

TOUR 2

Preparation for Departure

Building Relationships With Basic Listening Skills

Learning Objectives

- Recognize the importance of a helping relationship
- Master basic listening skills
- Learn to ask questions that facilitate professional relationships and change
- Evaluate and improve professional helpers' responses
- Become aware of professional helpers' common mistakes

EXPLORING AUTHENTICITY, RESPECT, EMPATHY, AND ENGAGEMENT

In the third chapter of *Counseling Children and Adolescents in Schools*, we described a variety of developmental milestones children and youth experience. We also view learning and honing counseling skills as a developmental process. *Basic skills* (sometimes called core skills, or microskills) that are developed on this tour include (a) non-verbal attending, (b) tracking, (c) paraphrasing, (d) reflecting affect, (e) clarifying, (f) summarizing, and (g) skillful use of questions. These skills are, essentially, good communication strategies that help us develop relationships—personal, collegial, and professional.



Think about someone with whom you have had conversations during which you felt understood, accepted, and validated. What did or does that person do that enables you to think of him or her in this context?

Typically, responses include such components as: (a) She looked at me, (b) he nodded, (c) his facial expressions let me know, (d) he said things so I knew he was listening, and (e) she stopped doing what she was doing and gave me her full attention. For children and adolescents, these verbal and nonverbal behaviors are much the same, although there may be slight differences in these interactions that help facilitate communication.



Think a bit further back in history to when you were a child or adolescent. Identify two or three adults with whom you could talk openly and feel understood. What were some of the reasons you identified these adults?

Unfortunately, many children and youth do not have opportunities for relationships like you may have described. Thus, it is important for school counselors and school psychologists to offer a qualitatively different experience during which young people experience respect, unconditional positive regard, attention, and understanding.

COUNSELING RELATIONSHIP AS THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT: A THEORETICAL REVIEW

Sometimes practicing basic skills seems tedious, mechanical, and artificial. That being the case, we start with *why* to use them rather than *how* to use them. A variety of empirical studies have resulted in evidence regarding the importance of the counseling relationship (Lambert & Barley, 2001; Wampold, 2001). In fact, Lambert and

Barley (2001) contended, “It is imperative that clinicians remember that decades of research consistently demonstrate that relationship factors correlate more highly with client outcomes than do specialized treatment techniques” (p. 359). In some fields, this relationship is also referred to as the therapeutic alliance or allegiance. Regardless of the terminology, we believe that a strong working alliance with student clients is essential. The relationship process is as important with children and youth as it is with adults, and in schools as it is in community agencies.

Our professional histories reflect diverse beliefs regarding counseling relationships. For example, Freud’s involvement with clients was equated with a blank screen. Nonetheless, transference and countertransference were rooted in the therapeutic relationship. The patient–psychiatrist relationship and the clinician’s attentiveness were critically important. Freud’s student, Adler, may have been the first to emphasize the importance of counseling relationships characterized by empathy and respect. Adlerian helpers’ initial task is to facilitate a therapeutic relationship characterized by equality, mutual trust, respect, involvement, and confidence. Consistent with the broader theory, the provision of such a relationship contributes to students’ socialization (Dreikurs, 1967).

Perhaps it was Carl Rogers who became the herald of the counseling relationship. According to Rogers (1961), the relationship is more than the foundation for counseling; the *relationship* is the therapy. In Rogers’s words, “if I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself or herself the capacity to use that relationship for growth and change, and personal development will occur” (p. 3). Rogers demonstrated his trust for others as he listened to them, cared about them, encouraged them, and facilitated egalitarian relationships with them (Bankart, 1997).

Even though we emphasize the relationship, there are times when you’ll need to focus on the presenting issue first (e.g., in cases of abuse, crisis intervention). Remain flexible in your approach.

In recent years, mental health professionals have recognized that the relationship is not the only necessary condition for growth to occur in some cases. Instead, a blend of the therapeutic relationship and the treatment method contribute to successful outcomes.

BECOMING FAMILIAR WITH BASIC SKILLS

Let’s start with an experiment. We suggest doing this with another person. However, if you are alone, you can use a mirror.

1. With your partner, initiate a conversation during which you both cross your arms, cross your legs, lean back, and avoid eye contact. What happens?
2. For the second stage of the experiment, pretend that one of you is a school counselor and one of you is a middle school student. While the student tries to visit



with the counselor about college admissions procedures, the counselor should, once again, cross his or her legs and arms, lean back, and avoid eye contact. How is this for both of you?

3. Reverse roles, and repeat the second step.

4. For the final step in this experiment, take turns trying to communicate interest, attention, and concern without using any words. Again, give feedback to one another.

NONVERBAL ATTENDING

“One cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 48) is a broadly accepted family systems principle. Whether or not we say a word, we transmit messages. These nonverbal messages are potent, even though they are quite vulnerable to misinterpretation. Nonverbal behaviors can be used to communicate (a) emotion, (b) changes in the interpersonal relationship between the professional and the student, (c) attitudes about oneself, and (d) discrepancies between one’s internal state and verbal behavior (Highlen & Hill, 1984). For optimal clarity, then, professionals strive for congruence between verbal and nonverbal attending. We also remain alert to incongruent messages we receive.

Nonverbal communication, sometimes called *analog*, includes many factors. For example, our voice tones and variations contribute to messages. Posture, appearance, gestures, facial expressions, and even breathing are other elements of nonverbal communication. Generally, nonverbal attending skills include:

- Maintaining appropriate levels of eye contact
- Uncrossing arms and legs
- Leaning slightly forward
- Changing facial expressions and voice tones according to verbal communication
- Avoiding distracting mannerisms (e.g., twirling hair, waving hands in the air)
- Appearing relaxed and comfortable

Imagine that someone smiles at you, maintains comfortable eye contact with you, and speaks in gentle tones while saying, “I simply cannot stand to be with you.” Perhaps it is easier to imagine someone glaring at you, decidedly placing his or her hands on the hips, and saying in a loud voice, “No. I am not mad at you.” When words and nonverbal communications are inconsistent, people typically trust the nonverbal messages.

Be aware that personal space also differs by culture and developmental level. Some children are sensitive to sitting too close or being touched (e.g., a pat on the back). Asking permission or checking with students as well as adults first is respectful and prudent.

Nonverbal actions can be difficult to interpret and communicate because of cultural differences. For example, adults who were raised in Western cultures are usually quite comfortable with eye contact. A comfortable gaze is associated with presence and

attention. However, in some, cultures eye contact is associated with disrespect. Thus, sensitivity to preferences and familiarity, typically communicated nonverbally, is essential.

Attention to our own nonverbal factors can also teach us more about ourselves. For example, Mary was in a consultation session with a parent. Her arms were crossed, and she appeared rigid—though she had a gentle smile on her face and her responses were accurate. When we watched the tape of the session, Mary realized that she was uncomfortable with the parent. She felt intimidated. Her crossed arms may have been an unconscious effort to protect herself.

TRACKING

Young children often communicate with actions or through play (as discussed in *Counseling Children and Adolescents in Schools*). School-based professionals acknowledge and respond to actions by tracking, which is a verbal response that identifies or describes a child's behavior. Additionally, they demonstrate their attention with tracking responses. For example, a counselor might say, "You are looking around the room to see what is here" or "You're trying to roll your sleeve." We also use a form of tracking with adolescents or adults by nodding our heads to show we are following the content, changing our facial expression to match the feeling or content of the message, and using minimal encouragers, such as *yes* or *okay*. Through the use of nonverbal attending and tracking, you establish that you are present and focused on the student client.

Tour Guide Note: On this tour you will meet a few school counselors and school psychologists in addition to several student clients. For example, you will meet **Anita**, who is a seventh grade student. She is having one of those days when everything seems to go wrong, and people repeatedly misunderstand her. **Paul** is a senior who has encountered competing expectations from a variety of important people in his life. **Jeremy** is an athletic second grade boy who views himself as a team leader. **Teriqua** is a sophomore who is originally from Ethiopia. Adjusting to her new school has been fairly easy; making new friends has been incredibly difficult. Later, you will become acquainted with **Juan**, a high achieving junior who is tired and discouraged.

PARAPHRASING

We communicate our understanding of clients and their situations by paraphrasing (sometimes called reflecting content). In other words, we use a combination of student clients' words and our own to "reflect back" what we have heard. In our first example, the school psychologist paraphrases Anita's difficult day.

Anita, a seventh grade student: It was a terrible day. First of all Bill asked me to help him with his creative writing assignment. Beth became angry at both of us because she wanted him to go skating with her. And then Dad got mad at me because I got home late.

School Psychologist: Your day has been tough because you were trying to help Bill, and people got mad at you.

In this second example, the school counselor paraphrases Paul's many responsibilities.

Paul, a senior: I'm not sure where to start. I have to get applications for college and financial aid ready. I have a major assignment due in chem. My mom needs me to help get the house ready for company, and Beth wants to go to the movies.

School Counselor: You have so many things you need to do. Applications are due. Assignments are due. You have responsibilities at home. And Beth wants you to spend time with her.

Because paraphrasing is fairly straightforward, the responses may seem like mimicking or parroting. The challenge is to succinctly capture the essence of the content as well as the aspects of the content that are most important. Additionally, we listen for core messages, themes, and perceptions. Our goal is to understand the other person as fully and accurately as possible.

REFLECTING AFFECT

Our responses become stronger when we reflect *affect* (or feelings) as well as content. Reflecting affect adds the dimension of inferring another person's feelings regarding the content. In the following example, the school counselor (SC) reflects both aspects of Jeremy's statement.

Jeremy: It isn't fair. I was supposed to be captain of the soccer team, and then when Jill came, everyone did what she said to do.

SC: You're *angry* because you thought you would be the captain.

In this longer exchange with Teriqua, notice how the school counselor continues to reflect content and affect.

Teriqua: I came to this school two months ago. I know my way around and I'm doing okay in my classes. But I still haven't made any friends.

SC: Even though you feel fairly comfortable with the building and schedule, you are *lonely* and want to be included.

Teriqua: Yeah. I didn't have trouble making new friends in Ethiopia. And I had lots of them. What's going on here?

SC: You're *confused* because finding new friends was easy for you in Ethiopia.

Teriqua: Yeah. I was in lots of clubs. I played soccer. I knew everyone.

SC: And now you go to classes and try to figure out what's not working for you here.

Teriqua: Sometimes I think kids here are just not friendly. And then sometimes I think it's because I'm different.

SC: I'm guessing that you're *worried* that your difficulty is related to your being from another country.

With practice, professional helpers reflect affect with short phrases, such as "You are angry" or "This has been scary for you." Notice how the same goal of helping Teriqua tell her story can be met with shortened reflections.

Teriqua: I came to this school two months ago. I know my way around and I'm doing okay in my classes. But I still haven't made any friends.

SC: You are *lonely* and want to be included.

Teriqua: Yeah. I didn't have trouble making new friends in Ethiopia. And I had lots of them. What's going on here?

SC: This is *confusing* for you.

Teriqua: Yeah. I was in lots of clubs. I played soccer. I knew everyone.

SC: You were accepted and you felt *secure*.

Teriqua: Sometimes I think kids here are just not friendly. And then sometimes I think it's because I'm different.

SC: You are *worried* that this has something to do with your being from another country.

An even more abbreviated form of a reflection is sometimes termed an *accent*. Accents highlight just one or two words from the student client's statement. For example, in Teriqua's last sentence she stated, "And then sometimes I think it's because I'm different." The school counselor could say, "Different?" as a way of inviting Teriqua to tell more about what different means to her.

Practicing Nonverbal Attending, Reflecting Content, and Reflecting Affect

1. Work in dyads, with Partner A and Partner B.
2. During the first 5 minutes, Partner A's role is to talk about a recent event that was somewhat perplexing or confusing. Partner B's role is to nonverbally communicate presence and attention, reflect content, and reflect affect.
3. After 5 minutes, Partner B can give feedback to Partner A. For example, the partner says, "Even though you weren't accurate in your reflection about my being irritated, I still knew you wanted to understand me because you tried to reflect. You sat calmly, and your arms and legs were uncrossed. You didn't seem to be in a hurry to do anything but listen. I liked that. You seemed to have trouble making eye contact with me."
4. During the next 5 minutes, Partner B's role is to talk about a pending decision while Partner A nonverbally communicates presence and attention, reflects content, and reflects affect.
5. Finally, Partner A should give feedback to Partner B.





How did you experience the experiment?

What did you learn from it?

Preservice professionals often struggle with reflecting affect. They find that they use the same words over and over. They have trouble with intensity. For example, they might say, “You seem a little sad about something” to someone who is crying. *Frustrated* and *upset* become default terms for reflecting affect.

Thus, we encourage preservice professional helpers to explore resources for developing their affective vocabulary. An electronic search using “feeling word list” and “feeling word chart” yields several useful resources. We also suggest participation in the following activity.

Developing Your Affective Vocabulary



1. In the first column, list all the synonyms you can for *happy*. Think about using feeling words reflective of different levels of intensity and different developmental levels.

_____	_____	Young Children
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	Pre-adolescents
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	Adolescents
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

2. Use a thesaurus to increase your list to at least 10 synonyms for *happy*.
3. In the second column, rank the terms in order of intensity.
4. In the third column, list terms you would use for young children, pre-adolescents, and adolescents.
5. Repeat this exercise with *mad*, *sad*, and *afraid*.

CLARIFYING

Clarification responses are appropriate when professionals are uncertain about something that a student or an adult has said. Clarification responses also help others achieve personal clarity. Clarification statements can take the form of a question or a restatement with an explicit clarifying component (e.g., “Now, let me see if I have this straight”).

Tour Guide Note: In the following section you will be introduced to **Ben’s parent**. The parent is quite frustrated because Ben has a history of behavior problems at school. Notice how the school psychologist (SP) uses clarification to ascertain an accurate understanding of this parent.

Parent: I’m so angry because Ben is in trouble again. It seems like all I do is come to school to deal with problems he gets himself into.

SP: It sounds like you are angry at Ben, and also frustrated because your many trips to school have not changed anything.

Parent: Yeah. I try so hard to be understanding because I know Ben’s limitations are contributing to his behavioral problems, and sometimes I just run out of patience.

SP: I'm sorry. I'm not sure what limitations you are talking about. I only knew about some health related issues.

Parent: Yes, Ben has asthma, and his allergies sometimes interfere with his concentration.

SP: And you are seeing connections between the difficulties Ben has at school and his asthma.

Parent: Ben often has asthma attacks at night. Of course we're up several hours as we use his inhalers to help get his breathing regulated. During allergy season this happens more often. We're usually able to get things stabilized, but Ben loses so much energy in the process, and he doesn't get enough rest. He has trouble concentrating at school, and seems to be more irritable.

SP: Okay. Now I understand.

SUMMARIZING

Summarizing responses assist professional helpers particularly when starting a session, introducing a transition, or ending a session. With summaries, professionals capture the essence and key elements of a session or segment of a session. They provide additional evidence that the professional does, indeed, understand the messages the student has endeavored to communicate.

For example, in response to Teriqua's series of comments, a professional might say, "Even though you have been at this school for two months, you haven't been able to make many friends. This is a new experience for you because you had lots of friends in Ethiopia, and you were involved in many activities. You're confused and discouraged because you don't know what is going on for sure, and you don't know how to make more friends."

After a summary, a professional can facilitate a transition to problem solving or continue listening to assist the other person as the situation is explored. For example, a professional might introduce a transition in the session by saying, "Before we talk about how you can figure this confusing situation out, I'd like to be sure I fully understand what is going on for you. You want to be on the fourth grade soccer team, and you also want to be in the winter concert. Your friends want you to join their Odyssey of the Mind team. Your parents have said you can only participate in two of those activities, and you just don't know how to decide what to do."

You may need to provide more summaries throughout the session for younger children. Frequent use of summaries is also helpful for student clients who move from topic to topic.

SKILLFUL USE OF QUESTIONS

Professional orientation to questions has changed over the years. Many of us who were trained several years ago were not allowed to ask any questions. I (S.M.) have a

friend who failed an entire assignment because he asked one question on a taped counseling session. Our position is not quite so strong. Still, our preservice professionals complain because they cannot imagine how they can work without asking multiple questions.

We propose two categories of questions to aid professionals in working with students. *Information acquisition questions*, the first type, are clear requests for information (e.g., “Who is your advisor?”). Indeed, there are times when professionals need clear information to be responsibly helpful. However, as their facilitation skills develop, professional helpers learn that students often share the important information and tell their life stories on their terms when we track, reflect, and summarize.

Facilitative inquiries, the second type of questions, are designed to increase self-awareness, introspection, reflection, and exploration of optional meanings. Facilitative inquiries also assist student clients in clarifying goals, making plans to achieve goals, circumventing setbacks, and generalizing their success to other areas.

Well composed questions *are* therapeutic. However, it is important to remember that we are not interrogating attorneys! Additionally, we don’t ask questions simply to fill the time or to satisfy our curiosity. Rather, questions are targeted at increasing self-understanding, insight, and resolution to challenges. Notice ways you can pose questions with versatility and for a variety of purposes:

- How was that for you? (invites reactions including thoughts, feelings, and assigned meaning)
- I have a hunch I’d like to check out with you. (tentatively poses a hypothesis)
- What are your thoughts about these three options? (encourages a cognitive response)
- What possibilities have you considered? (implies that student has considered options and that he or she has options)
- What challenges will you encounter this week? (assists in identifying challenges and planning strategies for maintaining progress)
- What day will be the most difficult for you? (implies the normalcy of difficult days and provides opportunity to circumvent difficulties that may arise)
- I’m wondering if you would be willing to talk about your reactions to Mr. Nillson. (empowers the student client to determine if he or she will answer and prevents a closed question trap)
- How will you know when you are ready to make the decision? (invites tangible indicators of progress toward goals)
- I’m wondering what you said to yourself about missing the deadline. (introduces a cognitive focus that may be useful for intervention)
- I’m wondering how it would be for you to try out for the play, knowing you may not get the part. (assists student in achieving self-understanding and potentially increased courage)
- Who will be the first to notice that you have taken responsibility for training rules? (identifies indicators of success as well as potentially supportive individuals)
- To whom will you turn for support when you feel discouraged or tempted to violate training rules? (assists student in identifying sources of encouragement and circumventing potential setbacks)

It is important to consider the cognitive development of students when posing questions. Younger children and some adolescents are not able to understand or respond to an inquiry requiring abstract thought.



Generating Questions

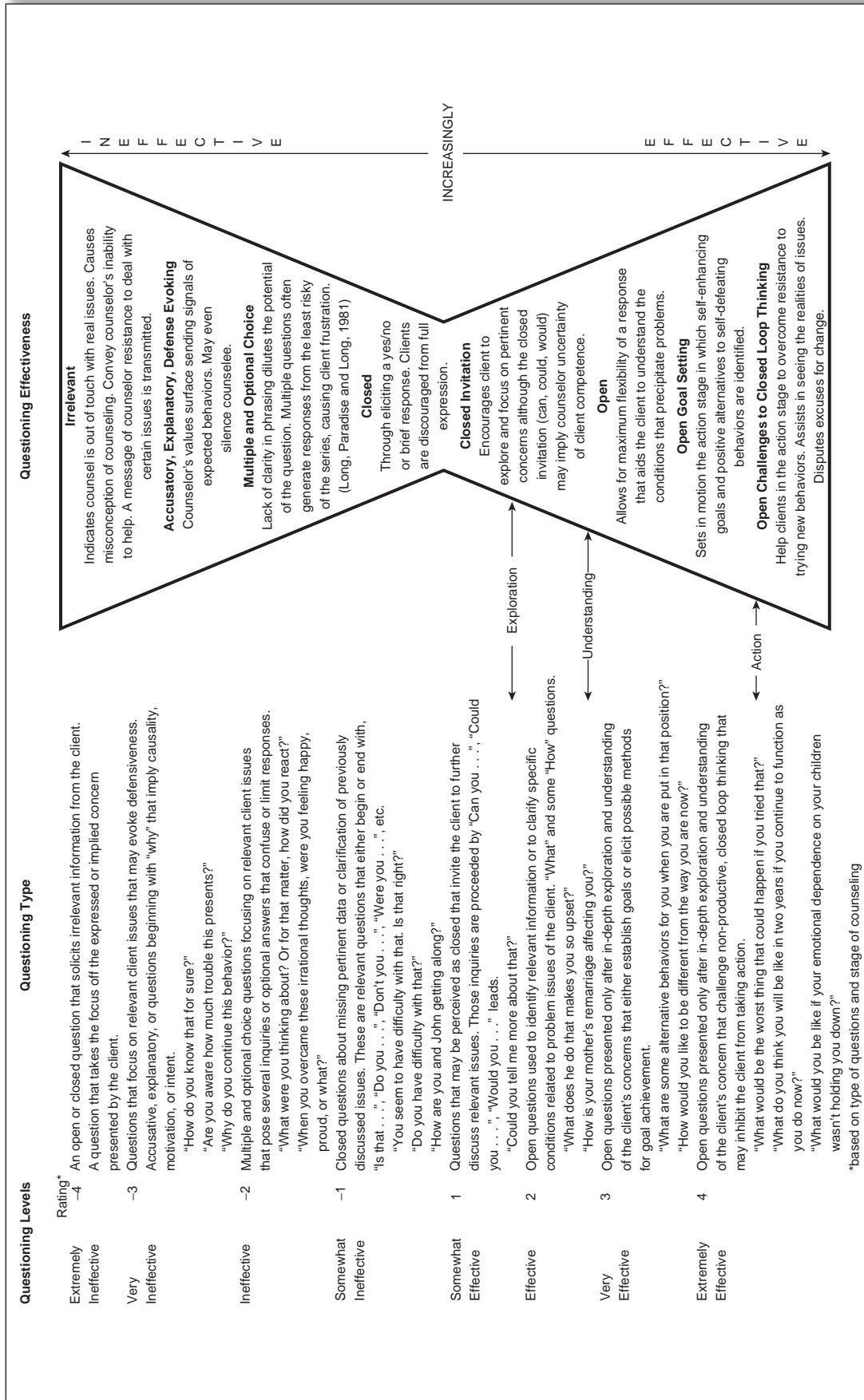
Asking questions that truly encourage deeper reflection and exploration is more difficult than it seems. As a practice exercise, generate as many questions as you can in response to Juan, who is a junior in high school: “What’s the use? I am tired of school. I am tired of working this hard. Why should I beat my head against the wall so I can go to college, just so I can go on to med school? I would just as soon get my G.E.D. and get a job doing something. If I go to med school it will be years before I can start earning a decent living.”

One of the many challenges when acquiring information is to refrain from asking questions to satisfy our own curiosity. Good questions to frequently ask yourself are “What do I need to know in order to be responsibly helpful?” and “Do I need to know the answer to this question?” Another self-monitoring strategy is to ask, “What is my purpose in asking this question?” To assist our trainees in making these decisions, we have used the model prepared by Sklare, Portes, and Splete (1985) for assessing the efficacy of questions used in counseling sessions. Questions are given an effectiveness score from -4 to $+4$ as shown in Figure 2.1.

Irrelevant questions are rated as -4 . They misdirect attention of the student and professional helper. These irrelevant questions evidence professional helpers’ incompetence, inattentiveness, and possibly resistance. For Juan, a -4 question might be, “Who is your medical doctor?”

“Why” questions are prime examples of -3 questions, which often result in defensiveness. They sometimes stem from helpers’ values and may be received as accusatory. They often become another barrier to communication. For Juan,

Figure 2.1 Questioning Effectiveness Model



a -3 question might be, "Where did you get the idea that you could make a decent salary with a G.E.D.?" or "Why would you want to throw such a promising future away?" A less confrontational example might be, "Why did you bring your books with you?"

Although -2 questions are not as destructive to relationships, they are confusing, or they narrow response options. Questions rated as -2 include multiple choice questions, such as, "Juan, would you rather go to a community college to get started, or would you rather go straight to the university?" Posing a series of questions is also rated as -2.

Questions that can be answered with a single word, such as *yes* or *no*, are rated as -1. Such questions stand in the way of broader self-exploration. Sometimes, they communicate covert advice, such as, "Have you thought about exploring options for working while you take classes?"

Questions rated as +1 are also closed. They are positive because they invite further discussion. The problem is that they can also be answered in one word, and sometimes that word is *no*. A +1 question for Juan might be, "Would you be willing to tell me some of the things that have led to you questioning your goal to become a physician?"

Effective professionals most frequently ask +2 questions. These carefully composed questions invite self-exploration; thus, they allow the broadest range and depth of responses. These questions often begin with *how* or *what*. An example of a +2 question is, "What kinds of things have led to you questioning your earlier decision?"

Questions rated as +3 and +4 are used less often. Their ratings relate to timing as well as phrasing. The +3 questions are asked after the professional *and* student have a thorough understanding of the presenting concern. They introduce or amplify the goal setting process. Questions in the +4 category often accompany +3 questions; these queries strengthen plans and propel energy for goal attainment. For Juan, the sequence might be, "When you encounter self-doubt again, what are some strategies you can use to protect yourself from discouragement?" and "What self-doubt messages will likely come up during your math test tomorrow?" The student client's response could be followed by "And how will you respond to that message so it won't keep pestering you?"

Tour Guide Note: The last three questions are influenced by cognitive-behavioral approaches. Externalizing the problem, a narrative therapy intervention, is also helpful when student clients encounter self-doubt and negative self-talk.

Heed one word of caution: It is important to remember that when asked prematurely, +3 and +4 questions become -4 questions because they are irrelevant.

Return to the questions you wrote in response to Juan, and rank each one according to the model. Consider modifications you could make to your -2, -1, and +1 questions, so they would be +2 questions.

The form and the frequency of questions seem to present the greatest challenges for preservice and inservice professionals. Sometimes, they get stuck in question traps from which they can't find an escape. One question seems to beget another, and they quickly run out of ideas for what to ask next. Unfortunately, this type of exchange is not productive, and student clients become frustrated or dependent. If this type of interaction continues, the relationship may be damaged.

One strategy for escaping a question trap is to say something like, "That wasn't how I wanted to phrase that. Let me try again."

Tour Guide Note: Using the same vignette from above, the following example illustrates an ineffective and unhelpful exchange between the school counselor (SC) and Juan. It may also provide comic relief 😊.

Juan: What's the use? I am tired of school. I am tired of working this hard. Why should I beat my head against the wall so I can go to college, just so I can go on to med school? I would just as soon get my G.E.D. and get a job doing something. If I go to med school it will be years before I can start earning a decent living.

SC: Where do you want to go?

Juan: Well, I would like to get started in the university here in town; the community college is a possibility. I've also thought about going to a private college in Kansas.

SC: Is that the college in Hastings?

Juan: Yes.

SC: Did you get all the applications?

Juan: No.

SC: Why?

Juan: I don't know, I wasn't sure how to start.

SC: How about financial aid? Can your folks get that information in on time so you'll be eligible?

Juan: If I could get them some information on how to do that, I'm sure they can.

SC: Why are you thinking about going to the community college?

Juan: I'm really not. I wanted to learn about my options, and how much everything will cost. I also thought I should apply to more than one place.

SC: Why? Do you think you won't get accepted?

Juan: I really don't know.

Tour Guide Note: The school counselor (SC) in the following example combines reflection and questions to help Juan explore his frustration and discouragement. With this type of interaction, the SC is able to obtain a clearer understanding of Juan's difficulties.

Juan: What's the use? I am tired of school. I am tired of working this hard. Why should I beat my head against the wall so I can go to college, just so I can go on to med school? I would just as soon get my G.E.D. and get a job doing something. If I go to med school it will be years before I can start earning a decent living.

SC: You're exhausted from studying so hard, and then when you consider how many years you will have to work this hard to be an M.D., you become discouraged and overwhelmed.

Juan: It doesn't even take that long to get discouraged. All I have to do is walk into the calculus room and think about all the assignments that I have due. When that happens I just want to walk out the door and quit.

SC: Calculus just seems like this incredible barrier right now. What has happened in calculus that has become so difficult for you?

Juan: Well, I think I had a fairly good handle on it last semester. I did okay in January too, and then I got sick and missed a whole week of school. I missed out on several things, and nothing has made sense since then.

SC: You felt fairly comfortable with calculus all through the first semester, but getting sick in January really set you back.

Juan: I got behind in everything else then too. When I came back to school I really didn't feel good. I was behind in everything, and then didn't have the energy I usually have. Things went south pretty fast.

SC: And how is your health now?

Juan: I am starting to feel pretty good again. I haven't started working out like I used to, but hope to get back on track with that during spring break. I had mono, and didn't really believe the physicians when they said it would take a long time to get my strength back. I have never missed much school, and whenever I've been sick, it's just been for a few days.

SC: You were awfully sick, and you're still surprised that it has taken so long to really feel good again—even though the physicians told you it would take a long time.

Juan: That's for sure. And it has really messed me up. My grades have dropped in several classes.

SC: It sounds like doing well in school is important to you.

- Juan:** Well, it always has been. I really want to go to college and I think I want to go to med school. My parents don't have that kind of money so I'm going to have to get some scholarships. If I don't get my grades back up, I won't be able to do that.
- SC:** So, as you see it now, a low grade in calculus would become a barrier to getting scholarships so you can go to college.
- Juan:** It's more than that. I want to go to the U, and their admission requirements are really high. Tuition at the U is high too. I really need to figure out a way to pull out of this.
- SC:** Doing well in school is important to you for several reasons. You want to be a physician, and to prepare for med school you want to go to the University of Alabama. Your grades have been good, so you are in line for a scholarship. You're discouraged because you've never been as sick as you were this semester, and that really set you back in calculus. Even though you're discouraged and worried about your grades, you're still holding onto your dream.
- Juan:** That sums the mess up. Is there anything I can do to turn this around?
- SC:** What are some of the things you have tried?

Tour Guide Note: Notice that the SC let Juan dictate when they would move from the situation to an implied goal. That segue suggests that the SC thought Juan was ready to begin the problem solving process.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, some questions are asked to acquire important information. Professional helpers are skillful in discerning information they need to be helpful. They overcome their own curiosity, and they ask questions judiciously to avoid an interrogative interaction. They also recognize when using a question to facilitate clarification is appropriate. If too many questions are used, students tend to offer less information and wait for the helper's next question. This pattern is especially true of younger children who are used to responding to adults' requests.

PITFALLS TO AVOID

We have reviewed basic skills of counseling that are particularly helpful when endeavoring to develop solid working relationships with individuals of all ages. In this section, we call attention to communication roadblocks based on an original list of barriers identified by Thomas Gordon (1970, 1974). Even though Gordon's list of barriers was originally published over 40 years ago, contemporary authors continue to build on his work as we have.

We learn some strategies.
We unlearn or avoid others!

Table 2.1 Communication Roadblocks (adapted from Gordon's twelve roadblocks to communication, Gordon, 1970, 1974)

Roadblock	Examples
Bossing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go back to your classroom and tell your teacher what you have done. • Get out of that line immediately and finish your spelling.
Threatening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will take away your recess for the rest of the year if we have one more disruption.
Preaching and lecturing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are much too nice of a child to act like that. Your parents would be so disappointed if I told them about this. • If I've told you once, I've told you 100 times that you must start thinking about your future right now.
Giving advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I were you, I would just talk with the other girls in your class and tell them how you feel. • You just need to ignore that boy and get on with your life. • You should just lower your expectations and go to the community college here in town.
Criticizing and judging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You are so lazy! How could you possibly get a good grade when you didn't even try? • Your appearance is disrespectful and disgusting. You should be ashamed of yourself. I am.
Interrogating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you do it this way? • Where did you leave your homework and backpack?
Distracting or changing the subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say, have you heard about that new movie downtown? • Let's play a game, so you can forget about your worries.
Making sarcastic comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you think it would turn out?! • That was stupid. • You run like a girl!
Mind reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know. You are mad at me because I came in late. • You think I'm supposed to help you all the time because I'm smarter.
Psychologizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know what your problem is. You are still having problems adjusting to your new home. • You are so defensive.
One upping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You think you have problems. Mine are much worse than yours.
Minimizing and placating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 3 years, you will have forgotten all about this. • You're stewing and fretting over something as ridiculous as that? • You'll be okay in just a few days. You are such a strong person that you will be able to get over this easily.
Assigning motives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You hid from me on the playground because you did not want to be seen talking to me. • You did that to get even with me. • You are just trying to irritate me!

Although we typically avoid focusing on mistakes our preservice school counselors and school psychologists have made, we have found that it is helpful to identify common errors that we have observed and, for the record, errors that we made when we were graduate students! The following paragraphs include examples of pitfalls to avoid.

These pitfalls are not unique to the counseling relationship. They interfere with all personal as well as professional communication.

How Do You Feel About That?

This common mistake may have originated in pop psychology and television sitcoms. Although professionals often focus on feelings with their reflections, asking students to identify their feelings rarely has value. The response is often cognition, and it seldom leads to productive work. Instead, we demonstrate our keen attention and understanding by reflecting *our* understanding of the student client's thoughts and feelings. If you are really unsure of what the feeling is behind a student's statement, try a general exploratory statement to help you understand the student's situation better—for example, "Boy! It sounds like you have so many different feelings going on inside of you right now. Help me understand what it's like for you to have your dad in jail."

Turning Good Reflections Into Questions

It is quite common for preservice professionals to communicate good reflections; however, they are unsure of themselves. Thus, they say something like, "You are angry at him, aren't you?" or "You are worried about your grades. Am I right?" Although these are not fatal errors, they may result in a one word response and interrupt the dialogue.

Focusing on a Third Party

Sometimes, it is important to inquire about our students' understanding of others' perceptions. Usually, however, focusing on someone external to the counseling relationship is less productive. Sometimes, adolescents attempt to deflect attention from themselves by focusing on friends and parents rather than on their own experiences and feelings. Examples of focusing on a third party include such questions as, "How does your father feel about you going to the university?" or "What was he trying to accomplish?" Sometimes, helpers and student clients inadvertently collude in focusing on others because the work is less intense when the focus is on someone outside the counseling room.

Interchanging Think and Feel

Although *think* and *feel* are not synonyms, they are often substituted for one another during informal conversations and even formal writing. For example, a helper might say, “You feel that he was wrong when he accused you.” The helper likely believes this response reflected feelings; actually, no feelings are involved in this statement.

We encourage you to develop a habit of using the terms accurately. Correct use of both terms helps you reflect more precisely and more poignantly. Additionally, you will be laying groundwork for when you endeavor to help student clients discern their thoughts from their feelings, particularly as you work from cognitive-behavioral and problem solving approaches.

A clue for identifying when reference is being made to a cognition rather than an emotion is the use of the word *that* (e.g., “you feel that she should not be the captain”). Correct phrasing would be, “You think he was wrong to choose her for captain.” Correct use of these verbs averts professionals’ confusion when reflecting, and it helps student clients clarify their experiences.

Understating or Overstating the Intensity

Reflecting student clients’ experiences with accurate intensity is often challenging. For example, professional helpers might say, “You are feeling just a little irritated,” when the student client is furious. At other times, the reflections are so tentative that their value is diminished, as illustrated with “I’m not sure about this, but it sounds like you may be feeling a little bit anxious because of the test you have scheduled.” These statements reduce the effectiveness of professionals’ input. An inadvertent implication might be that the helper doesn’t think the presenting problem is important.

Vaguely Focused Reflections

Preservice professionals often have trouble using precise and personalized language. For example, people often say, “How’s it going today?” Of course, they mean, “How are you today?” or “How’s your day been?” Sometimes, professionals say, “There’s some anger there.” Of course, anger is not freely floating in the atmosphere somewhere; the student is experiencing anger. As you reflect, strive for crisp, targeted language.

Consider use of formal versus informal language. Informality can reduce your effectiveness. On the other hand, informality is more engaging for some students.

Advice Couched as a Question

Preservice professionals sometimes have difficulty letting go of the notion that much of our work is giving advice or telling children, youth, parents, or teachers what to do. That approach rarely works. If it were effective, children would be champions in multiple arenas because they get so much advice from so many sources.

Covert advice is not effective either, and it's dishonest. For example, "Have you asked him to help you with the problem?" probably means, "I think you should ask him to help you with the problem." Similarly, "Why don't you stand up to your friends?" is not a good question, and it may not be good advice.

Asking Closed Questions and Creating Question Traps

Particularly with children and youth, closed questions yield minimal answers. Without an adequate response, professionals typically ask another closed question and find themselves in a question trap. Open-ended questions are more beneficial than closed questions; however, they can also result in a question trap if too many are asked or they are not properly balanced with reflections.

BEFORE YOU CONDUCT YOUR FIRST SESSION OR A SESSION IN AN UNFAMILIAR SITUATION

Undoubtedly, you will be nervous before you see your first student client for individual counseling or when you facilitate your first counseling group. We are sometimes anxious and question our abilities when we initiate a counseling relationship, and we've done this work for many years! Even Carl Whitaker, a well-known family therapist, often said he was anxious before seeing clients, particularly for the first time. In other words, a certain level of anxiety is normal.

It may be helpful to remind yourself of the most important task of the first session: facilitating a relationship. The person with whom you are working will probably not notice if your responses are awkward and if you ask closed questions. That individual will likely be anxious as well and may be afraid of being judged or criticized. During the first few minutes, we lay the foundation for how the relationship will develop. Thus, it is important to communicate acceptance, respect, warmth, and your understanding of his or her experience. It is also important to help persons in distress regain a sense of hope.

Typically, professional development proceeds from reading and hearing about counseling skills, practicing in groups, and practicing in role plays to conducting an actual session under supervision. Anxiety, self-doubt, and self-consciousness are common during early sessions. This kind of anxiety, as described by two of our pre-service school counselors at the end of their first practicum, is actually normal.

Testimonial of Sheila Phelps: I went into practicum with very little anxiety. I thought I knew what to expect and felt confident that I would make it through. That all changed after the first week. Even though I had been involved in several role plays in other classes, read the book, and had my list of feeling words memorized, the thought that this was no longer a role play, but a real experience with a real client had me tied up in knots. The first time I sat across

from my client felt like an eternity. I questioned my abilities and felt myself being overly critical with how I presented myself to my client. Actually, finishing out my professional career as a classroom science teacher didn't look that bad after all. I asked myself on several occasions at the beginning of the practicum journey, "What do you think you are doing? Who do you think you are? What do you know about counseling?"

It took a couple of weeks to work through my apprehension, self-doubts, and internal struggle of whether or not I would be effective as a counselor. Through the gentle guidance of my supervisor, and the support of the other five members of our practicum team, I realized that I was not alone in this. I had six other people behind the mirror cheering me on, offering valuable feedback, and helping me develop both professionally and personally. Observing my other team members and learning from their experience as well as my own was tremendous. Toward the end of practicum I was able to start formulating answers to those self-doubt questions I had at the beginning. My feelings of apprehension and self-doubts melted as I gained confidence in my abilities as a counselor.

Practicum is a process and a journey. I could not imagine a richer experience.

Testimonial of Sherri Schmidke: Practicum was one of the greatest and maybe the greatest experiences I have had in this program (and that says a lot). Going in to prac I was extremely nervous about how I was going to say the wrong thing and mess someone up, or that the clients would see me as an inexperienced student that didn't have the slightest clue of what I was doing. The mirror was the greatest cause of my anxiety, mostly because it was an unknown.

In eight weeks I gained confidence and an enjoyment for counseling far beyond my wildest dreams. My supervisor told me she didn't know who changed more: the client or myself. Practicum is a growth experience without the growing pains. I enjoyed every minute of it, and I was sad to see the end come. (Which was huge for me because I didn't even want to do practicum because of the time commitment!) After my first session with my first client I was pumped. I looked forward to my session every week. I don't know where I learned more, watching my peers counsel or being in the room myself. Both were truly learning experiences in very different ways. I will never forget my time in practicum, and I am very grateful for the experience it was—both for my future career and for myself personally.

USING SKILLS IN COMBINATION

Nonverbally attending, tracking, paraphrasing, reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, and skillfully asking questions are not isolated skills. As professionals learn to use all of these techniques, the art of our work becomes more obvious. Rarely, though, does that artistry appear without practice. Thus, we encourage you to practice during conversations with friends and while observing other people. For example, practice reflecting while you watch television. You might say, "She looks angry" or "He is happy because the girl said she would help him with the homework." You might reflect as you go through checkout lines in stores, but be careful! You may start a conversation that will take longer than you expected! Remember that becoming a skillful school-based professional takes time.



Reflection Rx:

For each of these reflections, indicate what is problematic and compose an improved response.

You feel that your mom was being incredibly unfair.

Problem: _____

Improvement: _____

I'm wondering what your mom was feeling when your brother stormed out of the room.

Problem: _____

Improvement: _____

You're feeling sad and confused that you weren't invited to the party. Is that right?

Problem: _____

Improvement: _____

You're maybe feeling a little hurt that your boyfriend invited someone else to the dance.

Problem: _____

Improvement: _____

Boy, there's just a lotta feelings goin' on there.

Problem: _____

Improvement: _____



Question Rx

For each of these questions, indicate what is problematic and compose an improved one.

Why did you leave your homework at Don's house?

Problem: _____

Improvement: _____

How do you feel about what she said to you?

Problem: _____

Improvement: _____

Were you hoping to get even, or were you trying to explain your situation?

Problem: _____

Improvement: _____

You're angry about that, aren't you?

Problem: _____

Improvement: _____

Have you thought about talking with your parents about how you feel?

Problem: _____

Improvement: _____

Think and Feel Rx

For each of the following, indicate whether or not the words *think* and *feel* are used correctly.



1. I feel like shouting when I get out of class on Friday.
2. I feel that no one really understands my problems.
3. I am thinking about going to the dentist right now, and I feel scared about it.
4. I feel terrified whenever I am around snakes.
5. I feel like I'm 10 feet tall when someone tells me I'm smart.
6. I feel really angry because I trusted my friend, and she told someone what I had asked her to keep secret.
7. I feel like I haven't got a friend in the world.
8. I just crashed my car, and I feel that wasn't fair. After all, I just got it paid for last month.
9. I feel happy about buying some new clothes on Saturday. At the same time, I feel worried about my folks' reaction when they get the bill.
10. I feel so misunderstood.

Reflecting Content and Affect

Write a reflection of both content and affect for each of these comments:

Isabella, a fourth grade student: I couldn't go to baseball practice because I had to finish my math assignment, and then, I had to watch my baby sister while Dad ran some errands. Now, the coach won't let me play on the team this weekend. I guess it doesn't matter that much really.



Reflection:

English teacher: I don't know what else I can do. The kids haven't learned their basic equations and the state tests are next week. I don't know what will happen if my kids don't meet bench marks.

Reflection:

Parent of seventh grade girl: I'm so angry at the girls in Annie's class. They are so mean to her. They call her names. They leave her out of their activities. They make fun of her clothes. They are absolutely cruel!

Reflection:

Tenth grade boy: I just found out I didn't make the cheerleading squad. I knew I could do the stunts if I had time, and I really wanted to be a varsity cheerleader. I didn't even care when other guys made fun of me. I wanted to be on the squad.

Reflection:

Senior: What's the use? No matter how hard I try, I'll never get my SAT scores high enough to get a scholarship, and I know my parents won't pay for college. I may as well go out and find a job.

Reflection:

Composing Facilitative Inquiry: +2 Questions

Compose two +2 facilitative inquiries that would improve each of the following questions:



Professional helper: Why did you ask me to see you today?

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Professional helper: Can I help you?

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Professional helper: Will you promise me that you'll come to school tomorrow?

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Professional helper: Where do you want to go to college?

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Professional helper: What do you want to do after you graduate from our school?

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Professional helper: How bad are your grades?

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Professional helper: What did you do in the lunch room before the monitor sent you to see me?

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Professional helper: What were you and your friends doing on the playground before you began to cry?

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:



Composing Facilitative Inquiry: +3 Questions

Questions become +3 when they are well timed and when they engage student clients in the process of setting goals. Assume you are working with Cassie (the student client featured in *Counseling Children and Adolescents in Schools*) and that you are confident she is ready to establish direction for her work with you. Combine your style and your knowledge of effective questions to compose three questions you might ask:

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Inquiry 3:

Composing Facilitative Inquiry: +4 Questions

Questions qualify for +4 when they build on the previous work and support goal attainment. These queries help students identify and prepare for roadblocks, possible setbacks, and challenges that might develop. Again, working with Cassie, compose two +4 questions to follow her responses to your +3 questions previously identified.



Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Composition of Advanced Facilitative Inquiry

In response to Cassie's comments that follow, compose at least two facilitative inquiries that you believe would be helpful, and one question that would *not* be helpful.

Cassie: I don't know. I'm struggling with so many questions about myself right now. Maybe there's something wrong with me. Worse yet, maybe I'm a bad kid.



Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Inappropriate/Nonfacilitative question:

Cassie: What's the use? Even if I go to college, I probably won't get a job. I know lots of our school's alums who graduated from college, and they're still waiting tables. They can make more money waiting tables than they could if they used their degree.

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Inappropriate/Nonfacilitative question:

Cassie: What would you do if you were me? Have you ever wondered if you were queer?

Question from the Tour Guides: Does a question seem appropriate to you here? How would you combine a question with a solid reflection?

Inquiry 1:

Inquiry 2:

Inappropriate/Nonfacilitative question:

Imagine that you are sitting with Cassie. What is going on with you right now? What reactions and words came to your mind?



Questions from the Tour Guides: What thoughts and feelings might underlie the questions Cassie verbally expressed? Would it be more helpful to respond with a reflection, a question, or a reflection and a question?



Compose a response that you believe would be most helpful for Cassie.

Compose a second response that you believe would be helpful for Cassie.



1. Of all the skills presented in this tour, which are the hardest for you?

2. What personal attributes will help you master basic helping skills?

3. What can you do to alleviate your anxiety when working with student clients?

Resources That Might Be Helpful for the Journey:

Cowles, J. (1997). Lessons from “The Little Prince”: Therapeutic relationships with children. *Professional School Counseling, 1*, 57–60.

Tour Guide Note: Cowles captured the essence of our work with children in this delightful article.

Faber, A., & Mazlish, E. (1992). *How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk*. New York: Avon.

Tour Guide Note: Although this text is nearly 20 years old, we still recommend it for school counselors, school psychologists, and parents.

Van Velsor, P. (2004). Revisiting basic counseling skills with children. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 82*, 313–318.