

# Counseling Children

Parents and teachers often find themselves in a counseling role, helping children deal with challenges or make a moral decision. While it may feel good to exercise our wisdom and give advice, it is more valuable in the long run to empower children to arrive at their own solution. The art of ‘Spiritual Companionship’ described in the book *Family Virtues Guide* is a dynamic counseling approach which as the author, Linda Popov, puts it: “honors the child’s ability to find his own truth in the context of virtues.” It helps increase self esteem and improves the emotional health of the child.

To be an effective spiritual companion, we need to cultivate certain qualities and virtues in ourselves first. These include respect for and understanding of the child’s feelings, love and compassion for the child, being genuinely present, and the ability to honor the child as he or she treads on the path of life.

Spiritual Companionship is an intimate yet respectful process of “walking along”, bringing you and your child into a close relationship. There are seven facets that serve as steps in the process of spiritual companionship. These facets can also be used singly in responding to a specific need of the child.

## **1. Open the door (What is happening?)**

Sometimes the child opens the door by exclaiming, “Mum, you can’t believe what happened today!” Other times you can see from child’s expression that he or she is upset but hesitant to talk. You will need to take the initiative. The parent or teacher can open the door by asking open-ended questions, e.g. “How are things going for you?”, “So what’s new?”

## **2. Offer receptive silence**

Once the child starts to talk, do not interrupt, do not give advice, and do not rush to rescue or fix the problem. Rather, allow the child to speak freely. Offer focused listening. A young Maltese priest’s words are cited in *the Family Virtues Guide*: “When you think you have been silent enough, be silent a little more.” It is often in the after silence that awareness is created and the truth dawns.

Compassion and detachment are needed to offer receptive silence. While Compassion enhances your empathy, detachment keeps you from taking on your child’s feelings.

## **3. Ask cup emptying questions (What is the hardest thing?)**

Ask open-ended questions with ‘what’, ‘how’ but not ‘who’ and never ‘why’. You don’t need to know all the details. You only need to be present to allow the child to express his feelings and hear himself. Good cup-emptying questions should be general, “How is that for you?”, or could zero in on bringing out the innermost feelings of the child-“What worries you most?”

#### **4. Look out for sensory cues (What are those tears?)**

Observe your child's facial expressions and body language. If the child were to share thoughts or feelings that have to do with the senses, zero in on what he is seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling or sensing. If the child were to describe a terrifying nightmare of a giant attacking him, ask questions to help him experience and release his feelings of fright, e.g. "What did the giant look like?" "How tall was it?" A child, whose emotions are acknowledged, learns to trust his feelings and to value his internal judgment.

#### **5. Ask Virtues reflection questions (What would give you courage?)**

Only after giving the child the opportunity to hear himself and becoming conscious of his own feelings, should the parent lead. The intent is not to 'tell' the child what to do, but rather to guide the child to reflect on virtues that will help him act responsibly. Ask questions that will prompt the child to decide on a course of action in the light of his feelings and based on his understanding of the virtues. For example, if a child is frightened to go on stage for a performance, you first acknowledge his or her feelings by saying: "It seems quite scary to go on stage.", then respectfully ask: "What will give you the courage to do so?"

#### **6. Ask closure and integration questions (What was helpful?)**

This step is useful when a moral issue or strong emotion is involved. The child needs help to reach a closure and to pull it all together. It is essential for the parent to resist giving what seems to be 'the right answer'- but rather trust the child's ability to arrive at his or her own moral and creative solutions.

To integrate thoughts and feelings, facilitate closure and internalization of a teachable moment, the parent could ask the following questions: 'What is clearer after talking about this?' or 'What have you appreciated most about talking?'

#### **7. Give Virtues acknowledgement (I honor you for your loyalty to your friend.)**

End with a virtues acknowledgment to restore the dignity and self-esteem of one who has given her heart and soul to you in confidence, e.g. 'I really admire your courage', 'So and so is lucky to have such a loyal friend', 'I honor you for your trust to tell me what's happening in your school and for your determination to work it out with your teacher.' Be specific and relate the virtue to the issue at hand. When an acknowledgement is sincere, it touches the heart.

Spiritual companionship is an art that can be learned. You act as a mentor to empower a child to be his or her own teacher, to find his or her own solutions based on self-awareness and understanding rather than just taking up the parents' suggestions.

It will give your child a boost in his or her self-esteem and emotional growth, which will help him or her cope better with more complex relationships later in life.

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