

Management of incident during counselling session
17HDC02191, 26 June 2019

Counsellor ~ Restraint ~ De-escalation ~ Empathy ~ Right 4(1)

An eight-year-old boy attended his second counselling session, accompanied by his mother. The counsellor had been providing counselling services to the public for many years. She did not have any formal qualifications in counselling, and indicated that her training for counselling children was having children of her own. She did not hold membership or registration with a counselling association.

At the second counselling session, an incident occurred between the counsellor and the boy, which resulted in the New Zealand Police being called. Differing versions of events were provided by each party about what occurred during the session. However, the following was accepted:

- a) The boy stated that he wanted to stab his mother.
- b) The counsellor enquired as to what the boy was going to use to stab his mother. The counsellor made a comment about him using some nearby scissors.
- c) The counsellor picked up the scissors.
- d) The boy reached for the scissors either just before, or just after, the counsellor picked them up.
- e) The counsellor restrained the boy. The restraint resulted in the boy being pushed into a chair.
- f) While restraining the boy, the counsellor asked him, "Do you feel powerless ... because if you do this is how your mother feels and your brother must have when you [held] a knife to his throat." (The counsellor told HDC that she was attempting to change his thinking by introducing the concept of empathy.)
- g) The counsellor's husband entered the room and took over restraint of the boy.

Findings

It was considered that the counsellor failed to de-escalate the situation when the boy threatened to stab his mother; instead, she incited and aggravated him, which led to the boy reaching for the scissors and subsequently needing to be restrained. In addition, the method used to attempt to introduce the concept of empathy was highly inappropriate and ineffective. Accordingly, it was found that the counsellor breached Right 4(1).

Recommendations

It was recommended that the counsellor provide a written letter of apology. It was also recommended that should the counsellor return to practice, she undertake prior training on best practice techniques in de-escalation and the development of empathy.