

Empathetic engagement: Tailoring therapy for a child client experiencing anxiety

Introduction/Description: During a typical therapy session at the Sunfield Center, I took charge of guiding an activity with one of my clients (8-year-old boy) who has been experiencing severe anxiety in school. Since starting therapy, my client had expressed a strong dislike for school due to feeling unintelligent and never achieving perfect grades. Through our session, it became clear that his anxiety stemmed from a deep-seated fear of not being good enough, especially relative to his peers. This was a significant moment for me as it was the first time I independently led an activity with the client, moving from observing to actively participating in his therapy. Together, we explored his feelings of anxiety, depression, and self-esteem, pinpointing when and where these emotions emerged in his daily life.

Overall Importance: This client interaction experience was extremely important as it allowed me to pinpoint the trigger of the client's school-related anxiety: receiving grades right before lunch break in the classroom. This revelation offers crucial insight into the root cause of his distress and informs targeted intervention strategies. Additionally, the client's disclosure of feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem highlights the complexity of his emotional landscape, guiding our therapeutic focus. By verbalizing this trigger, the client may have experienced a sense of relief, paving the way for more tailored treatment approaches to address his immediate needs effectively.

Tasks Carried Out:

- Facilitated a developmentally appropriate and engaging activity aimed at fostering self-exploration of feelings related to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.
- Debriefed with the client using developmentally appropriate language to discuss insights gained from his BASC-3 assessment that was conducted in a previous session.
- Employed questioning techniques to assess the client's understanding of key concepts such as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.
- Utilized probing questions to identify specific settings, times, and individuals associated with the client's feelings of anxiety.
- Engaged in follow-up questioning based on the client's disclosures to gain a better understanding and gather additional information.

Skills Learned/Acquired:

- Leadership: Independently leading the activity during the session.
- Developmentally appropriate communication: Adapting tone, language, and pace to suit the client's needs.
- Reflective listening: Actively listening and reflecting on the client's statements.
- Asking open-ended questions: Encouraging discussion and exploration by posing questions that require more than a yes or no answer.

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Key Learning Assignment

- Non-verbal communication: Utilizing body language such as leaning forward, maintaining an open posture, and nodding to convey understanding and engagement.
- Empathic responding: Demonstrating understanding and empathy towards the client's emotions and experiences.
- Summary/paraphrasing: Recapping and rephrasing the client's statements to ensure clarity and comprehension.
- Confidentiality: Maintaining confidentiality when discussing the session summary with the client's parent during check-out.

Lessons Learned:

- The significance of asking targeted questions to elicit desired information from the client.
- Reinforcing and commending the child for sharing significant emotions with the clinician fosters trust and facilitates open conversations in the future.
- Flexibility in session planning is crucial; prioritizing the child's pace and allowing them to guide the session is more important than completing all planned activities.

Overall Impact: This experience has significantly increased my confidence in conducting independent therapy sessions with young clients, a crucial step towards achieving my career aspiration of working with children and families. Moreover, it has enabled me to refine my skills in utilizing developmentally appropriate language, especially when discussing clinical topics like depression and anxiety. The importance of the person-in-environment model has also been underscored, particularly in understanding how the school environment influences the client's self-identity, serving as a clear source of anxiety. Overall, this experience has allowed me to make clear connections between theoretical concepts and interpersonal clinical skills in field.