



## Confidentiality in Family Counselling: Challenges and Efforts to Deal with Adolescent Problems

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### ABSTRACT

Confidentiality is an important aspect of the counselling process, particularly in family counselling, where counsellors must balance the needs and rights of individual family members with the family as a whole. This article explores the challenges and efforts in maintaining confidentiality in family counselling for adolescent problems. This research was conducted using a systematic literature review method. The researcher begins by outlining the legal and ethical considerations related to confidentiality and its exceptions, then discusses the challenges faced by family counsellors when confronted with adolescents and their families. The research also explores the different strategies counsellors use to maintain confidentiality while still addressing the needs of the family as a whole, including obtaining consent, setting clear boundaries, and building rapport with the adolescent and family. The article also discusses the importance of ongoing communication and cooperation with other professionals involved in the adolescent's care, such as school counsellors to authorities. Overall, this article highlights the complex nature of confidentiality in family counselling, especially when working with adolescents, and emphasises the importance of thoughtful and collaborative efforts to maintain privacy and still provide the best outcomes for the counsellor.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Family counselling is an important counselling approach used to address various challenges experienced by families, including those affecting adolescents. Confidentiality is a key factor in counselling that allows counsellors to feel safe and open up about their concerns. However, in practice confidentiality can also pose challenges, particularly when working with adolescent counsellors. Confidentiality is rooted in the right to privacy of the counselee which is at the core of effective counselling. The ethical obligation of counsellors is to protect the personal information of the counselee (Wheeler and Bertram, 2019). In family counselling, counsellors are sometimes faced with a choice of whether or not to share confidential information with the family. An individual undergoing family counselling also has the right to confidentiality (Mccurdy and Murray, 2003). However, in some situations, the counselling process also needs to involve other family members. It is important for a counsellor to develop the skill of identifying the counselee based on their problems as well as considering the consequences of the counselling process (Trijsburg, 1994).

Confidentiality in family counselling represents a unique condition and requires special skills to resolve. Kleist and Bitter (2009), state that when counsellors work with many people in one room, confidentiality issues become more complex and very difficult to implement in family counselling practice. Some of these ethical issues involve identifying who the counsellor is, giving consent, and dealing with relational issues in an individual context. The American Association for Marriage and Family Counselling (2001), states that counselling in this setting is faced with unique confidentiality issues as there may be more than one counsellor involved and the counsellor needs to respect and maintain the confidentiality of each individual counsellor. The counsellor needs to provide an introduction that the information provided by family members during individual counselling is confidential. So that the information cannot be shared with other family members without the permission of the individual concerned.

Some possibilities that can occur and violate ethics are when counsellors do not keep family secrets, collude with some family members against others, or contribute to dysfunctional family system dynamics. If the counselee's refusal to share information interferes with the agreed counselling goals, the counsellor may stop the counselling process and refer the counselee to another counsellor (International Association of Marriage and Family Counsellors, 2005). After discussing the limits of confidentiality, the counsellor seeks agreement among all parties who play a role and have the right to express consent. This agreement relates to each individual's right to confidentiality as well as the need to maintain known confidential information (American Counselling Association, 2005).

Counsellors need to consider the consequences for the adolescent if confidential personal information is shared with parents or other family members. If the confidential information is handed over to the family, will the problem be resolved? Does the counselee still want to continue counselling or does it create new problems that affect the willingness of the counselee to engage in the counselling process? The counsellor's skills play an important role in this regard. Most studies have ignored confidentiality issues related to adolescent problems in the context of family counselling. The purpose of this article is to explore the challenges and efforts involved in maintaining confidentiality in family counselling with adolescents and to examine efforts that can help counsellors overcome these challenges.

## 2. METHODS

This research was made using the systematic literature review (SLR) method. Systematic literature review is needed to identify, measure and interpret data in a study to answer loaded questions that have been previously applied (Kitchenham and Charters in Triandini et al., 2019). Literature review is an important feature of academic research. New knowledge findings must build and develop based on previous findings (Xiao and Watson, 2019). By reviewing relevant literature, researchers can gain a broad understanding and identify gaps to explore further. By summarising, analysing and synthesising a group of related literature, researchers can test certain hypotheses or develop new theories. In addition, with this method, researchers can also evaluate the validity and quality of existing findings against criteria to reveal weaknesses, inconsistencies, and cons (Paré et al. 2015). Francis in (Siswanto, 2010) describes six main stages in preparing a research report using the systematic literature review method, namely (1) Determining research questions, (2) Collecting literature related to the topic, (3) Selecting literature that is suitable for the topic, (4) Analysing findings in the appropriate literature, (5) Ensuring the quality of reference sources, and (6) Compiling a research report.

The process of collecting literature related to the topic was carried out through the internet with the type of literature in the form of journals, theses, and dissertations. The main focus at this stage is that the source must be in accordance with the topic raised. In this study, researchers collected literature that raised topics related to confidentiality in family counselling and how to deal with it. The data obtained came from the database <https://scholar.google.com>. The time span of the data obtained was around 1950 to 2023. The selection process is adjusted to the research questions that have been made previously. The researcher will evaluate the content of the literature, whether it is appropriate and contains answers to the research questions that have been made. In this study, 3 out of 10 journal articles were found that fulfilled and were considered to be able to answer the research questions. After selecting, the researcher will analyse the data and classify it before presenting it in the form of a research report. In addition, researchers will also test the validity of quality in literature or sources that are in accordance with the research that will be described in the discussion.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Findings

Based on the results of the literature analysis, there are several studies that explain the challenges and efforts involved in maintaining confidentiality in family counselling with adolescents including:

**Table** The COD and BOD values for the last week of the month (final clarification output).

| No. | Title                         | Author                 | Publication Time    | Result        |  |
|-----|-------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------|--|
| 1.  | <i>Counseling Adolescents</i> | <i>Suicidal Within</i> | Berg. R, Hendricks. | January, 2009 | Conditions that can occur when faced with adolescent counsellors who have suicidal ideation are the dilemma of prevention and confidentiality of |

|   |                                     |  |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Family Systems: Ethical Issues</i>   | B, and Bradley, B                   | suicidal reasons (Berg, 2015). The counsellor should inform the counsellor about the limits of confidentiality. Confidential information may also be shared if a counsellor perceives significant safety concerns for a minor counsellor. In the case of adolescents with suicidal ideation or plans, counsellors need to inform parents or guardians about the chosen suicide plan and method, risk factors in the home (e.g., ropes, sharp objects, drugs), red flags to watch for, how to talk to the child about the situation, and who to contact if a crisis arises (Thompson and Rudolph, 2000).  |
| 2. <i>Confidentiality Issues When Minor Children Disclose Family Secrets in Family Counseling</i>                       | McCurdy and Murray<br>October, 2003 | Counsellors can be caught in a situation where they are asked to maintain confidentiality by a young child or adolescent as a result of an individual counselling session, while at the same time, the parents ask the counsellor to disclose information submitted by their child (McCurdy and Murray, 2003). The code of ethics of the International Association of Marriage and Family Counsellors (2002) also provides some guidelines to avoid the confidentiality dilemma, the first of which suggests that counsellors need to use confidential information with care and not explicitly or implicitly promise confidentiality protection. Counsellors should remain aware that the counselee may assume that information disclosed in individual sessions will not be shared in family sessions. In addition, the IAMFC code of ethics (2002) encourages counsellors to draw on advice from other counsellors and professional literature in making decisions about specific confidentiality situations. |
| 3. <i>Family Counseling and Referral With Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Clients: Ethical Considerations</i> | Janson. G.R. July, 2002             | Challenges can be complex when faced with complex stigmatised groups such as LGBT people and their families (Janson, 2002). This study describes one case where a counsellor was confronted with an LGBT adolescent. This counsellor was named Paul with his counselee, Marc. Whenever an adolescent is deemed competent, the counsellor is obliged  |

to respect his autonomy and confidentiality (Swann and Herbert, 1999). Paul is obliged to respect Marc's desire for confidentiality. In the future, Paul should anticipate potential confidentiality conflicts and obtain agreement from all family members on more appropriate confidentiality boundaries and disclosures at the beginning of therapy (IAMFC, 2001). Paul also needs to take care to protect the confidentiality of Marc's records from non-counselling staff and others.

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### **3.2. Discussion**

Based on the findings, it is found that there are several challenges and efforts that counsellors can make when faced with the issue of confidentiality in family counselling with adolescents. Therefore, the discussion can be grouped into three categories, namely confidentiality in family counselling, challenges related to confidentiality in family counselling with adolescents, and efforts to overcome adolescents' problems while maintaining confidentiality in family counselling.

#### **3.2.1 Confidentiality in Family Counselling**

Confidentiality is an important aspect of family counselling, as it enables counsellors to trust their counsellors and feel safe to share personal and sensitive information (Berenson, 2012). Confidentiality is a key component of ethical and effective family counselling. It refers to the counsellor's obligation to protect the privacy of the counselee and their personal information (International Association of Marriage and Family Counsellors, 2015). Counsellors are bound by codes of ethics and laws that require them to keep confidential any information that the counsellor shares with them during the counselling process, including discussions regarding family dynamics, mental health issues and personal experiences. Where confidentiality extends to all family members, the counsellor must obtain written consent from each family member before sharing any information with others outside the counselling relationship (Council, 2014).

There are some exceptions to confidentiality in family counselling. Counsellors are required to disclose confidentiality if they suspect the counsellor is in danger of harming themselves or others (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association, 2015). Counsellors may also be required to disclose confidentiality if they become aware of abuse or neglect of a child, elderly person, or vulnerable adult. In these cases, counsellors have a legal and ethical obligation to report their concerns to the appropriate authorities.

#### **3.2.2. Challenges related to Confidentiality in Family Counselling with Adolescents**

Adolescents are individuals who are transitioning between childhood and adulthood (Monks, et al., 2002). Maintaining confidentiality can be a challenge in family counselling, particularly when working with adolescents. One of the challenges is balancing the need for

confidentiality with parental involvement in the counselling process. Adolescents may be reluctant to share information if they feel it will be shared with their parents, while parents may feel that they have a right to know what is discussed in counselling. These secrets are usually of a painful or embarrassing nature, such as abortion due to out-of-wedlock pregnancy, debt and fights. Adolescents who are reluctant to reveal these secrets will certainly cause feelings of suspicion in parents (Suparyanto and Rosad (2015, 2020). Counsellors must be able to balance these competing interests while maintaining confidentiality.

Another challenge associated with confidentiality in family counselling is the concern of harm to the adolescent. For example, if an adolescent discloses information indicating that they are being bullied at school, the counsellor may need to breach confidentiality to ensure that the adolescent receives the necessary support and protection from either their parents or classmates. This can create tension between the counsellor's duty to protect the adolescent and their duty to maintain confidentiality.

Counsellors may also face challenges regarding reporting requirements to the authorities. Courts have held that simply notifying the police is not enough to protect an identifiable victim (Loughran and Bakken, 1984). In some cases, counsellors may be required by law to report certain information to the authorities, such as when an adolescent discloses abuse or violence in the home. Criteria for reporting vary and counsellors need to be aware of the specific laws in their respective countries (Bennett et al., 2006; Welfel, 2010). This can create a dilemmatic conflict between counsellors' obligation to maintain confidentiality and their legal obligation to report.

### **3.2.3. Efforts to Address Adolescent Issues while Maintaining Confidentiality in Family Counselling**

Despite these challenges, there are several measures that counsellors can use to maintain confidentiality while addressing parents' concerns and ensuring the safety of adolescents. One such effort is through informed consent, which involves explaining the limits of confidentiality to the counsellor and parents at the beginning of the counselling process. Informed consent is a collaborative process that helps build and enhance the therapeutic relationship (Snyder and Barnett, 2006). Before starting family counselling, the counsellor should obtain consent from all family members, outlining the limits of confidentiality and the circumstances in which they may need to breach confidentiality. The counsellor should provide information to the counselee in a clear manner and ensure that they understand it. Informed consent should be provided in culturally simple language and should be understandable to the counsellor, including minors (children and adolescents) and individuals with impaired cognitive function (Goodwin, 2009a). This can help set clear expectations and boundaries, while providing opportunities for the counsellor and parents to ask questions and provide input. School counsellors need to approach parents as partners in the counselling process (Glossoff and Pate, 2002).

In addition, an effort that can be made by the counsellor is to create a safe space for the counselee. Counsellors can create a safe and non-judgemental environment for adolescents to share their thoughts and feelings freely. Secure the consent of the counsellor and discuss with them the potential, risks, and benefits of the many relationships involved in counselling (Herlihy and Corey, 2006b). Offering individual sessions to adolescents can provide a safe space for them to discuss their concerns with the counsellor while maintaining confidentiality.

Another effort that can be made is clear communication with the counsellor and parents. Encouraging open communication among family members and creating a culture of trust can help foster a supportive and confidential environment for family counselling. The [American Group Psychotherapy Association \(AGPA, 2002\)](#) states that counselling involving groups has rules regarding the boundaries of privileged communication that apply and informs group members about them. Counsellors should explain their policies and procedures for maintaining confidentiality, including circumstances where confidentiality may need to be breached. This can help build trust and reduce misunderstandings, while also helping to ensure that the counsellor and parents understand the importance of confidentiality. Counsellors can work with families to set clear boundaries around privacy and confidentiality, such as identifying what information will be shared and with whom. Keep the lines of communication open with the counsellor, allowing them to express whatever they feel to the counsellor ([Chauvin and Remley, 1996](#)).

Then lastly, counsellors should have a thorough understanding of the reporting requirements to the authorities. In order to protect themselves and fulfil such responsibilities, it is important for counsellors to be familiar with all applicable ethical and legal guidelines relating to trust, including state privilege laws as well as child and elder abuse reporting requirements ([Trijsburg, 1994](#)). This includes knowing what kinds of situations require reporting, how to make a report, and the consequences that may impact him or her from a breach of confidentiality.

#### **4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

Confidentiality is an important aspect of family counselling, especially when it comes to adolescents and their problems. However, maintaining confidentiality can be challenging in the context of family counselling due to the involvement of many individuals in the counselling process. Some of the challenges that counsellors often face are, firstly, the many parties involved. When working with families, there will be many family members involved in the therapeutic process, making it difficult to maintain confidentiality. The second is related to legal obligations. Counsellors have a legal obligation to report cases of abuse or violence experienced by adolescents which may be difficult to handle when working with families. Then the last is the issue of trust. Adolescents may be reluctant to share sensitive information with their families, for fear of consequences or retaliation from their parents. Meanwhile, efforts can be made to deal with these challenges by emphasising informed consent, creating a safe situation for the counsellor, providing space for discussion, communicating openly, and emphasising the limits of confidentiality. Maintaining confidentiality in family counselling for adolescent issues requires clear communication, building trust, and a thorough understanding of legal obligations and ethical considerations. Counsellors need to continuously develop their knowledge and skills related to confidentiality in family counselling, especially when faced with adolescent problems.

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