

Counseling Children & Adolescents

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Some Initial Thoughts...

- The significance of childhood
- Spiritual nourishment for children/adolescents is vital
- Why counsel children/adolescents?

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“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.” - Matthew 18:10

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” - Matthew 19:14

Children are a heritage from the Lord, offspring a reward from him. - Psalm 127:3

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“It saddens us to think that those who want to come alongside children would mistakenly believe that children somehow need different answers to life’s problems than adults need. Christ is our light! He is *the way*, *the truth*, and *the life*. There is not a separate way for children that differs in essence from the way for adults.”

-Amy Baker

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Development: Ages 10-12 (Building Bridges)

- Develops abstract thinking
- Attention span varies
- Self-concept influenced by school performance
- Develops and tests values and beliefs
- Can discern between desires toward sin and desires to follow God
- Struggles with how God sees them versus how others see them

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Development: Ages 13-14

- Experiences more moodiness
- Concern about appearance/body image
- Has ability to form complex thought
- Develops opinions and often turns to peers to inform them
- Desires autonomy from parents
- Proactive relationship building with adults is not valued, but much needed

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Development: Ages 15-18

- Requires more sleep
- Wrestles with understanding their emotions/motives
- Brain still developing and maturing
- Builds self-sufficiency skills
- May feel emotions more intensely
- Wants to make faith relevant to life
- Godly, healthy adult relationships vital to spiritual development

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Key Ideas

- Adults talk; kids play; adolescents play *and* talk
- Using play-based activities in counseling meets the child/adolescent at his or her level
- Creative and play activities help develop the relationship and can be utilized to meet counseling goals

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Common Child/Adolescent Counseling Issues

- Emotional issues
- Behavioral issues
- Family conflict
- Adjustment/transition
- Crisis/trauma
- Identity issues
- Suicidal ideation/self-harm
- Body image

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Counseling Techniques Unique to Children & Adolescents

- Data gathering
- Building the relationship
- Middle phase of counseling
- End phase of counseling

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Navigating Parental Involvement

- Why involve parents? Why not?
- Privacy versus confidentiality
- Helping parents understand their role in relational challenges (James 4:1-3)
- Providing parent consultation in addition to counseling support for the child/adolescent

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What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ² You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. ³ When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

James 4:1-3

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Unique Aspects of Biblical Counseling

- Support for higher levels of parental involvement
- Emphasis on both listening/understanding *and* imparting/teaching truth
- Ultimate goal is not self-awareness, fulfillment, or self-expression - but orienting the child/adolescent's heart towards God in the midst of their struggles

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Tools and Methods

Use of creativity



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Creativity

- "Mindless" creativity (manipulating play doh, coloring a geometric shape) can help some adolescents feel more comfortable and open
- Intentional creativity (directing to draw a particular kind of picture or paint) can provide meaningful material for dialogue

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Example: Boat & Refuge Activity (Building Bridges)

- Provides material for meaningful dialogue regarding anxiety, sources of safety-refuge, emotions, and spiritual truths
- Draw a boat - any boat on a large sheet of paper
- Ask questions:
 - What kind of boat did you draw? Why?
 - Are you in the boat? Are in the picture? Where?
 - Is the water you are in calm or choppy or scary?
 - What is the weather like?
 - Where does help come from?
 - If God were to enter this situation, what would he look like? How would he come?

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Tools and Methods

Use of sandtray



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Sandtray

- Offers avenue for exploring thoughts and feelings that a child/adolescent may otherwise struggle to articulate
- Requirements:
 - Shallow tray of sand
 - Collection of miniatures of various kinds - people, animals, structures, bridges, fences, landscape, cars, spiritual symbols - cross, etc.
- Ask child/adolescent to build a world in the sand (any world - no right/wrong answers)

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Sandtray

- Ask processing questions
 - What is the name of this world?
 - Tell me what's happening in the world
 - I noticed...(describe things that stand out to you in the tray)
 - I wonder how...(this figurine is feeling)
 - Is God in this world? Where?
 - Do the people know where God is?
 - How do things end in this world?

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Tools and Methods



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Fidget Toys

- Simple, but helpful play item
- Some adolescents feel better talking if they're doing something with their hands
- Having some fidget items (not noisy or distracting) available on a side table can be helpful

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Tools and Methods

Games



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Games

- Games can feel familiar/comfortable and make counseling a more fun experience for children/adolescents
- Choose games intentionally!
- Best to use games that don't require much intensive thought or strategy, and that utilize simple rules
 - Jenga
 - Connect Four
 - Uno

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A Word on Games

- Consider the impact of winning (or losing) repeatedly
- Remember the goal isn't playing the game itself. Use the game to:
 - Help the flow of dialogue
 - Build rapport
 - Increase comfort with counseling
 - Model winning/losing well

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Tools and Methods

Timeline



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Timeline

- Large poster board
- Markers, paint, stickers, etc.
- Draw a timeline and together identify significant events/moments and draw them out
- Identify the valence (positive or negative experience), the significance of it, etc.
- Ask them to identify spiritual moments
 - When did they feel God's presence with them?
 - What things/people encouraged them in their relationship with God?
 - When did they feel far from God? Why?

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Final Thoughts

- Children/adolescents may need counseling support because of difficult events, mental health concerns, challenging dynamics with parents
- Some level of parental involvement is ideal; the younger the child, the greater emphasis on parental involvement
- Using play-based activities is an important part of the counseling process for many children/adolescents

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Final Thoughts

- The goals in counseling children/adolescents can include:
 - Strengthening family bonds
 - Helping the child/adolescent know who God is and how he cares for the details for their life
 - Helping the child/adolescent understand the gospel more fully
 - Helping the child/adolescent more fully understand how the Bible is relevant to their life
 - Offering tools and strategies for navigating life's challenges and difficult emotions
 - Instilling hope in Christ
 - Supporting connection to Christian community

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Resources



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Questions?

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