

**Privacy of Information Shared in Counseling/Therapy for Adolescents:**  
**Your Rights and Child and Family Counseling Center Policies**

**What to expect in counseling:**

The purpose of meeting with a counselor or therapist is to get help with problems in your life that are bothering you or that are keeping you from being successful in important areas of your life. You may be here because you wanted to talk to a counselor or therapist about these problems. Or, you may be here because your parent, guardian, doctor or teacher had concerns about you. When we meet, we will discuss these problems. I will ask questions, listen to you, and suggest a plan for improving these problems. It is important that you feel comfortable talking to me about the issues that are bothering you. Sometimes, these issues will include things you don't want your parents or guardians to know about. For most people, knowing that what they say will be kept private helps them feel more comfortable and have more trust in their counselor or therapist. Privacy, also called confidentiality, is an important and necessary part of good counseling.

*As a general rule, I will keep information you share with me in our sessions confidential, unless I have your permission to share certain information.* There are, however, important exceptions to this rule that are important for you to understand before you share personal information with me in a therapy session. In some situations, I am required by law or by the guidelines of my profession to disclose information *whether or not I have your permission.* I have listed some of these situations below.

**Confidentiality cannot be maintained when:**

- You tell me you plan to cause serious harm or death to yourself, and I believe you have the intent and ability to carry out this threat in the very near future. I must take steps to inform a parent or guardian of what you have told me and how serious I believe this threat to be. I must make sure that you are protected from harming yourself.
- You tell me you plan to cause serious harm or death to someone else who can be identified, and I believe you have the intent and ability to carry out this threat in the very near future. In this situation, I must inform your parent or guardian, and I must also inform the person whom you intend to harm. I may also need to contact the police.
- You are doing things that could cause serious harm to you or someone else, even if you do not *intend* to harm yourself or another person. In these situations, I will need to use my professional judgment to decide whether I will need to inform your parent or guardian.
- You tell me that you are being abused—physically, sexually, or emotionally—or that you have been abused in the past. In this situation, I am required by law to report the abuse to the Virginia Department of Social Services.
- You are involved in a court case and a request is made about your counseling or therapy. If this happens, I will not disclose any information without your written permission *unless* the court requires me to. I will do all I can within the law to protect your confidentiality, and if I am required to disclose information to the court, I will let you know that this is happening. This is very rare and usually only occurs if you are committing serious crimes. It can also

sometimes happen in divorce situations in which your parents disagree about custody or other matters relating to your care. If you are unsure about what things to tell me because of a court case or a potential court case in the future, be sure to ask me.

### **Communicating with your parent(s) or guardian(s):**

Except for situations such as those mentioned above, I will not tell your parent or guardian specific things that you share with me in our private therapy sessions. This includes activities and behavior that your parent/guardian would not approve of or would be upset by—but that do not put you at risk of serious *and* immediate harm. However, if your risk-taking behavior becomes more serious, then I will need to use my professional judgment to decide whether you are in serious and immediate danger of being harmed. If I feel that you are in such danger, I will communicate this information to your parent or guardian. I would prefer that you be the one to share this information (with my help), but will give you the choice of who will share the information.

**Example:** If you tell me that you have tried alcohol at a few parties, I would keep this information confidential. If you tell me that you are drinking and driving or that you are a passenger in a car with a driver who is drunk, I would not keep this information confidential from your parent/guardian, as you are placing yourself in danger. If you tell me, or I believe based on things you've told me, that you are addicted to alcohol (or drugs), I would not keep this information confidential. They would need to know so that we could decide together the best way to handle this situation.

**Example:** If you tell me that you are having protected sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend, I would keep this information confidential. If you tell me, that on several occasions, that you have engaged in unprotected sex with people you do not know or in unsafe situations, I will not keep this information confidential. The risks are too great in this situation.

You can always ask me about the types of information I would need to share. You can ask in the form of “hypothetical situations.” In other words, “If someone told you that they were doing \_\_\_\_\_, would you tell their parents?” This way, I can give you some guidance while you are deciding what to share with me.

Even if I have agreed to keep information confidential—to not tell your parent or guardian—I may believe that it is important for them to know what is going on in your life. Examples might include school or family problems. In these situations, I will encourage you to tell your parent/guardian and will help you find the best way to tell them. They can't help if they don't know what the problem is! Also, if I meet with your parents separately, I may sometimes describe problems in general terms, without using specifics, in order to help them know how to be more helpful to you.

You should also know that, by law, your parent/guardian has the right to see any written records I keep about our sessions. It is extremely rare that a parent/guardian would ever ask to look at these records and I would discourage them from doing so. If I believe that having them look at your records would be damaging to you or cause you harm, I may decline to share these records. Ask me if you have questions about this.

It would be especially helpful for me if you remind me when you tell me things what is okay to share with your parents and what you do not want me to share. I will ask you first if I am uncertain.

**Communicating with other adults:**

**School:** I will not share any information with your school unless I have your permission and written permission from your parent or guardian. I sometimes ask teachers to complete questionnaires or rating forms on how they see your behavior and progress at school. I will share their observations with you. Sometimes, it is helpful for me to give suggestions to your teacher or counselor at school.

A very unlikely situation may come up in which I don't have your permission but both I and your parent or guardian believe that it is very important for me to be able to share certain information with someone at your school. In this situation, I will use my professional judgment to decide whether to share any information.

**Doctors:** Sometimes, your doctor and I may need to work together; for example, if you take medication in addition to seeing a counselor or therapist. I will get your permission and written permission from your parent/guardian before sharing any information. The only time I will share information without your permission is if you are doing something that puts you at risk for serious and immediate physical or medical harm. An example might be using illegal drugs or other substances that could be harmful when combined with medication that you are taking.

**Probation officers:** If you are on probation, your officer may ask for occasional updates on your progress. Usually, officers ask for a letter stating how often you attend therapy, if you are cooperative, and if you are making progress. They don't need to know everything we talk about. You are welcome to see any letters I send on your behalf. If you have questions about what information I will include, feel free to ask me.

**Finally:**

Don't hesitate to ask me any questions about confidentiality or about counseling in general.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Adolescent Patient Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

*Source: Drafted for The Center for Ethical Practice by Sherry Kraft, Ph.D. (2005)  
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