

ACTO COMPETENCES FOR ONLINE THERAPISTS WHO WORK WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Introduction and Background

These competences are the result of several discussions held by a panel of highly experienced therapists working with CYP online. **We asked our panel what they considered to be the most important considerations in working online with CYP using the ACTO competences as a framework.**

Going forward, there will be blogs that complement these competences so that the experience of the panel can be shared in more depth. **Our intention is to both provide guidance, but also to start a discussion around best practice for working with CYP online.** ACTO CYP will also be hosting regular events in collaboration with Online Events commencing in the Autumn 2022 to facilitate more discussion and consideration of these best practices for working online with CYP.

ACTO considers online therapy with Children and Young People clients to be a distinct aspect of online therapy. They are complementary to the ACTO Competences in recognition of the different requirements and focuses that may be needed working online with CYP clients to ensure best practice.

ACTO recognises and welcomes the guidance offered by other professional bodies for working with CYP online, such as those of the BACP and UKCP:

[Counselling CYP in the time of coronavirus \(bacp.co.uk\)](http://bacp.co.uk)

[Adapting how we work | UKCP \(psychotherapy.org.uk\)](http://psychotherapy.org.uk)

The ACTO Competences for working with Children and Young People Online

To meet the competences for working with CYP clients online, ACTO recommends that:

- Therapists will have a minimum of level 2 ACTO Professional Membership.
- Therapists have specialised CYP online training to complement their professional online training when they become available, given the complexities of working with CYP clients.
- Therapists who work with CYP clients online should already meet the CYP Competences practice from their professional body, such as the BACP [bacp-cyp-competence-framework.pdf](#)

Association for Counselling and Therapy Online

1. Psychological Processes relevant to Online Therapy

ACTO Therapists working online with Children and Young People will be competent to:

- **Evaluate the Developmental Stage** of each CYP client for their suitability for online work and informed consent. This requires an understanding of the online formats in respect to the suitability for the CYP client depending on their developmental stage.
- **Assess the Attachment Style** of the CYP client and consider which online format may be most suitable and how attachment and rejection may be best managed within that format.
- **Weigh up the risks of working in a specific format with the client's well-being** if a particular format has been requested by the client.
- **Manage the disinhibition effect**, recognising how the pace of the material being processed may need to be accommodated to ensure the client's well-being.
- **Able to work with a trauma-sensitive approach** with an understanding of how complex trauma can influence attachment, emotional regulation/dysregulation, disinhibition in the relationship and how to best manage the complexities to ensure safe practice online.
- **Establish supportive structures and resources** around the client where there may be trauma and recognising that the disinhibition effect requires these to be robustly developed to contain traumatic processing.
- **Able for the therapist to evaluate their own competences around issues** presented by the young client, including complex trauma, OCD, eating disorders, racialised trauma, and neurodiversity and seek additional training to ensure best practice or be aware that the CYP may need a forward referral.
- **Assess the appropriateness and extent of collaboration with others** which may include schools where the DSL and pastoral care team may be involved, teachers, charitable organisations, social services, parents, guardians, school, social worker, other agency and GPs.
- **Understand how the communication styles differ in the different formats** and manage the ruptures arising from miscommunication to best elicit repair.
- **Understand the different ways to work with neurodiversity**, how communication may be best developed, and safety and engagement established recognising that specialist training would support best practice with neurodiverse clients.
- **Foster an appreciation of working with cultural differences** and the relevance of any issues that may arise from these differences.
- **Appreciate and acknowledge where cultural, sexual or gender differences** may influence the therapeutic alliance and demonstrate an ability to integrate difference into the practice.

2. Assessment of clients for online therapy

ACTO Therapists working online with Children and Young People will be competent to:

- **Evaluate the Referral so that from the very first communication about the CYP client**, an evaluation of who is referring and their role in the online therapeutic process is clearly established.
- **Appreciate the importance of the assessment stage** in working with CYP online and demonstrate clear and thorough practices to meet the requirements for secure and effective working with CYP different ages and abilities.
- **Assess the developmental stage of the CYP client** and understand the needs for the CYP client to ensure safe and effective practice and suitable choice of online format.
- **Recognise that the assessment process** includes the supportive factors available to establish safe and effective practice in different age ranges and abilities. With younger clients, the role of carers or other professionals in setting up the therapeutic space would need to be evaluated.
- **Establish Informed Consent with an understanding that this goes beyond ticking boxes on a contract.**
The assessment process should provide a means for ensuring the understanding of the child is carefully evaluated to ensure they know what they are agreeing to and that this is beyond a 'tick-box' exercise.
- **Evaluate Gillick Competency and Fraser Guidelines for the extent and limits of confidentiality and assess when and how to seek parental consent. For more see** Gillick competence and Fraser guidelines | NSPCC Learning
- **Apply Gillick Competency and Informed Consent** to the appropriate jurisdiction with an understanding of the international context of the work. If working from a jurisdiction outside that of England and Wales, then establishing the requirements for informed consent in that country, and demonstrate an ability to know where to seek further advice on these issues.
- **Undertake on-going assessment and reviews**, seeing it as embedded in the therapeutic process. Safeguarding protocols can be explained and discussed in the assessment stage so that there is clear agreement about who to contact should the occasion arise.
- **Undertake regular reviews of the work and the online setting with the CYP client** are recommended to ensure necessary changes should circumstances change and that the CYP client continues to understand confidentiality and occasions when this may need to be breached.
- **Demonstrate an appreciation of how the circumstances around the child can change rapidly**, both externally and internally, and so regular and on-going assessment can enable the online therapy delivered to keep pace with these changes and developments.
- **Ensure alignment with the CPS guidance for pre-trial therapy** (specifically point 7 'Specific considerations for children') at Draft guidance on pre-trial therapy | The Crown Prosecution Service (cps.gov.uk) <https://www.cps.gov.uk/publication/draft-guidance-pre-trial-therapy>

Last accessed 06/03/2021

3. Contracting and Boundaries

ACTO Therapists working online with Children and Young People will be competent to:

- **Communicate the Agreement and supporting documentation** in a way that reflects the client's developmental level and would be understood clearly by the CYP client.
- **Agree from the outset who is involved around the therapy and the limits of this involvement.** It is likely that the online therapy will be a collaborative process with a CYP client, particularly with the younger age groups, and who is involved in

that collaboration needs to be agreed from the outset. This will differ depending on the setting, developmental stage of the child and referral.

- **Establish where the online therapy** is to take place and set it up in such a way that confidentiality and privacy needs will be met. There is such a huge potential for accessing the most vulnerable CYP clients online but establishing where the therapy takes place needs careful evaluation and agreement to ensure security and confidentiality. In busy family homes, it is recognised that it can be difficult to maintain confidential boundaries so that other family members do not disrupt the therapy session, but this is where the collaborative aspect is important, so the therapist is working with the family to ensure the secure delivery of the therapy.
- **Manage and agree where artwork and other resources will be stored** securely by the client and/or the therapist. How this will be arranged needs to be decided in the agreement.
- **Establish the boundaries** on the sharing of any creative resources or materials connected to the therapeutic process within the agreement.
- **Establish a clear social media policy** that provides clarity around the limits and extent of the therapist's engagement on social media platforms with discussions with the young client to mitigate the difficulties and confusions that can arise around social media contact.
- **Establish the security of the device** that will be used for online therapy, maintaining boundaries, especially if the client uses a hand-held device or if a shared device within a family setting.
- **Reach agreement from the outset** over how to best manage sudden and unplanned disconnections, intentional or otherwise. Should the therapist text the backup mobile number, or a supportive adult if there is a sudden disconnection which raises concerns about the safety of the CYP client? This can all be agreed from the outset in the contracting stage.
- **Apply an awareness of the adjustments** required to a contract if working for an organisation, such as a school or a charity offering online therapy services, to ensure that the agreement safeguards the boundaries for effective and secure online therapy as outlined here.
- **Examples of Online CYP contracts are below.** Your practice may vary from these agreements, such as use of screen share on Zoom in sessions, but these examples provide a framework to be discussed by your organisation towards ensuring best practice online with CYP.

[example of counselling agreement](#)

[visyonclientagreementforcounsellingviazoom.pdf](#)

4. Communication in online therapy

ACTO Therapists working online with Children and Young People will be competent to:

- **Communicate clearly in different online formats** where the therapist has received training to meet the ACTO Competences in these formats.
- **Apply an evaluation of the CYP client's development stage** to the selection of the appropriate format.

- **Demonstrate the requirement for more explicit communication than in F2F work**, to work to qualify and rectify misunderstandings as they arise with an awareness of the potentials for ruptures but also for essential learning from repairs. The therapist may need to consider how any information provided in the session is retained and processed in online sessions compared to F2F.
- **Work to best practice in Live Chat** which is often the preferred way of working with older CYP clients recognising that the way of communicating within this format requires specific training and experience.
- **Agree the use and meaning of any emoticons** with the client to mitigate misunderstandings.
- **Set up Email therapy to meet the requirements of clear boundaries**, in particular where stored, using an encrypted email service, and also agreeing timing to avoid 'black holes' (see Suler, 1997, The black hole of cyberspace') and causing distress to CYP clients if they expected an immediate response, especially when there is high risk.
- **Understand how audio can be used to best effect in online therapy**. The therapist should develop awareness of voice tones and what they convey and how to best manage silences. The management of sudden disconnections is to be agreed in the contracting stage.
- **Use a webcam with CYP clients that ensures best practice**, including with the younger age groups. The webcam can be used as a creative resource itself, playing hide-and-seek games, the CYP client playing at switching the camera on and off, and the distance to the camera.

5. Creativity in Online Therapy

ACTO Therapists working online with Children and Young People will be competent to:

- **Recognising that many Children and Young People** already connect and play online, we need to be prepared to explore this more with the young clients, assessing the security and appropriateness of any online resource whilst seeking specialised training where required.
- **Establish in the agreement where any materials** used in therapy will be safely stored and the limits of sharing them by the client as well as the therapist.
- **Uphold security and confidentiality whatever online resource is used, such as a video game.**
- **Consideration of the therapist's modality**, such as art therapy, drama, CBT etc and how required resources can be developed and integrated for online settings, again seeking specialised training where appropriate.

6. Managing Risk and Safeguarding Issues ACTO Therapists working online with Children and Young People will be competent to:

- **Establish clear risk assessment procedures**. These are to be used at the assessment stage of therapy to establish the baseline of risk for the CYP client at the start of therapy.
- **Undertake on-going risk assessment** practices that are embedded into every online therapy session.
- **Utilise competently specific risk assessment tools** if this is the selected means of assessing risk with additional training when required

- **Demonstrate an understanding that managing risk** can be more complex online by virtue of the distance, but also including the nature of the online medium itself which necessitates a requirement to think more pre-emptively and collaboratively about risk with all clients throughout the stages of therapy and not confined to assessment only.
- **Evaluate risk within the session in a conversational way**, with the need to apply clear steps and explicit communication as an on-going part of the therapy.
- **Apply clear safeguarding steps agreed at the very beginning of therapy and outlined in a safety plan if appropriate.**
- **Regularly review the safeguarding procedures and safety plans to ensure up-to-date information and that the client has an on-going understanding of the safeguarding agreements.**
- **Be fully cognisant of the safeguarding protocols if working for an organisation and individuals within the organisation who need to be contacted in an emergency.**
- **Establish clear safeguarding practices if working in private practice. It is strongly recommended that a safety plan is established with the CYP client, along with an agreement with the CYP client of two named trusted adults, or agencies such as GP or emergency service such as police, who can be contacted in an emergency.**
- **Manage and research the safeguarding steps if working with a CYP client who is in another country, knowing the emergency services available in that country, their date of birth, address, trusted adults and/or agencies, are needed.**
- **Understand how the safeguarding practices around the CYP client can be seen as building a secure base for the online therapy, forming an essential part of the effective therapeutic process itself that develops safety, collaboration and trust within the therapeutic relationship.**
- **Review safeguarding practices regularly and adjust as required.**

An example of a clear safeguarding policy for CYP at Risk of harm can be found here:

[Social care Wales \(safeguarding.wales\)](https://www.socialcare.wales/safeguarding.wales)

(last accessed 06/03/2021)

[example-safeguarding-policy-statement](#)

NSPCC example of a safeguarding policy statement template

(last accessed 22/03/2022)

7. Providing Online Therapy Across International and State Boundaries

ACTO Therapists working online with Children and Young People will be competent to:

- **Show an understanding of how CYP clients may well move around the globe with their families and so a constant evaluation of where the therapy is taking place is required and the therapy agreement will have to change to reflect these changes.**
- **Meet the requirement for appropriate and adequate insurance cover to work with CYP clients in different countries and jurisdictions.**

- Understand the safeguarding aspects of working with a CYP client across international and state boundaries with clear safeguarding policies that align with the country the young person is in. • Awareness of the legal, informed consent, data protection and internet-security risks for the CYP client in the different jurisdictions.
- Understand and evaluate how cultural, social and linguistic differences may arise from working internationally.

8. Endings and Supervision

ACTO Therapists working online with Children and Young People will be competent to:

- Establish an agreed ending to each session to enhance containment around the CYP client.
- Agree the steps to make contact in the case of sudden disconnection.
- Agree where any materials developed in the therapy sessions will be stored at the end of therapy, including emails.
- Agree on-going contact should the client wish to resume therapy if this option is available to them.
- Access supervision with an experienced and trained online CYP supervisor is the strong recommendation. It is acknowledged that there is currently a scarcity of trained CYP online therapists, but ACTO expects this to change as more CYP supervisors become trained to work online.

9. Data Protection relating to CYP

ACTO Therapists working online with Children and Young People will be competent to:

- Understand that post-Brexit the need to refer to the ICO governance on data protection with CYP clients which is based on the Data Protection Act 2018. Whilst the current guidance on the ICO website on Children and the GDPR Guidance [accessed on 20 Feb 2022] is quoted below, it is the responsibility of the therapist to check for the latest guidance
- *“If you are relying on consent as your lawful basis for processing, when offering an online service directly to a child, in the UK only children aged 13 or over are able to provide their own consent.*
- *For children under this age you need to get consent from whoever holds parental responsibility for the child - **unless the online service you offer is a preventative or counselling service.** [our emphasis].*
- *When attaining parental consent, it should be considered that if the child has parents who are separated, but both have parental responsibility, there should be consent from BOTH parents.*

[Age appropriate design: a code of practice for online services | ICO](#)

- Explain clearly the risks of using different formats and platforms to ensure the CYP client’s understanding in the assessment stage.

- Communicate clearly in a way that will be understood by the CYP client the steps to data protection and data storage to ensure the CYP client has understood.
- Have a thorough understanding of informed consent, data protection, and Gillick Competence evaluation for the therapist's jurisdiction and know where to attain this information for areas outside your jurisdiction when needed and know where to seek clarification if unsure.

These Competences were put together by a working party led by Rachael Klug consisting of Basi Amodu, Jan Stiff, Lalage Harries, Susan Utting-Simon, Jeanette Hannigan, Ellie Finch, Lesley Simpson-Gray and Elle Gilbertson .

ACTO'S Commitment

- A. ACTO in collaboration with Online Events will host regular workshops for CYP online therapists to share ideas, resources and experiences around working with their clients.
- B. ACTO is developing a network of CYP online therapists who can share resources and ideas for ways to work effectively and securely with CYP.
- C. ACTO will establish a Senior Professional Membership category for therapists who have sufficient specific additional training or where sufficient experience can be demonstrated in working online with Children and Young People.
- D. ACTO will encourage ACTO Online Training Providers to develop specialist CYP training, leading to specialist Senior Professional Membership for therapists working with children and young people.
- E. ACTO will provide a list of trained online CYP supervisors.
- F. These "ACTO Competences for CYP Online Therapists" will be reviewed annually to reflect changes in best practice, technology and ACTO competency guidance.

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