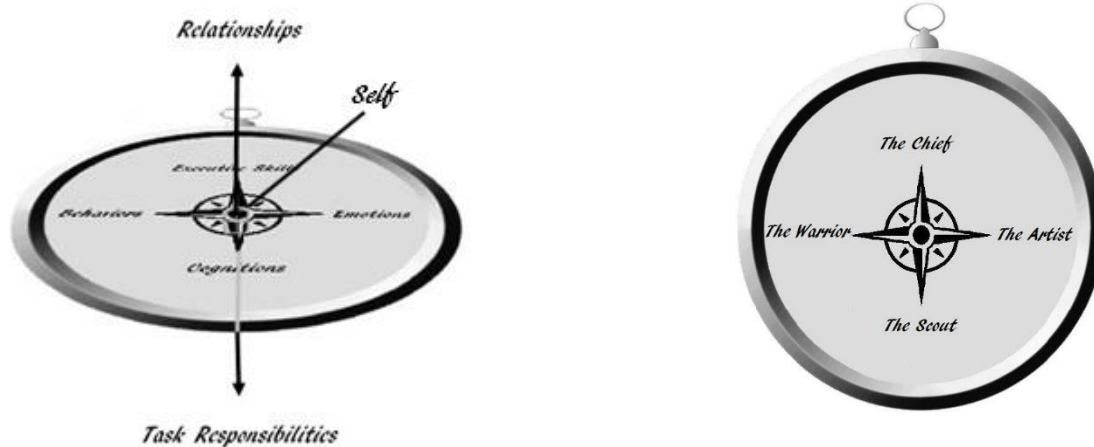


Residential Counselor 101 part 3: Co-Regulation & Empathic Listening Key Concepts



Posture: The parts of the brain that control the physical body (the inner Warrior) and the parts of the brain that operate in terms of emotions (the inner Artist) are tightly linked in the brain. Changes in one automatically trigger changes in the other. So, getting kids to become more aware of their posture, and to habitually adopt good posture, supports being in a positive emotionally state-of-mind. The art is being able to frequently help kids improve their posture without it becoming obnoxious.

Co-Regulation: When you synchronize your nervous system and a client's nervous system. This is most easily done through high energy activities such as playing an active game together; however, it can also happen in quieter moments such as watching something engaging together. When kids co-regulate with a relatively organized adult, they are exercising the same parts of their brain that are involved in self-regulating. If they get skilled enough at self-regulation, they still may require treatment, but would no longer need to receive that treatment in an institutional setting.

Empathic Listening: The goals of Empathic Listening are two-fold. The first is to create a co-regulating experience for the client. The second is to leave the client feeling like their feelings are understood by you. That's the heart of empathy – being able to feel what another person is feelings.

There's seven steps to Empathic Listening:

1. *Mirroring* – match the client's general body language and speech (speed and tonality). Slightly lead the client toward lower and slower physiology and speech.
2. *Intense listening* – use body language, gestures, and small verbal cues to convey that you are intensely listening. One “trick” you can use to help yourself slip into conveying intense listening is to speak and carry yourself as if you were trying to memorize what the client is saying.
3. *Ask clarifying questions in a non-judgmental fashion* – convey that your interest is in understanding the client. Do not just repeat what the kid has said; rephrase the highlights or key points, taking care to not distort the meaning.

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- a. Can I just clarify? You're saying that ...
 - b. Am I understanding you correctly; you're saying...
 - c. Let me make sure I've got this right; you're saying ...
 - d. A lot of times people use the same word a little differently. What do you mean by...
4. *Focusing on emotions* – ask clarifying questions to inspire the client to share the emotional content of what they're saying. Take care to not tell kids how they are feeling. Often times, adopting an air of curious confusion can be helpful for getting kids to elaborate on their emotions. Adopting a non-judgmental tone is again crucial. Remember, feelings don't have to be logical, they just are. You're trying to get the client to talk about their feelings.
- a. When you said that made you “angry”... what do you mean by that? Is that something you feel in your body?
 - b. When you say you're “upset”... I'm not sure I really know quite what you mean? Help me understand better....
 - c. When you say “it's unfair,” I could kind of guess at what exactly you mean, but I don't really want to guess. Could you explain that?
5. *Avoid problem-solving* – it can be incredibly tempting to steer the conversation into problem-solving. Don't do that. That shifts the kid from speaking from an emotional place to using the more analytical parts of the brain. That's a key point of Processing, which is a separate tool, from Empathic Listening. The goal of Empathic Listening is to create a sense of connection and a therapeutic alliance. It's much more powerful, and in most situations more therapeutic, to simply leave the client with a feeling of being understood, and sitting together with the feelings, than thinking that your role is to help them solve some problems.
6. *Avoid the “empathizing equals agreeing with” trap* – sometimes an Empathic Listening session can include a kid complaining about other adults. It is wise to be explicit that while you think you understand what they're saying, that doesn't necessarily mean that you agree with their characterizations of others. Done skillfully, if you've established a rapport, this distinction will be accepted by kids without breaking the rapport you've established.
7. *Plug the client back into program structures* – while it's not necessarily “wrong” to end an Empathic Listening session with Problem Solving, that can take away from the power of the Empathic Listening. Instead, it is often times preferable to end the session by acknowledging that the emotional issues that were shared are not something that can be solved, and then directing / assisting them to engage in whatever scheduled structures are currently the group's focus (e.g. “I really appreciate you sharing some really difficult feelings with me; I hope on some level you also found that helpful. I think the best thing to do now is to switch gears to the schedule, which right now would be bed prep.”).