



Think Your Teen Needs Counselling?

Counselling teens can be tricky business. The call is invariably from an exasperated parent who no longer can tolerate the behaviour of their son or daughter. The teen is presented as *out of control*. There may be concerns of drugs or alcohol; school performance; and/or the influence of the peer group. The teen may be described as depressed, anxious, angry or even suicidal.

The parent wants the counsellor to meet with their son or daughter. The subtext is a parent wanting the counsellor to *talk some sense into their child*. The hope is that the counsellor can wag an even bigger finger in front of the teen for an effect more profound than that of the parent or miraculously get the teen to *open up*.

Wagging fingers doesn't work. If the teen isn't talking to their parents, then dragging them off to the counsellor as an agent of the parent likely won't work either. If the teen does meet first with the counsellor and does talk, what is often heard is a litany of complaints about the parents. The counsellor is next in the middle between parents and teen playing "he said, she said". So what is a parent to do?

Parents are advised to meet with the counsellor together, ahead of their son or daughter. This achieves several objectives:

1. Parents can provide a detailed description of their concern and the history of the problems. The counsellor then has a broader perspective to understand the issues than what the teen would likely provide.
2. Some teens (like adults) view counselling as stigmatizing. The counsellor may be able to avoid this by arriving at a clinical diagnosis of the problem. This means that on the basis of the parents' description, the counsellor may come to an understanding of the problem and can direct the parents accordingly. If the counsellor can offer meaningful direction without even seeing the teen, then the teen may be spared feeling stigmatized. If need be though, the counsellor can still meet with the teen directly.
3. The parents will have had the opportunity to check out the counsellor and determine if they are

comfortable trusting their son or daughter's care to this person. Not all counsellors are alike and the parents may prefer the approach or values of one counsellor to another.

Lastly, parents must understand that the counsellor doesn't live with the teen. The parents do. Even though the focus of what brought the teen into counselling may begin with their behaviour and problems, at some point the counselling must take focus on a positive direction and look for solutions with *parents as partners*. The solutions should include not only what not to do, but include clear direction for what to do. Dwelling on the problems will leave participants immersed in the negative, living in the past. Refocusing and developing positive strategies for improving relationships and behaviour can redirect both parents and teen to positive ends.

So, if you are looking for counselling for your teen:

1. Meet with the counsellor first.
2. Determine if your teen needs to be seen in discussion with the counsellor at this meeting.
3. Remember, the counsellor doesn't live with your teen. Counselling may be directed to help parents better guide, manage or influence their teen.
4. If your teen does attend counselling, your participation remains crucial.
5. After determining and addressing the problems, the focus must shift to positive working solutions that are future oriented and facilitate parent-teen relationships.
6. If ever you are uncertain, ask questions!

The goal: Relief from distress and well-adjusted teens.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.