

Introduction

Counselling and Psychotherapy work with children and adolescents requires different skills, knowledge and competencies. All these elements should be achieved within a training course that includes content and assessment components related to working with children.

Counsellors and Psychotherapists working with under 18s need to demonstrate competence in taking into account the development of the child's brain, the different domains in that development and how those domains present, the impact of attachment issues and trauma on developing brain, the systemic world for the child and family, the impact of specific learning difficulties, different abilities and working with differently abled children, and the impact of the wider social world on children's emotional and social development. This document sets the standards that must be met in order to practice therapeutic work with clients who are under 18 years of age in a safe, congruent and responsible way. These standards are designed to ensure that practitioners who work with children and adolescents possess the appropriate knowledge, skills and competencies to engage ethically, professionally and effectively with such clients.

Classification

Child: In Ireland under the Child Care Act 1991, the Children Act 2001 and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is defined as anyone under the age of 18.

Adolescence: Defines that period of childhood extending from puberty to adulthood. (In accordance with Irish law and the UNCRC).

Minor: Person under the age of 18 who is not married (or has not been married).

Consent and Contracting

As per Code of Ethics and Practice, point 1.3 i); Parental participation is important in order to support a young person in the therapy process. Both parents, where possible, should be invited to take part in the therapy process and provide their written permission for Counselling/Psychotherapy to proceed. It is important to obtain written permission from both parents/legal guardians before commencing Counselling/Psychotherapy with a minor (A minor is a person under the age of eighteen).

However, sometimes there are situations where it is not possible to obtain written permission from both parents/legal guardians. Where circumstances such as this arise, written permission must be obtained from at least one parent/legal guardian prior to the commencement of Counselling/Psychotherapy. If it is not possible to obtain permission from both parents/guardians, this should be formally recorded by the Counsellor/Psychotherapist.

It is incumbent on all who engage in this work to maintain an up-to-date knowledge base regarding child protection and relevant legislation. IACP Members qualified to work with under 18s, are expected to have a competent knowledge of all legal requirements which govern children's lives and the competencies for those working with minors in a professional context.

Counselling and Psychotherapy are formal activities where both parties explicitly agree a contract about participation and procedure.

Contract must be signed between the parent/ guardian and the therapist. The parent / guardian should receive a copy of the contract.

Therapist takes responsibility for making a clear contract with the parent / guardian to include issues such as availability, fees, and cancelled appointments.

Practitioners ensure that the contract is agreed, if feasible, before work commences. Any subsequent revisions of the contract shall be agreed with the parent / guardian before they take effect.

Competencies Framework

Core competencies for work with under 18s:

- Knowledge of child and adolescent counselling
- Knowledge of developmental psychology and of family development and transitions and the ability to match interventions to the appropriate developmental stage
- Knowledge and understanding of developmental issues and mental health problems of children and adolescents
- Knowledge of the law related to working with under 18s
- Ability to operate within professional and ethical guidelines
- Ability to work with issues of confidentiality and consent, including ability to develop a contract with the guardians
- Ability to work with agencies
- Ability to work in culturally diverse environments
- Ability to engage and work with children and adolescents and their systemic world
- Ability to communicate with children and adolescents with consideration of different developmental levels and backgrounds
- Knowledge of psychopharmacology used in work with children and young people, including side effects
- Knowledge of when and how to refer
- Ability to foster and maintain a good therapeutic alliance and to grasp the client's perspective
- Ability to conclude counselling relationships

Generic therapeutic competencies:

- Knowledge of models of intervention, and their employment in practice
- Ability to work with the emotional content of the session
- Ability to manage endings and service transitions
- Ability to work with groups of children or young people and/or parents/ carers
- Ability to make use of measures (including monitoring of outcomes)
- Ability to make use of supervision specific for this type of work
- Reflective Practice

Assessment Competencies

- Ability to conduct a collaborative assessment
- Ability to conceptualise and formulate the case

- Ability to identify situations of concern and manage them appropriately

Required standard of qualifications

It is essential that all those who are working with underage clients, completed a course that has been designed to work with this specific population.

IACP sets the minimum training requirement for members who have qualified as counsellors / psychotherapists and who now wish to work with under 18.

Training should include the following themes:

1. Child Development
2. Atypical psychology
3. Neurodevelopment of the brain
4. Play skills for the therapist and techniques for working with children
5. Legal Training / Children's Rights / Child Protection Policy / Child Welfare / Consent / Report Writing
6. Systemic issues / working with parents / guardians / care-givers
7. Personal therapy / Group process
8. Working with disabilities / special needs clients
9. Practical element in training required and under strict supervision

Grandparenting.

There is a need to acknowledge the years of experience for practitioners who didn't attain formal qualification in working with children but have completed multiple short courses to date and substantial experience of working with under 18s. Professionals who fall under this category of practitioners must meet and be able to demonstrate required Competencies for working with clients who are under 18 years of age.

Child's Autonomy and Rights

Children's rights include the right to health, education, family life, play and recreation, an adequate standard of living and to be protected from abuse and harm. Children's rights cover their developmental and age-appropriate needs that change over time as a child grows up.

There are four general principles that underpin all children's rights:

- **Non-discrimination**
- **The best interests of the child**
- **The right to survival and development**
- **The views of the child**

The full list of rights for children and young people under the age of 18 is set out in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most accepted standard on children's rights in the world. Ireland committed to promote children's rights when it signed up to the Convention in 1992.

Family as a System, Social and Cultural Context

Counsellors and Psychotherapists must respect and work with the systemic world of the child and work with the child in the context of their systemic world.

Legal Requirements and Reporting

Working with under 18s takes place within specific legal and statutory requirements of Irish and EU law. It is incumbent on all who engage in this work to maintain an up to date knowledge base in regard to child protection and relevant legislation.

IACP members qualified to work with under 18s, are expected to have a competent knowledge of all legal requirements which govern children's lives and the competencies for those working with children in a professional context.

Supervision, CPD and Self Care

Therapists who work with children and young people must comply with all ethical and practice requirements in relation to clinical practice, supervision and continuing professional development. Modalities will consider any specific requirements that may apply in relation to appropriate supervision and/or supervisors for those who practise with children and young people and areas of CPD that may be required. Practitioners with children and young people should discuss with their Supervisor an adequate CPD annually, which is specific to those members working with under 18's.

Also, all therapists must be aware of the importance of self-care and take responsibility to protect and monitor their own physical, emotional, mental and psychological wellbeing at a level that enables them to work effectively with their clients. IACP Code of Ethics and Practice describes self-care as:

- Taking precautions to protect their own physical safety
- Monitoring their own psychological and physical health
- Seeking professional support and services as the need arises
- Keeping a healthy balance between work and other aspects of life

Members should monitor themselves for signs of impairment from their own physical, mental, or emotional problems. Practitioners refrain from offering or providing professional services when their professional functioning is impaired due to personal or emotional difficulties including illness, bereavement, trauma, alcohol or drug misuse or dependency, or any other significant distress.

Members should take responsibility to seek appropriate professional assistance for problems that reach the level of professional impairment, Practitioners also take responsibility to inform and consult with their supervisor in relation to such issues, and when necessary, for the safety of their clients, and their own wellbeing, limit, suspend or terminate their professional responsibilities until it is determined with their supervisor that they may safely resume their work.

Members should provide consultation and assistance when warranted with colleagues showing signs of professional impairment and intervene as appropriate to prevent imminent harm to clients.

Data Protection and Record Keeping

Individuals and organisations involved in data processing of any sort need to be aware the regulation addresses them directly in terms of the obligations it imposes. The GDPR emphasises transparency, security and accountability by data controllers, while at the same time standardising and strengthening the right of European citizens to data privacy. All therapists must comply with the GDPR requirements around data protection, storage, especially when dealing with different types of technology.

Data protection and the Code of Ethics:

Privacy and Confidentiality:

- h) Store, handle, transfer and dispose of all records including written, electronic, audio and video in a way that safeguards the client's right to privacy.
- i) If requested, inform the client of the length of time records are held.
- j) Acknowledge and respect client's rights to access their notes and records

Informed Consent and Freedom of Consent

- f) Obtain parents' / legal guardians'/ consent before making audio or video recordings of sessions, making them aware of the purpose, storage and disposal of same

Record Keeping & Continuity of Care

- a) Maintain and safely store records appropriately.
- b) Take responsibility to securely dispose of records in an appropriate timeframe after the termination of therapy.

As per IACP Record Keeping & Retention Guidelines:

IACP recommends that, in the absence of a superseding requirement, Counsellors/Therapists retain records for a period of 7 years after the last date of service delivery. Records for children and young people should be retained until the client is 25 (or 26 if they are 17 when therapy sessions end) or 8 years after their death, if sooner.

Note: Some insurance providers may require the retention of client records for longer periods, therefore, members should check their insurance policies before deciding on their retention periods.

Useful resources:

Reporting a Child Protection Concern to Tusla

<https://www.tusla.ie/children-first/individuals-working-with-children-and-young-people/how-do-i-report-a-concern-about-a-child/>

BACP Counsellors' Guide: The competences for humanistic counselling with children and young people (4-18 years)

<https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/15874/bacp-cyp-competences-counsellors-guide-2022.pdf>

BACP Counselling Young People (11–18 years) Training Curriculum

<https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/16763/bacp-children-and-young-people-training-curriculum-jun20.pdf>

ICP Standards for Working Therapeutically with Children and Adolescents in Psychotherapy

<http://psychotherapycouncil.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Child-and-Adolescent-Standards.pdf>

Guidance Counselling Core Competencies & Professional Practice

<https://jgc.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Guidance-Counselling-Core-Competencies-Professional-Practice-1.pdf>

ACA Code of Ethics

<https://www.counseling.org/resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf>

Irish Play Therapy Association Code of Ethics

<https://ipta.ie/about-us/code-of-ethics/>

Document ratified November 2023. To be reviewed every 12 months.