2. Keys to good communication

Introduction

To enable children to be comfortable enough to contemplate change it is essential to create a climate of acceptance and easy communication. Successful social interaction requires us to have sufficient space in our mind for the other person so that we are able to offer full attention to what they bring to the conversation, both in the things they say and the way they are.

Conveying our availability is helped when we create a safe space where we can talk together without interruptions from others. Quality conversations are made easier in a comfortable environment in which both parties are enabled to feel relaxed and unhurried.

This chapter will explore some of the attitudes and skills that promote a therapeutic relationship between an adult and child, and will then consider some common barriers to open communication.

Being genuine and respectful

A good relationship is founded on genuineness. To work well with children we need to be at ease, without feeling the need to play a professional role when talking with them. They need to know we want to help because we care about their wellbeing, not simply because we are paid to do so. This requires us to believe that working with the child is worth our time and effort. We need the ability to be spontaneous yet not uncontrolled in our response towards them. If a child is upset we can show concern, but it will not help for us to burst into tears too! Similarly it is unhelpful to show ourselves horrified by things they share, as our alarm may lead them to become more reticent.

It is important to remain open and non-defensive towards them, even when we feel criticised by what they say and how they are behaving towards us, or when we feel uncomfortable about their criticism of someone else. Each child is unique and needs to be valued for who they are. A supportive and respectful relationship is built upon unconditional positive regard, which means looking beyond any difficult behaviour to a child expressing needs, however clumsily. We should always assume that they are good at heart. Maintaining a positive attitude towards them in the face of challenge gives a very powerful message of being valued despite their difficulties. Respect is about valuing others simply because they are fellow human beings. There also needs to be consistency between our declared values and our own behaviour. Our values may sometimes conflict with those of a child we are working with, yet it is possible to maintain our own values while remaining tactful and respectful towards them and their views. We don't have to approve of everything they do, but we need to respect their intrinsic value as a person.

Relationships are two-way, so in assisting a child to have the confidence to open up to us it can be helpful to share something of ourselves. This is referred to as self-disclosure and needs to be handled with sensitivity. We should hold in mind the question, 'Is this helpful to share?' It is important to remember that we are providing children with the opportunity to unburden to us, not the other way round! Too much self-disclosure can divert attention away from the child and their issues.

An important aspect of showing respect is to maintain confidentiality, within the accepted limits around child protection. It is important to avoid telling other people things that the child only wanted to share with us, providing that maintaining confidentiality does not put them at risk. If we consider it helpful to share information with another it is respectful to seek the child's agreement, explaining why we think it would be helpful for the other person to know.

Showing empathy

Empathy is about being able to relate to a child's feelings and communicate understanding. It involves seeing things from their perspective, sometimes referred to as putting ourselves into their shoes. This requires us to put our own experiences to one side and project ourselves into the experiences of a child, as if we were them. To do this requires imagination, while keeping a firm hold on our own reality. The 'as if' quality of empathy prevents us from being sucked into the other's emotions and becoming overwhelmed by their difficulties. Once that occurs we take on their helplessness and find ourselves unable to assist them.

Empathy is different from identification. 'Oh, I know just how you feel – exactly the same thing happened to me,' is a statement of identification rather than empathy, confusing our own experience with that of the child. We need to be able to keep our experience separate from theirs. Situations and our reactions to them may be similar but will never be identical. Confusing our respective experiences can lead us to lose sight of their issues and begin to focus on our own.

It is also different in quite a subtle way from sympathy, which is a reaction to the plight of the child – feeling sorry for them. An expression of sympathy may be entirely appropriate but we offer it while remaining separate from the child's experience. Empathy, by contrast, involves us imagining ourselves in their position. Sympathy can quickly be offered but it takes time to listen and understand another person's perspective without racing ahead to offer solutions. We show empathy by how well we listen and interpret, from verbal and non-verbal communications, what it is like to be that child at that time. This includes the feelings and hidden messages behind the behaviour.

Actively listening

Attentive listening is far from passive. Indeed, it requires a high level of concentration to attend fully to another, listening not only to what is said but noticing their tone of voice and body language. There is always a danger that we do not listen carefully to what a child is telling us because we have predicted what their message is about and are planning our response. This is especially so when a child is long-winded in their explanation and we are very conscious of time.

We are not always good at listening to a child's point of view if we sense it needs to be challenged. We are tempted to step in and correct some inaccuracy or faulty thinking before giving them the space to fully express their concerns. In this way we may inadvertently reinforce their perception that 'nobody listens to me'. In a helping relationship we need to remain alert to our own biases or prejudices, which may hinder us in hearing an alternative point of view.

Another challenge for us may be our own distractibility. We are often aware of how highly distractible some children are, yet our own attention can easily be drawn away to something else, including those tangential thoughts that pop into our minds about a task to be done or a message to be given. Those of us who strongly identify with this last point need to think about how we can help ourselves to remain more focused. Distracted thinking is well nigh impossible to hide! One of the key indicators of attentive listening is good eye contact. Trying to talk to someone who hardly looks at us is very disconcerting because we feel they are disinterested, and most of us will tend to dry up. (Some children are very uncomfortable giving eye contact, so encouraging them to focus on the end of the nose is a helpful strategy because it looks as if they are looking us in the eye.)

Elements of communication

It is easy to assume that the spoken word is the most important element in communication between two people. In the field of communication studies, however, it is recognised that the words themselves represent a very small proportion of the impact of a message. A considerably greater importance is placed on what is known as paralanguage – voice tone, inflection, pace and speed of speech. For a simple demonstration of this, try saying several times out loud the sentence, 'I didn't say she stole my purse,' each time putting the emphasis on a different word, and see how it changes the meaning. More important still, accounting perhaps for more than half the communicative value of the message, is body language – gesture, posture and movement. This may be one reason why some people are uncomfortable using the telephone, while the cumulative impact of body language with paralanguage suggests that emails, which are often written hurriedly, may be especially vulnerable to misinterpretation.

Non-verbal communication

In talking with children we need to be attuned not only to what they say, but to their whole demeanour. It is especially important in therapeutic conversations to notice any incongruence between what a child says and their non-verbal communication. While it will not always be appropriate to comment at the time, it could be addressed sensitively along the lines of, 'You say you don't care what he thinks of you, but I notice you are looking upset.' This gently invites the child to think further about the impact upon themselves of the circumstances they are recounting. Non-verbal communication will reflect true feelings when there is a contradiction with what is being said.

With this in mind, we need to recognise that the same is also true of us. If we feel impatience, scepticism or even plain dislike of the child, those feelings will certainly leak from us and undermine any work we try to do with them. Children are very good at seeing through us if we are only pretending to be positive.

Our body language has a powerful impact on the behaviour of the child talking. If we maintain an open and relaxed body position they are more likely to relax and open up with us. If we mirror their body language, without descending into mimicry, it communicates empathy. Looking interested in what they say to us reassures them in the telling of their story, encouraging them to persevere and tell those bits that may be hard for them to share.

Some useful verbal strategies

When we listen to someone tell their story the important elements may not always be clear to us. It is helpful to pause and clarify. Clarification may be by seeking additional information to help us understand better ('Can you tell me more about that?'), or it may be by checking that we have understood correctly ('Do you mean …?').

To ensure the accuracy of our understanding it is helpful to summarise from time to time. It is a way of checking that we have heard what is important for the child and are not overlooking key information. A summary should be presented in a way that allows the child to correct any misunderstanding on our part ('So let me see if I've got this right; the thing that worries you most is …'; I think the main points we've talked about today are …').

The ability to reflect back what the child has said is an important skill. It shows that we have heard them, but may also bring them into greater awareness of their own thoughts

and feelings. Sometimes this is done by repeating a key word or phrase, but making sure we avoid a questioning inflection (Child: 'He just doesn't care. I know he hates me.' Adult: 'Hates you.') Sometimes it is done by picking out the feeling behind the words ('It sounds like you are very upset.') Or it may be done by paraphrasing what the child has said (Child: 'I completely mucked it up.' Adult: 'You think you got it all wrong.').

Reflecting feelings enables a child to develop the language to describe their own emotions. We tentatively name these and check it out with them. Being able to articulate our emotions reduces the need to demonstrate them in less helpful ways – a theme developed more fully in chapter 3 on recognising and managing feelings.

There needs to be a balance in our use of questions – too many and a conversation begins to feel like an interrogation. Closed questions (those that can be answered with a yes/no or by repeating a given alternative) have their place as they make less demand on a reticent child. Open, reflective questions, however, encourage a richer response. Here are a few examples:

How do you feel about going into the next class?

What do you think about your new house?

What was it that you found so scary?

Is there anything else you could have said?

How might you do it differently next time?

This kind of questioning holds us back from offering our own solutions to someone else's problem. It invites them instead to explore their own thoughts, feelings and options.

Use of pauses and silence

We are often uncomfortable with pauses in a conversation and so we rush to fill them. In the context of therapeutic conversations pauses are as important as words. We need to recognise just how powerful they can be. They allow the child time to work through an idea, or experience more fully a feeling evoked by the discussion. Pausing also gives a child time to find the words or courage they need to tell a difficult part of their story. Sitting silently rather than responding with a comment or question may be sufficient encouragement for the child to spontaneously expand on what they have already said.

As listeners we need to assess the quality of a silence. We will want to discern whether the child has really finished and handed back to us the turn to talk. Until we get used to using this technique a few seconds' silence will feel much longer to us than it does to the child. As we become more experienced we will find ourselves better able to judge whether some silence is useful or whether the child is discomfited by it. It is a skill we can practise in ordinary conversation and it is interesting to note the effect of leaving some space when the person with whom we are speaking pauses. They may appreciate the opportunity to elaborate on what they were saying.

Barriers to communication

Finally, we need to be aware of some things we may find ourselves doing that get in the way of helping conversations. Unconditional positive regard was mentioned earlier in the chapter. This is also referred to as non-judgemental acceptance. Judging is always counterproductive.

We must be careful not to imply criticism in the way we respond to children, as this simply reinforces their sense of inadequacy or failure and may lead to defensiveness. Our aim instead should be to show understanding of their difficulties.

There are occasions when we may notice ourselves avoiding a child's concerns, which is similarly inadvisable. This is sometimes done by taking the conversation off in a different direction, perhaps because we are uncomfortable with where it is headed. At other times we attempt to apply logic to nullify a child's concerns. Until the child knows that we have genuinely heard those concerns, any attempt to argue against them will undermine their confidence in us. Faulty logic takes time and patience to expose because we have to involve the child in exploration of the available evidence to see that their initial assumption does not hold true. Another way in which concerns are avoided is through premature reassurance. If we try to reassure the child before they are confident we have really heard them, our reassurance will probably be to no avail. The child is more likely to think we are not taking them seriously.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to communication in a helping conversation is the strong temptation to give solutions – the 'if I were you' approach. This presents the adult as expert in the child's difficulties, thereby undermining the child's own insight. We have probably all experienced the frustration of those moments when we simply want to express our feelings, only to find that the one we are talking to just wants to tell us what to do. This is not to say that we cannot make any suggestions. Timing is important, but when the child is ready to engage in problem solving we need to ensure that this is genuinely collaborative. Phrases like 'Some people find it helpful to …' or 'I wonder how it would be if …' can be useful here. We then remain sensitive towards the child's responses, encouraging them to choose the strategy that fits best for them. It is unhelpful to push a child towards a course of action they are uncomfortable with. Rather, we should seek to validate their ideas where possible. We all respond better to encouragement than correction.

Let's get practical

Games

Helping conversations with children can be greatly assisted by introducing a focus activity that provides some structure to the talking. While there are some children who need no encouragement to talk, most find it easier when there is an external activity that reduces the focus on them. There is a large range of therapeutic games, pertinent to different areas of emotional literacy, available through educational suppliers. Children usually relax better during the playing of a game, where the helping adult plays a full part in the turn-taking activities, modelling responses. Many games include question or discussion cards relevant to the topic. Since the time available to play the game will be limited, it is wise to preselect the cards that will be most helpful to address with a specific pupil or group of pupils.

Natural resources

A collection of stones, pebbles, shells, fir cones, acorns, conkers, feathers and twigs is an invaluable creative resource that can be gathered at no cost. The key is to collect items that vary in size, colour, shape and texture. A child can be invited to draw items from the collection to represent themselves and significant people in their lives (family members, peers, teachers). When these are placed on a large sheet of paper or plain cloth, a kind of 'picture' can be developed depicting characteristics and relationships. The helping adult's role is to ask open questions and make reflective comments that gently guide the interaction, e.g. *'I notice that you have put your younger sister right next to Mummy and yourself some distance away. I wonder if that is showing us anything.' 'The stone you have chosen to represent your brother is much bigger than yours. Would you like to say anything about that?' 'Tom's stone has sharp edges and l see lots of sparkly bits in it.' 'The fir cone you have chosen is large and open. How might that be important?'* The adult adopts a stance of interest and curiosity throughout the activity, allowing plenty of time for quiet reflection. Sometimes they may ask questions and sometimes drop in comments that the young person may or may not respond to. A golden rule to observe is never to touch an item the pupil has selected, as in choosing it they have invested it with personal meaning. Touching or moving it would feel intrusive to the child. At the end of the activity, it may be useful to take a photo as a reminder. Always ask children whether they would like to put the objects away themselves or leave them for you to do after they have left.

Miniatures or puppets

A collection of small toys, including cars, figures and other play objects, may be used in the same way as natural objects. Some broken items can usefully be included. The contents of Christmas crackers can be useful additions to the collection. These may be more accessible to younger children because they are less abstract than natural materials. If used with a sandbox, the arrangements become three-dimensional and there is the potential for some things to be part or wholly buried. Engaging with how the child uses the objects is like a

journey of discovery for the helping adult. It is not only what they select that is of interest, but how they handle and place them. Stroking an object affectionately and placing it carefully holds different meaning from grabbing it and flinging it carelessly to the edge of the scene.

Finger puppets or larger puppets can be used in a similar way to the miniatures. The adult needs to hold back from prejudging the relevance of their characteristics. To one person a mouse may be thought of as timid, to another as curious and adventurous. Always find out what it means to the child. *'When I asked you to choose something to be you, you quickly chose the mouse. Tell me about the mouse.'*

Drawing

A young person may be invited to draw their fear, for example. They may want to produce a representational picture or an abstract picture. It is important to provide a range of coloured pens, pencils, crayons or pastels for this. While they draw, the adult watches with interest, commenting from time to time on aspects of interest. A child may be invited to draw their family. It is interesting to note who they put where, and sometimes the relative sizes of depicted family members can have a significance beyond their real-life size. A young person who may be the victim of bullying could be invited to draw a sketch map of their school showing safe and unsafe places.

Modelling and craft activities

Clay and playdough are attractive to some pupils because of their kinaesthetic qualities. To mould these may help them relax as they talk. Sometimes there may be relevance to the shapes they create; sometimes it is simply that the activity provides a diversionary focus. There are children who love to engage in craft activities that involve cutting and sticking. It is helpful to have a good range of items such as tissue paper, foil sweet wrappers, pipe cleaners, lolly sticks, paper plates, cups, boxes, and pieces of material. A child may like to make something to show how they feel, something that represents them as a person or a model depicting things that are important in their life.

Case study

Learning about family life

The ELSA was asked to provide a programme of support to Vicky, a 13-year-old girl who was often disruptive in lessons and had received several fixed-term exclusions from school. After meeting several times with Vicky, the ELSA picked up on her dismissive comments about home. Curious to learn more about Vicky's home life, she brought out her collection of natural objects as a focus for a conversation about Vicky's family. Vicky chose a broken pebble to represent herself and put it towards one corner of the large napkin being used for her 'picture'. She acknowledged that it felt like her life had fallen apart when her parents split up. Dad was depicted by a piece of driftwood, flung to the far edge. The ELSA noticed this and commented on how Vicky had cast it to the side. Vicky said her Dad had done that with her – he had walked out and rarely bothered to contact her anymore. She said she didn't care about him anyway, but the ELSA noticed her sad expression and realised Vicky was probably hurting inside. She wondered aloud about how rejecting her father's lack of contact might feel, and Vicky agreed she felt rejected and unimportant. To represent her Mum, Vicky selected a mottled pink pebble which was smooth and rounded. She said her Mum is quite pretty and she used to feel close to her. Then a dishevelled feather was placed alongside. This represented Tom, her Mum's new partner. The ELSA wondered about the feather. *'I don't think he's good enough for Mum. He lounges around drinking beer and watching the telly – never does anything to help. My Mum's always running around after him.'* The ELSA asked how it had felt for Vicky when he moved in. *'I resent him. It's like he's taken my Mum from me,'* Vicky confided. There were several siblings added to the scene, each with their own problems and all of them presenting challenging behaviours at home or in the community. Using the natural objects helped Vicky to describe her frustration with life at home and how she felt unimportant within the family. The ELSA gained a much clearer sense of what it felt like to be Vicky in a family experiencing significant turmoil. Through her empathic understanding, she built good rapport with Vicky and focused her intervention programme on helping her develop a clearer sense of herself – her unique attributes, including her personality traits and special interests, her hopes and fears, and her sense of personal agency (those things she could take control of for herself in life). Vicky's head of year noticed a change in Vicky over the duration of the ELSA intervention. Her marks picked up and her relationship with teachers became less confrontational. Vicky said how much it had helped to be listened to; she felt the ELSA understood and was on her side.

Summary

In this chapter, we have looked at some things we can do to help children feel more comfortable to talk to us. First and foremost is maintaining a positive view of the child regardless of any difficulties they may be presenting. We need to communicate our understanding of where they are at as we listen attentively to the things they choose to share. The importance of non-verbal messages has been considered, both those from the child and those we communicate ourselves. We have included some useful phraseology within therapeutic conversations and noted the importance of leaving space in the conversation for reflection. Some common barriers to successful communication have been noted. A useful expansion of the skills that enhance helping conversations can be found in Gerard Egan's book, *'The Skilled Helper'*. Some practical resources have been suggested as a medium for exploring children's perceptions and experiences.