

How to Choose a Therapist for Your Child

by the Clinicians of Doll & Associates, SC

When should you contact a therapist?

It is normal for children to go through short periods of unhappiness or difficulties with family, friends, or school. However, when these problems persist, it is time to get help. Getting help early can often prevent long lasting problems. When your child is experiencing any of the following, you should consider contacting a qualified therapist:

- depressed mood or mood swings
- anxiety, nervousness, tension, fears
- problems with anger control
- consistent misbehavior and/or aggression
- school difficulties
- problems with friendships
- major life changes (separation, divorce, death, or relocation)
- significant changes in eating, sleeping, or toileting patterns

If your child has a problem, it doesn't mean you are a "bad parent." It means that your child is hurting and needs help to get better.

What should you look for when choosing a therapist?

When you have decided that you or your child will see a therapist, there are many issues to consider before selecting someone that is best for your child.

Experience and Competence of the Therapist

Choose someone who is specially trained to diagnose and treat behavioral, emotional, and learning difficulties in children. Ask:

- What is the therapist's degree and educational level (e.g., are they a psychologist, social worker, family therapist, etc.)? Are they licensed in your state?
- What kind of training, and how much experience does the therapist have with the specific problem you need help for?
- Does the therapist specialize in working with children and adolescents? What are the therapist's areas of expertise, and how much experience and training does s/he have in these specific areas?
- What do others say about them? One of the best ways to find a qualified therapist is to ask your doctor, friends, family, school staff, church, or colleagues.

Personal Comfort Level and "Fit" with Therapist

Because you will be sharing information and experiences of a very personal and/or emotional nature, it is imperative that you feel comfortable and respected by your therapist.

- Ask to have a brief phone consultation with the therapist before you commit to find out if there is a good fit with you and your child.
- Does the therapist have a general philosophy about therapy and their role? Does it fit with your values?
- Does the person answering the phone treat you with respect?
- Are there other therapists in the clinic you can transfer to if you or your children do not feel comfortable with your therapist?
- Keep in mind that if your child is not comfortable with his or her therapist, this may be temporary. Be sure to discuss this with the therapist.

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Working Style of the Therapist

Therapists work with children and adolescents in a number of different ways. Depending on the problem, they may see your child alone, in a group, or with other members of the family. Ask:

- What type of involvement do they expect from parents?
- Will the child be seen alone, together with the parent, or both?
- How much information will the therapist share with the parents about the child?
- What opportunities exist to review your child's progress in treatment and at home?
- Does the therapist work closely with your doctor or school personnel if necessary?

Financial Issues and Other Logistics

Most health insurance plans cover mental health treatment to some extent. Ask:

- What types of health insurance does the therapist accept?
- What are the therapist's fees per session? Is there a sliding fee scale?
- What will your financial commitment be (e.g., deductible, co-payments)?
- Does the therapist accept credit cards? Is there a payment plan that allows you to pay over time?
- What is the therapist's policy when you miss an appointment, or have to cancel late?
- What is the emergency procedure? What happens when you need help after hours, or if your therapist is on vacation?

Choosing a therapist can be a difficult task. However, finding the right therapist for your child can also be a very rewarding experience. Therapists are trained to help children and adolescents change their behaviors that are causing them problems, and help them learn to cope with difficult situations. Therapists are also experts at helping children and adolescents understand and express their feelings. Many children develop a special relationship with their therapist and remember that person for many years.