



## The application of solution-focused brief counseling in children

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### Abstract

Solution-Focused Brief Counseling (SFBC) is a relatively new approach in counseling world. Firstly introduced by deShazer and his institute in the 1980s, SFBC is based on client strengths and focuses on solutions rather than deep exploration of client's history issues. This approach has been applied in various settings and has disclosed emerging evidence to be examined to address the mental health problems among families, youths and children. SFBC counseling is relevant to apply among children with adequate cognitive abilities. In this respect, the implementation of counseling in children is extensively integrated with play therapy.

**Keywords:** SFBC, play therapy, children

### 1. Introduction

A solution-focused brief counseling approach (SFBC) was firstly introduced by Steve DeShazer in the 1980s (Prout & Fedewa, 2001; DeShazer, 1985, 1988, 1991, 1994; DeShazer dkk., 1986)<sup>[11, 15]</sup>, InsooKim Berg (Berg, 1994; Berg & DeJong, 1996; Berg & Miller, 1992)<sup>[2, 3]</sup> and his corresponding researchers (e.g., Miller, Hubble, & Duncan, 1996; Walter & Peller, 1992)<sup>[28, 1]</sup>, in Brief Family Therapy Center for more than 15 years (Franklin, dkk. 2001, 2008)<sup>[17, 18]</sup>. SFBC is a relatively new approach in counseling world (Brasher, 2009)<sup>[6]</sup>.

Solution-focused brief counseling is a force-based postmodern approach grounded on the belief that clients are individuals who have strengths and accessible capacities to designate the enjoyment of a more fulfilling and productive life (Corcoran & Stephenson, 2000; Leggett, 2007; 2008)<sup>[8, 26, 27]</sup>. The client is also convinced as a competent and independent agent of change (Daki & Savage, 2010)<sup>[9]</sup>. They have the resources and skills needed to solve the difficulty. The role of counselors is to build collaborative relationships with clients and articulate their desires (Legget, 2009)<sup>[25]</sup>.

As a short-term therapy, SFBC emphasizes solutions rather than deep exploration on the origin of occurred problems. Generally, counseling takes place between 4-6 sessions (Jones, *et al*, 2009; Lama & Yuen, 2008)<sup>[21, 24]</sup>. In a remarkable longitudinal study of studies acknowledge the success of SFBC as an approach that does not take long time but produces a significant effect. In this regard, SFBC has been widely applied to various settings such as schools, mental health centers, social institutions, hospitals, and home care (Miller, *et al*, 1996; Stobie, Boyle & Woolfson, 2005)<sup>[33]</sup>. In particular, SFBC has been widely applied to addressing the problems of spouses and families (Chung & Yang, 2004; Huang, Zimmerman, *et al.*, 1996; and Keney, 2010)<sup>[4, 35]</sup>, mental health problems in adults (Knekt & Lindfors, 2004; Rhee, Merbaum, Strube & Clock, *et al.*, 2008, and Zhang, *et*

*al.*, 2010)<sup>[23, 34]</sup>, and is widely applied to children particularly in regard to academic and behavioral issues (Daki & Savage, 2010; Franklin, Moore & Hopson, 2008; Corcoran, 2006; Fearington, McCallum & Skinner, 2011; and Ciuffardi, Scavelli & Leonardi, 2013).

### 2. Theoretical Framework of SFBC

According to SFBC theory, it stated that humans will continue to disclose bad feeling if they are unable to demonstrate behavioral changes in positive direction toward their lives. The key to feeling better is to focus on "what" can be done. SFBC theory conceives that humans can behave well in the present and in the future. Counselors on SFBC counseling also believe that humans may fall into unresolved problems in the past and failures that hinder the present, in contrast, they at the future can eventually demonstrate better changes. SFBC might be the only counseling that prioritizes future orientation rather than the present.

Most importantly, SFBC theory highlights counselee as a free man to make choices. The counselee is not about being victim of heredity and environment. SFBC counselors possess a positive outlook on clients such as what has been declared by Rogerian followers. As well, human being basically has a good nature, has the strengths to overcome evil and can deliberately choose good behavior. They are also essentially rational because they have adequate capacity to solve their own problems and overcome irrational influences in their habits.

In this regard, Henderson and Thompson (2010)<sup>[20]</sup> stated that SFBC counselors work based on concepts of human nature described as follows:

- 1) Human being is seen as a creature who has the nature of goodness, able to think rationally, able to make changes in positive direction, and free to make choices. However, without direction from the counselor, it may arise a natural desire to perform negative things in their lives.

- 2) The counselor brings the client into focus from negative into positive direction.
- 3) Human being has the capacity to act on common senses if given the opportunity to use them and identify problem-solving strategies.
- 4) Humans will demonstrate better responses to counseling when they can make positive changes in their lives.
- 5) Humans will demonstrate better responses to counseling orientations at present and future.

Therefore, healthy individuals, according to SFBC theory are individuals who see themselves as having abilities, having capacity to build, able to design and find solutions to solve the problems. On the other hand, trouble individuals are defined as individuals who construct self-weaknesses through constructing stories given titled “problems” and believe that unhappiness relies on themselves and they are on problems area and feel doubt to disclose their solutions to overcome problems.

The main objectives of SFBT are as follows develop collaborative relationships with clients, formulate concrete objectives based on clients’ expectations toward the counseling implementation, and build solutions through the resources and clients’ strengths (Prout & Pedewa, 2015) <sup>[30]</sup>.

In contrast to this, De Jong & Berg (2008) suggested that the most important counseling objectives are as follows a) the determined goals should be important to the counselee; what they want, b) the goal must be expressed under interaction pattern; the counselor may inquire directly to counsees in the counseling process, and c) the goal should characterize a situation in which the counselee views more possibilities; counselee shall address the choice to limit what difference they are eager to do.

SFBC counseling works in a collaborative interaction model. The counselor does not see him or herself as an expert but it is highly considered that the client recognizes more about his life. With regard to this issue, De Jong and Berg (2008) <sup>[10]</sup> provided suggestion that counselors should build the “do not know” skill premises in which these skills will lead clients to figure out more about their lives. Counselors use more skills on listening, summarizing, observing possible clues. The main purpose is to create motivational and mobilizing conversations.

As already suggested, SFBC counseling is referred to simple technique to apply and can be employed by counselors with different levels of expertise to generate clients’ satisfaction (Brasher, 2009) <sup>[6]</sup>. With regard to this issue, Birdsall & Miller (2002) <sup>[4]</sup> tried to examine that there are five questions counselors can use as SFBC method: (a) coping questions, (b) exception-finding questions, (c) the miracle questions, (d) scaling questions, and (e) task-development questions.

### **Coping Questions**

Birdsall & Miller (2002) <sup>[4]</sup> described coping questions as questions that helped counsees focus on what they have done to solve their problems. Such type of questions might help the counselee to address his or her remarkable attention on counselee’s mind where at first it is full sense of failure leading to a positive mind. An instance of a coping question “When you think of other difficult times in life, what makes you get through?”, “How do you think you can get through

difficult times?”, “Where do you find the strength to keep

trying?". Coping questions help find and build coping skills and counsel resources (Prout & Henderson, 2015) <sup>[30]</sup>.

### **Exception-finding Questions**

The SFBC counselor asks exception questions to direct the counselee at the time when the problem does not exist. Exception is past experiences in counselees' life when they are free from problems. For instance "Have you ever encountered a problem and you were able to overcome it?", If this exceptional question is identified, the next counselor can ask "what, when and where". Exceptional questions assist the counselee clarify changes, possess the strengths and ability to solve the problem, provide remarkably concrete evidence of completion and help the counselee find his or her forgotten strengths.

### **The Miracle Questions**

The miracle question leads the counselee to imagine what would happen if a problem was miraculously solved. This technique clarifies the purpose and highlights the problem by stimulating the counselee to imagine solution and eradicate the obstacles in problem solving and to build hope for changes. An example of a miracle question is "Imagine one night while you are sleeping, a miracle happens and all the problems you are experiencing are resolved. How do you know your problem is solved?" (Birdsall & Miller, 2002) <sup>[4]</sup>.

### **Scaling Questions**

This technique is a questioning technique such as asking the counselee to make the abstract becomes concrete, vague becomes clear, by summing up the strengths, problems, circumstances, or counselee changes. Not to mention, the counselor can deliver a question "On a scale ranging from 1 to 10, where 1 means you have no control over your problem, then at number 10 means you have full control over your problem, then in what range you plan to put yourself in such scale?" and "What do you need in order to increase your scale?".

### **Compliment**

Counselors can provide messages designed to give praise, appreciation of the advantages, progress, and positive characteristics for achieving the counselee's goals. This technique is mainly addressed before the counselee is given assignments towards the end of the counseling meeting.

### **Task-development Questions**

Task-development questions are a task format given to the counselee to complete. Therapy can ask "Among our current and next meetings, I hope you can explain to me concerning what happened to (family, life, marriage, relationship) you hope will continue to happen?. In the second session the counselors may ask the counselees what they have observed and what they are willing to possibly happen in the future.

### **Feedback**

SFBC counselors generally take at least 5-10 minutes at the end of a counseling session to compile a summary of values for the counselees. During this time the counselors formulate

the feedback given to the counselees. In such feedbacks, there are three basic components as follows compliment, bridge connect, and assignment.

### **3. Implementation of SFBC in Children**

As already figured out in the theories above, SFBC counseling is thus relevant to apply to children with adequate cognitive abilities. Cognitive ability is mainly necessary in order to make children able to describe problems and the used language becomes an important tool in building solutions (Nims, 2007) <sup>[29]</sup>. Language will describe the purpose of therapy and find out what steps children will take to achieve their goals. Therefore, the application of such valuable counseling should be given to children at the age of 5 and above because such ages are the development ages and they have been able to be invited to talk.

Most importantly, SFBT counseling is not recommended for children under the age of kindergarten schools considering this counseling focuses on a solution in which the children's cognitive abilities determine the counseling process. Such formulated approach has addressed effectively emerging evidence to assist children's problems such as students' behavior (Franklin & Hopson, 2008) <sup>[18]</sup>, depression and anxiety problems (Bond, C., Woods, K., Humprey, N., Symes, W., & Green, L., 2013) <sup>[5]</sup>, trauma (Bannik, 2008), speech and language disorders or stuttering problems (Nicholas, 2014).

The implementation of SFBT counseling on children is integrated with play therapy. Selekman (Nims, 2007) presented a mixed-model among the best modification elements of play technique and traditional art therapy techniques with solution-focused counseling among children. Based on results obtained in this line of counseling, Selekman acquired positive responses from both children and parents, they obtained satisfaction from the counseling.

### **The use of Arts / Pictures**

Marty, a 10-year-old boy, got mad. He recently had an incident on the tennis court. He became very angry with his coach and rebutted arguments with his coach. Marty's inability to control his emotions could eventually harm him. The counselor then carried out an order to him to draw an object that described his anger. Marty drew lightning as a way to illustrating his emotions. Then he made the picture quiet, he drew a slow-moving river. The counselor asked him "What are you going to do on the tennis court if it applies calmly? in this regard, demonstrating quiet behavior becomes a counseling purpose. Goal setting is particularly important to assist children to have a clear goal picture. If kids can visualize the purpose, it will facilitate goals achievement (Nims, 2007) <sup>[29]</sup>.

### **The use of Sandtray**

If counseling uses sandtray, the counselor can ask the children to create their world (picture of the children world). This is done as an attempt to build relationships and involve children in counseling. At this point, the counselor sets the goal of counseling. The counselor can deliver an order to children "Make a miniature of your world today!", "How would you like to make the world a little better?", "Make a sandtray that you want to have and be different from your current world!",

“Right now, show me what will you do to sandtray who has such different world?”. For example, Jamie case, a 9 year-old-child. He was referred counseling for having problems at home. When asked what would be better at home, Jamie talked about a clean room. Jamie used sandtray to show the clean room he wanted. Being able to do room cleaning activities is the emerging purpose of counseling sessions (Nims, 2007) <sup>[29]</sup>.

#### The use of Puppet Dolls

Dolls are one of the most useful tools in counseling with children, because the dolls are naturally interesting and fun. Dolls are designed to assist children expressing their verbal difficulties. Mary’s case example, an 8-year-old girl was referred by her teacher. Her parents reported that she was getting more aggressive and uncooperative at home. While she showed good behavior in school. Not surprisingly, Mary’s parents have divorced. At the beginning of the counseling session the counselor involves Mary to create a doll made of two pieces of material and sewn together. The counselor asked Mary to use a marker to draw her doll’s face. The counselor asked Mary to draw a face that represented her feelings at the time and unluckily she drew a sad expression. Mary talked to the counselor that she was sad because she had to move to her new home. The counselor took her doll and begged Mary’s opinion what she would do if she was not in a heavy heart. Mary then delivered her ideas that she would have fun and visited her friends with her mom just as usual before her mother got divorced. Mary also demonstrated a talk on how would she act differently once she showed interesting things. Such behaviour was the notable aim of counseling session (Nims, 2007) <sup>[29]</sup>.

Besides using play therapy of SFBC counseling, storytelling and creative language are also especially relevant to be employed. As well, Ciuffardi, Scavelli, and Leonardi (2013) <sup>[29]</sup> conducted a study in regard to the application of SFBC model through storytelling technique and creative languages to deliver psychological supporting services among children. The results of their genuine research stated that SFBC model applied with storytelling and creative languages, the children disclosed more understanding towards their situation. The storytelling method encourages students to recognize the strengths and children resources and then apply such skills to solve problems and to achieve their goals.

#### 4. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, counseling is a process, as well as a relationship, between persons. The counseling theory approach is based on respected views that the client is an individual who has strengths and resources to solve their own problems and able to move one step forward into better changes in the future. The purpose of a summary, after all, is to convey that problematic client according to this theory is the client who has low confidence in his or her abilities and never at least try to move from their problems thus they do not have skills to figure out considerable solutions. The use of questions also plays an important role in encouraging client to explore their resources and strengths, setting goals and expectations desired in counseling. The implementation of such formulated counseling is very relevant for children with a

minimum age of 5 years and over because within these ages are familiarly called as the development age. SFBT is not recommended for children under the kindergarten age considering this counseling focuses on a solution in which the kids’ cognitive abilities shall determine the counseling process. SFBC applied to children is also notably integrated into the game, it draws attention to lead the client to the enjoyment of a more fulfilling and productive life. Hence, children are enthusiastic during counseling sessions, and in turn, the counselor can explore the children’s remarkable problems in depth.

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