



# The Royal Belfast Academical Institution

## Counselling Policy

### COUNSELLING AT RBAI

- 1.1 Counselling is an integral part of the pastoral system at RBAI. Formal counselling for post-primary schools is delivered through the Department of Education Independent Counselling Service for School (ICSS) in co-operation with *Make a Melody* Counselling.
- 1.2 Counselling in schools can play an important role in supporting the emotional health and wellbeing of young people. Pupils experiencing stress or emotional problems find it difficult to reach their potential. Where staff can recognise and respond appropriately to their needs the educational outcome is maximised.
- 1.3 Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reports confirm the need for counselling support as an important complementary feature of pastoral care arrangements and recommended that it should be independent of the school.

### 2. WHAT IS COUNSELLING?

- 2.1 Counselling can be described as *"the opportunity to talk about things that are concerning us, in confidence, with a qualified counsellor. What is spoken about will depend on the individual, but common themes are stress, relationships, change, loss and distressing traumatic events"*.

### 3. RAISING AWARENESS OF THE COUNSELLING SERVICE WITHIN THE SCHOOL

- 3.1 At all meetings for new parents, time is spent explaining the overall pastoral structure within RBAI and reference is made to the place of the Counsellor within this.
- 3.2 The Counsellor attends a whole school assembly early in the Autumn term to remind pupils about the availability of counselling and how the referral process works.
- 3.3 The Counsellor also speaks with the new Year 8 pupils during the Autumn Term to outline what is involved in counselling.
- 3.4 There is a pastoral notice board in tutors' registration rooms which advertises the Pastoral Structure and explains the role of the Counsellor.
- 3.5 A copy of the Counselling Policy is available on the website under the Parents' section
- 3.6 All new staff members are made aware of the Counselling Service.
- 3.7 The key contact for the Counsellor is the Vice Principal (Pastoral).

### 4. HOW CAN A PUPIL AVAIL OF COUNSELLING?

- 4.1 A pupil may be referred to the Counsellor in a number of ways. He may self-refer by completing a self-referral slip and leaving this in the Referral box outside the Medical Room. This is checked each week. Alternatively, a pupil may be referred by a parent or teacher. The tutor or Housemaster will complete the relevant on-line form.
- 4.2 It is important to note that attendance at counselling sessions is entirely voluntary and that where a pupil is referred by a parent or teacher he may decide not to attend. This decision will be respected.

### 5. GUIDANCE ON PRACTICE

- 5.1 Counselling is a non-compulsory service. As stated above, attendance is entirely voluntary, and a pupil may withdraw himself at any time.
- 5.2 While each individual is different, in all instances the focus is on empowering pupils to formulate their own ways of dealing with the circumstances in which they find themselves.
- 5.3 Any information relayed to the Counsellor will remain confidential unless it involves the disclosure of a Child Protection issue. If this occurs the Counsellor will forward the information as soon as possible to the Designated Teacher (or in her absence the Deputy Designated Teacher), who will take appropriate action as required by law and in accordance with the RBAI Safeguarding & Child Protection Policy.
- 5.4 During counselling sessions the Counsellor will make professional judgements about how best to proceed. The strategies will be explained at a level appropriate to the age of the pupil and will not be initiated without his consent.
- 5.5 Respecting the pupil's right to confidentiality means that information will not be relayed to parents. However, where it is agreed to be desirable, this will be undertaken by the Vice Principal (Pastoral and Pupil Achievement) or the Principal.

## **APPENDIX 1: Counselling Information for Parents and Carers**

### ***What is counselling?***

Counselling provides an opportunity to talk in confidence to a qualified Counsellor about any issues/concerns. The issues raised will depend on the individual, but common themes are stress, relationships, bereavement or traumatic events.

### ***Who are the Counsellors?***

They are a team of professionally qualified and experienced people who have experience working with children and young people. Counsellors are trained to listen without judging and to help people sort out their thoughts and feelings about whatever is concerning them.

### ***Why do we need a Counsellor in school?***

Few of us are able to work well when we are stressed or unhappy. The impact of distressing or difficult situations can be felt even more acutely by young people than by adults. If pupils are able to receive emotional support from a qualified professional, they will have greater opportunity to fulfil their potential.

### ***Where and when does it take place?***

A small, private room is made available in school during the day. Sessions will usually last for 45 minutes and appointment times are varied so that time is not lost from any one subject. Counselling may last for just a few sessions or be longer term. The need is reviewed regularly between counsellor and pupil.

### ***Is it confidential?***

A key feature of the counselling service is that information is treated confidentially. Counselling is a time when it is alright to talk about concerns without fear of them being discussed elsewhere. This includes not discussing the counselling work with parents unless the pupil requests or gives consent to this. This can be hard for parents to accept at times, but ensuring the confidentiality of the work is crucial for establishing trust so that pupils feel confident to speak openly and freely about what is concerning them. However, if a pupil appears to be at risk of significant harm, it may be appropriate to seek help from other agencies to keep them safe. The Counsellor will discuss this with the pupil first. All Counsellors receive supervision of their work to ensure the quality of their practice, and these sessions involve the anonymous presentation of casework. At no time will the pupil's name appear on paperwork.

### ***What if I don't want my child to receive counselling?***

If your child requests counselling and can understand what is involved in the process, then they have the right to access counselling. The Counsellor, however, would prefer to have your support for the work and is always happy to talk with you about any concerns that you may have about the idea of counselling.

### ***What if my child refuses to have Counselling?***

The decision about whether to take up the offer of counselling is entirely voluntary for young people just as it would be for an adult.

### ***Can I support the Counselling work?***

Yes, and this is welcomed. Experience shows that the most helpful thing a parent or carer can do is to show an acceptance of counselling as a normal and useful activity, and to show an interest if their child wishes to talk about it, but not to press them if they do not. Counsellors acknowledge that this is not an easy task, and it is quite natural for parents to feel anxious about what may be being said in the sessions. It is hoped that talking with a Counsellor will lead to greater openness, but you may need to allow a little time for this to happen.

### ***If my child wants to see a Counsellor does that mean I am failing as a parent?***

Absolutely not! We all experience occasions when it feels hard to speak to those closest to us about things which are bothering us. Often this can be because we do not want to worry those we love best, or because we want help thinking things through with someone unbiased and removed. The Counsellor will not be judging you or your child but looking to help them find their way through whatever is troubling them.

### ***How are referrals made to the Counselling Service?***

Referrals are made through the school's pastoral care system, but the request may come from you, your child or a teacher. If a teacher makes the request, we expect them to speak with the pupil first about why it may be a good idea. An initial session can be held with the young person to determine if counselling is an appropriate support in their circumstances.

### ***Data Protection Procedures and Evaluation***

All information about counselling work undertaken must be kept securely by the Counselling Service in line with the requirements set by the Data Protection Act 1988. After the counselling has finished your child will be sent an evaluation form to complete anonymously. If there is any cause for complaint, you or your child are welcome to contact the Counsellor, the Counselling Provider or the ICSS Regional Co-ordinator who will try to resolve any issues of concern.

## **APPENDIX 2: Counselling Information for School Staff**

The Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) operates as an integral part of a schools' pastoral care provision to support the emotional health and wellbeing of the pupil. This requires a collaborative and co-operative partnership from all areas within the school.

A named counsellor, Ms Vanessa Gillespie, is assigned to RBAI and should be available at the same time each week. In RBAI this is currently Wednesdays and Thursdays. The Senior Management Team will introduce the nominated Counsellor to staff. The Counsellor will promote an understanding of the counselling process and how it can be used to support pupils. This may be done at general staff meetings, in small groups or through informal contact in the staff room.

At the heart of the counselling service is one to one therapeutic counselling provided for pupils. If you feel that a pupil could benefit from the service, you should discuss this with them. The approach values the pupil and respects his right to be involved in decisions.

If you are unsure whether to refer a pupil for counselling, it may be helpful to discuss concerns with the school Counsellor in order to clarify the most appropriate way forward. Once you are clear that a referral is appropriate you need to speak with the pupil's Housemaster or the Pastoral Vice Principal.

Counselling is not compulsory, and a pupil may choose whether or not to attend. School counselling is not a disciplinary measure and must not be used as such.

ICSS counsellors deliver the service according to the ethical framework for good practice of a professional body such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). Supervision and record keeping (within data protection guidelines), evaluation forms and complaints procedures are all within the code of their professional organisation.

If you have any concerns, please discuss them with the Counsellor or the Regional Coordinator.

If you want to know more about the service, a copy of the ICSS Handbook is available from Staff Resources or on <http://www.deni.gov.uk>.

## **APPENDIX 3: Counselling Information for Pupils**

### ***What's counselling about?***

Sometimes we all have problems that are worrying. Think of a confusing jigsaw when all of the pieces are difficult to match together. Talking about a problem in counselling is like sorting out the pieces so that we can build a picture that makes more sense to us.

### ***What happens in counselling?***

Counselling gives you the opportunity to talk in private about anything which is worrying you. The counsellor will not take sides or tell you what to do or how to live your life, but they will help you to look at choices and encourage you to make your own decisions.

### ***Who are the Counsellors?***

They are a team of professionally qualified and experienced people who have experience working with children and young people. Counsellors are trained to listen without judging and to help people sort out their thoughts and feelings about whatever is concerning them.

### ***Where will counselling take place?***

Counselling will take place in a room set aside by the school (in the ground floor of the sixth form centre). This room will be a safe place where no one will be able to listen in to what you are telling the counsellor. Sessions will usually last for 45 minutes and appointment times should be varied so that time is not lost from the same subject.

### ***When is counselling available?***

Your counsellor is Ms Vanessa Gillespie and she will be in the school on Wednesdays and Thursdays.

### ***How do I get to see the counsellor?***

You can see the counsellor by talking to one of your teachers, self-referring by using the post box in the reception area outside the medical room or by asking your parent or carer to arrange an appointment.

### ***Is counselling confidential?***

What you say in counselling is not repeated to others without your permission unless there are very serious concerns about your safety or another person's safety. This will be explained to you at the initial meeting with the counsellor.

### ***Do my parents need to know?***

Counselling works best when you can tell your parents and they can support you. If you want to have counselling without your parents knowing your school will decide if you can do this. This decision is based on how well you understand what counselling is about and the consequences of not telling your parents. This is known as being 'Gillick competent'.

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