

Can't go, won't go, you can't make me!

While we need to be careful to embed any interventions in our own model, says Val Taylor, there are nevertheless strategies that work to re-engage young people who skip school

In my work as a school-based counsellor, I frequently come across young people who fail to attend school regularly for a variety of reasons. Some of them consciously opt out as truants, and some of them are quite happy at home, their absence fully condoned by parents or carers. For them, there is no perceived value in attending school. There is a third group, however, who simply cannot attend, despite sometimes wanting to.

I remember, when I was a teacher, having a conversation with the Educational Welfare Officer regarding a young girl who was refusing to come into school. She would get as far as the school gates and then freeze, cling to the school railings, become increasingly agitated and scream. Her mother would take her home, and the same procedure was repeated the next day. Having spoken with the girl on one of the occasions when we did get her into school, I found she could clearly describe her terror as she got near to the school gates, but was unable to identify the cause of these feelings. Eventually, she rarely turned up at school and became a forgotten number on the school roll. As a teacher, I could absolve myself from any responsibility by referring her to the agencies responsible for monitoring school attendance. As a counsellor, I am often the last hope for some of these young people before they disappear from the system and become a statistic. Can anything be done to re-engage these young people, or are they a lost cause?

Strategies – but how?

From my experience, I believe we can use simple counselling strategies to help them. However, I believe there are key elements we need to be aware of. Kathryn and David Geldard in their book *Counselling Adolescents*¹ [see publisher offer page 44] recommend the use of proactive strategies with this age group. But while I wholeheartedly agree with this, I also believe we need to be careful about when and how we include proactive strategies in our work, and I hope that readers of the book who use these strategies will pay particular attention to the case studies in Part 4 where the authors reflect very carefully on the work and how it links with practice.

A wide range of books is now available with worksheets and hints on strategies that can be used to deal with the angry teenager, the depressed teenager, and the anxious teenager². But such things can get 'lost in translation' if we don't firmly embed them in our own practice and carefully reflect on why we are using them. My core model of counselling is psychodynamic, and, whilst my work with young people is now integrative, I need to take great care when introducing worksheets etc into the counselling process. Whose agenda am I following when I do this? Is it perhaps my own anxiety I need to deal with when a young person simply grunts and shrugs their shoulders, so that I feel I am failing and a worksheet or game might 'sort everything out'? We need to be as careful and reflective over our proactive and creative interventions as we are with our verbal interventions, otherwise we are in danger of allowing our own agenda to interfere too greatly in the counselling process. We may also be setting up a parallel process that replicates what is happening in the school, in terms of keeping the young person occupied with tasks but not really fully processing the usefulness of the task or, indeed, its relevance for the young person.

With that proviso, the following strategies are ones I use with young people, and also with supervisees who are on placements in schools. They are not new, but have been adapted, tried and tested in the context of school-based counselling and are certainly worth considering.

1 Where are you on the bus?

Getting back to our non-attendees: when working with young people who are reluctant to attend, it is important not to make assumptions with regard to the reason for this. We have a common experience of attending school but we do not have a shared understanding. To investigate this, with supervisees, I have used a 'Where are you on the bus?' creative exercise³. Set the room out with chairs to represent rows on a bus and ask your group to sit themselves in a chair to represent how involved they felt they were at school. If they were fully involved in clubs and activities and felt they belonged, they may sit themselves towards the

front of the bus; if they were disengaged and felt they did not participate in the life of the school, they may wish to sit themselves to the rear of the bus. I have known participants take themselves off the bus altogether, as they considered they were observers of the school process but never really part of it. This can generate useful discussion, such as what would have helped them move a row forward, or what was it like sitting at the front with everyone behind them? This can also be a useful exercise to use with young people on a group or individual basis and it can be used as a cognitive strategy to help set goals.

2 Naming the feelings

Sometimes it can be difficult to understand what young people are feeling. We have to constantly check that their terminology matches our own and that we share a common understanding. They are creative in changing the meaning of words! Understanding can be crucial to helping them, particularly if we wish to demonstrate Rogerian congruence and unconditional positive regard. Some young people may never have been encouraged to focus on or express their feelings and do not have words for them. I particularly remember a 12-year-old girl who was becoming a school phobic and for whom no cause could be found. She said merely that she 'loved school' but was unable to name even simple feelings. The route in with her was to use the IDibod cards⁴ produced by Incentive Plus. There is a variety of similar products on the market, but I find these particularly useful for exploring and identifying feelings, as they contain no words and the characters are genderless. My young client could not find words but was able to select half a dozen that she felt applied to her with regard to the different feelings she had during the day. Over the next few weeks we built on naming the feelings and created a story round the characters. She became animated and engaged in the process, which helped externalise her problem (as with narrative therapy) reducing her anxiety and allowing her to begin to tell her story for the first time.

3 The squiggle game

I have always loved Winnicott's work with his warmth and apparent understanding of the inner world of the child, and I have read and re-read his account of the psychoanalytic treatment of a little girl named 'Gabrielle' in *The Piggle*⁵. It is, therefore, not surprising that I've integrated his 'squiggle game' into my work. This simple pencil-and-paper game⁶ is a useful activity with many clients because of its link with attachment. There is interaction between counsellor and client, negotiation of rules, and, most importantly in a school-based situation, the handing over of

power so that the young person takes their turn at controlling the game. I've also found this a useful exercise to help with my own processing of my client work. One of my young clients loved playing the game and we would spend time each week playing it. When I was reflecting on the drawings I had made after several sessions, I realised I had drawn smiling faces on them all. I perhaps had a blind spot, in that I was unknowingly trying to cheer up my young client. When I raised this with her at the next session, it seemed she was aware that I was doing this and she liked it because it reminded her of how her auntie had been with her. Clearly something was happening in the transference and countertransference that I had missed. I was aware that her auntie had died, but was not aware of how close my young client had been to her and how much she missed her. Over the next few weeks, we were able to focus on her grief and help deal with her feelings of loss. Whilst I do not presume to be able to interpret the squiggle game in the depth Winnicott was able to, I can recommend it as a strategy.

These are only a selection of the strategies I use with young people, but I hope they illustrate how we can use simple techniques that don't involve major expense, allow for creativity, but still do not 'hijack' a session and cause us to control what is happening rather than allowing for opportunities to explore and understand the young person's inner world when they say they would rather not be at school, no way.

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References

- 1 Geldard K, Geldard D. *Counselling adolescents*. 3rd edition. London: Sage; 2010.
- 2 See for example: Bombèr L. *Inside I'm hurting: practical strategies for supporting children with attachment difficulties in schools*. London: Worth Publishing; 2007. And: Sutherland M, Engleheart P. *Draw on your emotions*. Milton Keynes: Speechmark Publishing; 1997.
- 3 I would like to thank Kathy Raffles who introduced me to a variety of creative techniques, such as the 'Where on the bus' activity, when I attended her supervision training. I have been able to adapt and use many of them in my supervision of school-based counsellors.
- 4 IDibod 'Feelings' cards, devised by Penny Moon, illustrated by Bill Stott. From Incentive Publishing (www.incentiveplus.co.uk/p/77-6657/Feelings-IDibods-Cards.html).
- 5 Winnicott DW. *The piggle*. Reading: Penguin Books; 1989.
- 6 A full account of how to use the scribble game and how it relates to psychodynamic and person-centred work can be accessed online at <http://tinyurl.com/ycnncyu>



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