



Basic Counseling Skills IV - Building a Counseling Relationship

In your work with the children, especially in a counseling setting, it is important that you help the children trust you and feel comfortable with you.

Research has shown that the relationship you build is the most important element in successful counseling.

Your relationship is the foundation for anything else you do in counseling sessions with the children. It is more important than any specific type of treatment method.

If the children don't feel comfortable...

- they won't share their thoughts and feelings with you
- they won't trust what you say
- they won't participate in the way you need them to

How do you build a strong, positive relationship?

- ❖ Use your **active listening skills** to demonstrate that you understand where they are coming from. **Validate their feelings** - even if you don't think they should feel sad or scared in a particular situation, the truth is, they are sad or scared, so let them know you understand.
- ❖ **Take whatever time the child needs.** It may take some kids longer to build trust and feel comfortable sharing personal issues. Some will share only surface level details at first. Pay attention to the content and body language – both will indicate how much the child is ready to share. **Be patient – don't give up.**
- ❖ **Focus on small successes first.** Before discussing their biggest problem, try helping with a smaller problem early in the process. This will help them **build confidence in you and themselves.**

- ❖ **Treat the child with respect.** Treat them as you would like to be treated. Be prompt, create a comfortable, private environment, and use a tone of voice that communicates respect.
- ❖ Use **self-disclosure** occasionally; share a story about a personal experience you have had, but be careful – keep the focus on the child.

Five Key Counselor Qualities for Relationship Building

1. **Be genuinely interested.** Maintain eye contact, set aside time with the child without interruptions, LISTEN.
2. **Feel empathy for the child.** Try to understand how the child sees and feels about things. See the child as a whole person, not as someone who is difficult, abnormal, or a problem.
3. **Show unconditional positive regard.** Separate the child from the behavior. You can love the child even if you don't like their behavior...let them know this.
4. **Maintain confidentiality.** The content of sessions must remain private and confidential, and the child needs to know this. No information is shared without the consent of the child, unless the child or someone else is in danger.
5. **Remain non-judgmental and unbiased.** If the child feels you are judging them in a negative manner based on what they have shared and revealed, they won't be open – they will shut down. Do not impose your own beliefs on a child.

Self-Reflection

1. Have you experienced stronger relationships when you have used your active listening skills and recognized the child's feelings?
2. Have you had experiences where some children are very open and share easily, and others are quiet, reserved and have difficulty discussing their issues?
3. Have you shared stories or examples of experiences you have had? How was it received by the child?
4. Give examples of ways you could show respect to the children.
5. Have you had any issues maintaining confidentiality? Do others ever pressure you for information on a child? How do you handle it?
6. Where do you hold your counseling sessions? Is it a comfortable and private location?
7. Have you ever had difficulty separating the child as a whole person from his/her behavior?
8. What do you see as your strengths in relationship building, and what areas could use some attention?