



Basic Counseling Skills V - Understanding the Problem

The steps in the counseling process have been identified as:

1. Building a relationship
2. Understanding the problem
3. Looking at options
4. Setting goals
5. Developing a plan of action
6. Monitoring and evaluating

Previous lessons have focused on Step 1 - Building a Relationship:

- I - Active Listening
- II – Listening for Feelings
- III - Open and Closed Questions
- IV - Building a Counseling Relationship

This lesson will outline Step 2 – Understanding the problem

In this lesson you will learn how to move beyond helping children explore their thoughts and feelings and begin the process of changing those thoughts, feelings and behavior.

- ❖ The goal of this step is to **gather information** and **understand the child’s concerns**. However, you will need to continue to use active listening, ask open questions, and maintain a level of trust. Even though you have moved beyond step 1, you continue to use these relationship building skills.
- ❖ Be sure to **recognize the importance and uniqueness of every child**. “You are special and I want to get to know you and understand why you are the way you are.” Ask questions not for purpose of judging or evaluating, but to get clarification. You want to know more about the child.

- ❖ Start with “**Why are you here today and what do you expect from talking to me?** What would you like to see different as a result of our meetings? (State it in positive; what they want, not what they don’t want; keep it open ended)

In counseling, the presenting problem (what the child wants to see changed) is seldom the real problem.

To understand real problem, focus on:

- What are the symptoms (behaviors, physical complaints)?
- When does the problem occur, where, with whom?
- What makes the problem better or disappear for a while?
- What makes the problem worse?
- What happens before and after the problem occurs?
- How long has it been an issue? How long does it last when it occurs?
- In what ways does the problem interfere with daily functioning?
- What has helped you cope?
- What strengths and support systems do you have to help you change?
- What feelings are associated with it (fear, anger, etc.)?
- What are your beliefs and perceptions about the problem? (eg, I am not allowed to speak up, I shouldn’t be afraid, etc.)
- What would be different in your life if changed happened?

Don’t overwhelm the child with this list of questions. Gather the information through your conversation with the child and use your listening skills. Watch child’s body language (posture, gestures, and facial expressions) for keys to their feelings.

There may be many solutions to a problem, but in order to understand what may work best for the child, all parts of the problem must be understood. Some issues may be hidden. Each part of the problem helps to build a whole picture of what is wrong.

Counselors do not have all the answers, but they know what questions to ask.

The Five Why's Technique

One technique to get to the real issue is called “Five Why’s.” As the child identifies the problem, ask them why the problem occurred – what was the cause?

- ✓ Keep asking “why” each time they suggest a cause; each time you are going deeper into the issue. You are trying to understand the true root cause where you and the child can see change is needed.
- ✓ Be careful not to annoy the child with your continual “why’s” – phrase your question in a different way.
- ✓ You do not need to ask exactly five why’s – stop asking “why” when you have uncovered the deeper issue that needs attention.

Example:

Child: I’m really upset - I got a low mark in my math exam.

Counselor: That must be upsetting. Why do you think you scored so low?

Child: I guess I didn’t study enough.

Counselor: It’s good that you are willing to admit that. What kept you from studying harder?

Child: I knew that I should, but Raj kept bothering me – he kept asking me to play cricket with him. I really want him to be my friend so I didn’t want to say no.

Counselor: So you knew you should study more, but you just couldn’t say no to Raj...why do you find it so hard to stand up to him?

Child: Because I feel like he’s my only friend. If I don’t do what Raj says, he won’t be my friend, and then I’ll have no one.

- This conversation could continue with more “why’s,” but it shows the general concept. In this example, you were able to uncover the idea that this child feels like he has no friends.
- Of course, you would want to go back to the issue of the poor mark in math to check in with the child – does he understand the material? Does he need more coaching? But, as you can see, the Five Why’s Technique helped to uncover a deeper issue.

Now, practice using The Five Why’s Technique

- ❖ **Role Play 1:** Child says “I hate it when my friends fight.”
- ❖ **Role Play 2:** Child says “I wish I never had to grow up.”
- ❖ **Role Play 3:** Child says “Priya always ignores me at school.”