

Drawing the boundaries

AGE RANGE
three years old +

Helping young children to understand the therapeutic relationship and anticipate its ending

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Mourning is a continuing process of adjustment to a world which no longer holds the person who has died'. For a child this will be a lifelong experience of varying intensity. Typically, bereavement issues can be expected to surface and preoccupy bereaved children at times of transition, such as during developmental change or when moving house or school. Other crises during their lives will also hold echoes of the childhood bereavement and, once again, they may be obliged to manage the intense emotional states and thoughts that characterise mourning. It is at times like these that the child may need some additional help and, if parents are unable to give it, the child may accept the offer of professional therapeutic help.

The process by which a therapeutic relationship is formed and sustained involves the child in making another commitment to a relationship which will eventually end. The closing of the relationship will, in itself, be another loss experience, another bereavement. One of the main differences between this bereavement and the one which precipitated the child entering therapy is that this ending can be anticipated from the first session. We can give the child the opportunity to exercise a degree of control over this loss experience which may not have been possible before. Controlling this end can be a highly positive experience, one which can enable children to return when they recognise the need for help of this sort again.

A time-limited intervention with young children presents a number of difficulties. One is how to describe the finite nature of the current relationship, while signalling a continuing availability of help that will enable the children to return when they perceive the need. Then there is the problem of describing the conditional freedom to play in any way, providing neither the child or worker are harmed or frightened. Finally, how does one communicate the principle of confidentiality within the sessions, alongside the need to record sessions or observe the child protection rider by informing statutory authorities of concerns for the child's safety? Verbal explanations may suffice with adults, but words alone

are never enough when communicating with a young child. Few children will have encountered a therapeutic relationship before and the principles and concepts may be difficult for them to understand and assimilate.

Illustrating the relationship

The most effective way that I have found of communicating the subtle distinctions that define the therapeutic relationship is by drawing, in effect making a poster which can be added to by the child as a record of what he or she has done. Using symbols which either have a particular relevance for the child or which the child can recognise, I describe the privacy of the room by drawing it as a safe place to be, where nobody can look in or hear what is said. Confidentiality, alongside the child protection safeguards, can be depicted as a treasure chest of 'good' secrets which can be locked and kept safely but which does not hold 'bad' secrets. These have to be taken elsewhere so that the child can be kept safe and well.

I often use a clock face to describe the hour of each session and select a symbol which I know the child will recognise to describe the

number of sessions, and we mark them off each week. For example, one child used a cake which had the same number of slices on it as there were sessions. Each week she put a candle on another slice so that by the end of our work the cake was ablaze, a celebration of all that we had done together. She also drew a toy she had used during that week, thereby constructing her own toy-box to take away with her at the end of the sessions.

I always tell the children that they can keep in touch if they want to and depict this by drawing a telephone with my number on it and writing my address on a picture of an envelope. These elements of the contract are always at the bottom of the sheet and concretely confirm that the sessions will end but that the relationship can continue in another form.

The poster illustrates the relationship and demonstrates to the child that, even though I may see many other children, he or she is a unique person to me because this poster is something I have made especially for him or her. This sort of 'contract' enables us, as practitioners, to describe to the child, in language far more appropriate than words, some very complex concepts and ethical issues. Not only does this help children to appreciate what is being offered within the sessions but it also enables them to mark their progress, anticipate and manage the ending and have a personal memento of our times together.

Reference

1. Hemmings P. Social work intervention with bereaved children. *Journal of Social Work Practice* 1995; 9 (2): 109-130.

