maintenance of a separate, safe and protected space is often a critical precondition for young people to begin to reflect on, disclose and confront painful, distressing, traumatic or shameful events or aspects of themselves. In the first instance, it may be a high priority for the Psychologist to establish and demonstrate these conditions in their relationship with the client and other people in their lives.

In general, it may be helpful for the parent to pass on information to the Psychologist – confidentially if necessary – of any concerns or facts that parents have about their child. The Psychologist is likely to treat this information flow like a one-way valve. That is, receiving information in from parents but not responding with any information back. However, generally, most Psychologists would work towards the young person agreeing to some type of general feedback to parents to keep them informed about critical matters or to keep them up-to-date about therapeutic progress.

## Some common **issues of concern for parents / carers**

When their child forms a confidential relationship with a Psychologist, one of the hardest aspects for parents can be feeling "out of the loop" of important information flow. While often the young person's problems raise unique and complex issues in relation to confidentiality and the Psychologist's duty of care, some general comments can be made on especially difficult welfare issues such as:

- **Self-harm, suicide risk** – duty of care requires that steps be taken to reduce harm or the risk of harm as a matter of urgency. However, at times this may need to be balanced with the need to a) keep the young person engaged in counselling and b) provide treatment for the factors underlying these issues, which may mean that these issues may not always be addressed directly. However, in the case of immediate risk of serious harm, in almost all circumstances the Psychologist will inform a responsible adult (usually a parent/carer) so they could act to reduce the risks.
- **Alcohol and substance abuse** – the Psychologist should assess for and monitor risks and expeditiously encourage the young person to use harm minimisation strategies, or if realistic, to be abstinent.
- **Sex, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), pregnancy** – Psychologists frequently assess a young person's relationships and sexual behaviour and if prudent will provide education about safe sexual practices and healthy relationships. This might include specific information about STIs, contraception or a referral to services for specialised sexual health or fertility control consultation. Suspected or confirmed pregnancy is not grounds for breaching confidentiality unless this fact places a young person in immediate risk of serious harm. Psychologists generally encourage a young person to discuss confirmed or suspected pregnancy with a trusted adult, most usually a parent, and seek support in making decisions about their pregnancy.

Understandably the restrictions upon a Psychologist disclosing information about anxiety provoking issues such as these or other welfare issues can be stressful for all involved. Parents should feel they can discuss how their child's Psychologist would manage any potential scenarios they may have concerns about. While it may be difficult to discuss scenarios hypothetically or actual scenarios that a Psychologist is bound to maintain confidentiality about, it is usually beneficial to all parties to attempt open dialogue about any concerns. However, parents need to understand that they may still feel frustrated that they do not receive their desired level of information or certainty about how an issue might be managed. Parents need to keep in mind that well maintained boundaries regarding confidentiality are an essential foundation to their child receiving effective help from the Psychologist.

Further, it is reasonable for the parents to be provided with accurate information about the Psychologist's training and experience in dealing with these and any other difficult issues to allow them to make an informed decision about the Psychologist's suitability to provide a service to their child.

## Issues in School :

Young people who see a Psychologist in private practice may have been referred by a school Psychologist or may benefit from the school knowing basic information about what issues are current for the young person should support at school be beneficial or necessary. While not all counsellors in schools are Psychologists, most non-government schools do employ Psychologists in counselling roles. It is important to keep in mind that non-Psychologist counsellors are not beholden to the same ethical / legal requirements that Psychologists are. Additionally, Psychologists employed by a school are often beholden to the policies of the school in certain matters and they may be directed by the Principal (their employer) in specific cases. In effect, the level of independence and confidentiality that a Psychologist in private practice provides may not be the same as a Psychologist working in a school.

- **The school's duty of care to parents** – Schools may have policies on how all staff manage certain student welfare issues that may apply to their Psychologists, for instance, mandatory reporting of alcohol or drug use.
- **Mandatory reporting of abuse** – Psychologists in private practice are not mandated by law to report suspected child abuse. The Psychologist in private practice is able to use their discretion about when or if to report. In contrast, a school-employed Psychologist may be compelled by the policies of the school to report suspected child abuse.
- **Psychologists in private practice may consult to a young person's school** when consent is provided but in this case, the young person retains the right to direct the psychologist what information they can or can't disclose. The school needs to understand and respect the young person's rights in this regard and recognise that the Psychologist may be significantly restricted in what information they can convey.

## Guidance on getting a young person to get help:

Only 1 in 4 young people with serious mental health issues receives any form of professional support which means that adults in a young person's life play a critical role in monitoring and detecting possible mental health or personal safety issues and being a "bridge" to that professional support. Approaching and engaging a young person in a discussion about your concerns and supporting them to accept help can be a difficult and delicate process. Often guidance from a Psychologist on this first step can make the difference between successful engagement with professional support, or continuing avoidance and on-going risk. Being prepared and thinking through your approach is important. There is more advice on this from our website:

[www.neopsychology.com.au/getting\\_help/supporting\\_young\\_people\\_to\\_get\\_help.html](http://www.neopsychology.com.au/getting_help/supporting_young_people_to_get_help.html)

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Tel: (03) 9810 3067

[www.neopsychology.com.au](http://www.neopsychology.com.au)

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