



COSCA (Counselling & Psychotherapy in Scotland)
16 Melville Terrace | Stirling | FK8 2NE
t: 01786 475 140 f: 01786 446 207
e: info@cosca.org.uk w: www.cosca.org.uk

Training for Counselling Children and Young People

This publication is intended to provide a brief response to some of the issues that arise for people considering training for counselling children and young people in Scotland. It is in the form of answers to 11 frequently asked questions.

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Q1 What is youth counselling?

Youth counselling is a term used to describe both counselling and psychotherapeutic support to assist children and young people to address and overcome developmental challenges, psychological obstacles and traumatic life experiences - promoting self-belief, enhancing self-insight and building resilience. A client-centred therapeutic dialogue is offered within a non-judgemental relationship, where the well-being of the young person is paramount and their agenda is central.

This is a contractually agreed relationship that is voluntarily entered into by both the client (young person) and an appropriately trained and supervised counsellor. It is offered within clearly defined parameters and underpinned by a professional code of ethics and practice for counsellors.

The offer of forms of psychotherapeutic support will be contractually agreed with the young person or their carers. Wherever possible the consent of the recipient is sought for any support activity offered. Psychotherapeutic support may be particularly appropriate for young children or those without the verbal skills to engage in counselling. Drama, play, music and art therapy are all examples of this approach. Practitioners will be appropriately trained and supervised and work within a professional code of ethics.

Q2 How does youth counselling differ from counselling adults?

The same rigorous application of standards and codes of ethics should apply for counselling young people as it does for adults.

However, it is also generally recognised that engaging in counselling work with children and young people will present significant differences from counselling adults. All therapeutic work should be within a Young Persons' Rights framework.

Boundaries around responsibility and accountability may be less clear cut and will be significantly affected and maybe challenged by working contexts which may impose contractual obligations around sharing information, note-taking and policies, for example, on child protection and drug abuse.

Counsellors need to be aware of issues of legal responsibility in, for example, confidentiality, consent and human rights.

Liaison with other interested and concerned parties including parents and referral agencies may be an important part of the work, and many counsellors may be expected to work systemically, offering group work to selected client groups and feedback to organisations. Another significant difference which counsellors may need to address is that, living in the family or institutional structure, young people may hold very little actual power in terms of choice and possibilities for change.

Counselling young people may mean working with some of the **most** vulnerable members of our society. The client group are more likely to present in highly charged emotional states and it is possible to encounter high risk problems such as suicide and self harm. Resistance to engage in the process is not uncommon. Counsellors may have to overcome issues around accessibility of counselling including practical environmental issues as well as emotional and developmental issues of young people.

Counsellors have to face issues around limitations to counselling competences and expertise and the need for assessment and referral. When working with young people, the need for consultancy and advice in areas like mental health problems and confidentiality is required in addition to supervision.

Consequently, the counsellor's knowledge base has to be quite wide and include knowledge about the nature of childhood, adolescence and emerging identity, cultural influences and anti-discriminatory practice in relation to all young people. It is also important to be able to assess the impact of age, ability and other factors on maintaining a confidential relationship with young people.

Youth counsellors need to be able to keep young people at the centre of their work and therefore need to have considerable affinity in relating to young people, as well as expertise in counselling.

Q3 What training is needed to counsel children and young people?

Youth counsellors need training in three main areas:

1. Counselling skills training
2. Core training in counselling

This must cover the following:

- ❑ Human growth and development
- ❑ Theory, theorists and other therapeutic traditions
- ❑ The therapeutic relationship
- ❑ Psychopathology

3. Training in specialised youth issues and the application of counselling to these areas. These include adolescent development, youth culture, confidentiality and increasingly, mental health issues.

An understanding of specific contexts where counselling is delivered is also important, e.g. school counselling or community counselling.

The most commonly followed course into youth counselling is through a course in counselling skills followed by a diploma or other advanced level course in counselling training with an additional specialist module in youth counselling. Modules in youth counselling can be obtained from various sources including in-house training from youth counselling organisations.

Some courses may incorporate all of these three strands, e.g. a specialised diploma or other advanced level course in psychotherapeutic work with young people which may encompass art and play therapies. This route is less common because of the shortage of courses, especially in Scotland.

A popular route to youth counselling, because of its flexibility and accreditation of prior learning, is through a combined route. A variety of different counselling trainings and relevant academic study which together amount to the equivalent of a longer diploma or advanced level course can be undertaken over a period of many years.

Practitioners can also build on previous study and experience of working with young people which included relevant skills and theoretical underpinning of knowledge applicable to counselling. This may include youth and community workers, social workers, teachers, nurses and psychologists who may want to become counsellors. Many practitioners use their prior learning to gain access to counselling posts where they receive additional training on youth counselling.

All routes require evidence of supervised practice of client work before counsellors can apply for accreditation as counsellors.

Q4 What is accreditation and how is this achieved?

COSCA, Scotland's professional body for counselling and psychotherapy in Scotland, aims to maintain standards of qualifications, training and practice in counselling and psychotherapy. COSCA, therefore, has developed a system of accreditation of counsellors and psychotherapists, underpinned by its Statement of Ethics and Code of Practice. The key purpose of Accreditation is to provide an assurance to the general public that a counsellor/psychotherapist has been assessed and deemed to have attained a mature, professional, competent, safe and ethical standard of practice.

The Accreditation process requires counsellors/psychotherapists to evidence:

1. Core training and theoretical knowledge
2. Supervised practice with clients.
3. Counselling practice, including the ability to assess and refer.
4. Working within the COSCA (or equivalent) Statement of Ethics and Code of Practice
5. Continuing professional development (CPD)

Q5 How can I be sure the course I am following will count towards accreditation?

There are two routes to accreditation:

1. Diploma route
 - Candidates must have achieved a COSCA, or equivalently validated Diploma in Counselling or Psychotherapy.
2. Combination Route
 - Candidates must have achieved a combination of core training and practice. Core training must cover specific aspects of theoretical knowledge.

Please see the COSCA Website www.cosca.org.uk for full accreditation details and criteria.

Q6 What is involved in youth counselling training?

Youth counselling courses vary greatly in content, assessment and duration. These variations are often a feature of the service providing the course so it is important to consider the content and focus of the course before deciding on a particular course.

As a general guide, trainees can expect:

- Counselling theory, in relation to young people. This may be where there are greatest variations with some courses adhering to specific counselling theories and others taking a more integrative approach.
- A component of self-awareness training which will probably involve reflection on personal experiences during adolescence.
- Skills practice development in relation to young people
- A specific focus on youth issues and contexts where counselling is delivered. This may mean concentrating on issues like drug abuse, mental health, bullying, peer relationships, and referencing boundary issues like confidentiality and referral.

Q7 What questions should I ask about training courses?

As most counsellors will have to take an initial generic counselling course, these questions may help trainees decide on the suitability of the courses:

- What is the course content and how much of it will be relevant to working with young people?

- Does the training course require trainees to enter into their own supervision, independent of placement and therapy?
- How many client practice hours are required to complete the course?
- Will there be help in finding placements for working with young people?
- What is their evidence/assessment /reflective practitioner framework and how does it relate to work with young people?
- Are there creative elements to the course that would be especially useful for working with young people?
- How much will they cost and what is the completion rate?

Q8 What is a counselling placement?

Counsellors in training are required to undertake a certain number of supervised practice hours, usually within an established service with a counselling provision. This can be a youth counselling service.

Q9 What qualifications and experience do I need to gain entrance to youth counselling training?

This depends on which route you take.

Some agencies who work with volunteer counsellors will train people from the basics onwards.

Initially, you will need training in counselling or another related helping discipline to undertake training which could contribute to the combined route.

A good grounding in basic counselling skills is an important requisite of all diploma and advanced level courses.

No formal qualifications are required but obviously a commitment to working with young people is important. You should expect an in-depth interview with regards to your suitability for counselling. You may also be required to attend an interview to consider your suitability for counselling, level of self-awareness and openness to personal development as well as ability to cope with the academic and emotional demands of the course.

Q10 Are there any steps I should take to prepare for youth counselling training, work experience and placements?

It helps to have experience of working with young people or to have attended short courses on youth issues such as mental health, substance abuse, peer pressure, self- image, leaving home, self-harm etc.

Q11 Where can I find employment as a youth counsellor?

Youth counsellors are employed in a wide range of statutory, voluntary and private services.

Although some counsellors are employed in specialised youth counselling services, the majority will find employment in other services which are not specifically focussed on youth counselling.

Some of these services are specifically set up for young people like Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services; others are integrated into wider service provision, e.g. Young Persons Sexual Health Clinic.

The following areas are examples of services that may employ counsellors:

- Schools, colleges and universities
- Youth and community services
- Social care services
- Youth justice
- Health services
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- Advice and Guidance Centres
- Crises services

Rates of pay are notoriously variable and often depend on the service employing the counsellor and the way any counselling post is funded.

In the voluntary sector, many services are dependent on volunteer counsellors who are unpaid, e.g. ChildLine. (However, these services often provide excellent routes for acquiring training, supervision and useful expertise)

A few counsellors elect to work in private practice.

COSCA

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