

THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:
A Letter for Parents by the
NYU Child Study Center

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CHOOSING A MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL

When is the right time?

Many children have to deal with life stresses in the course of growing up. For most children challenges are temporary, and they learn to adjust and move on. However, some children and their families need outside help in coping with their difficulties. Parents and other adults should be alert to physical and emotional signs that suggest that a child or teen may be not be adjusting well and may need help. Some problems can be of serious concern, for example, when a child or adolescent has lost touch with reality or is in danger of harming her/himself. Other problems may be of less concern, for example, when a child experiences difficulties in peer relationships or is particularly fearful of something or has suddenly become aggressive. Further investigation may also be warranted when a child seems out of step with peers or shows changes or problems in any of the following areas:

- eating
- sleeping (persistent nightmares)
- excessive fears
- worrying or crying
- decline in school work
- mood
- constant disobedience
- poor relationship with family or friends
- aggressive behavior
- marked opposition to authority
- returning to behavior typical of a younger child

Other important questions to keep in mind in making the decision about requesting professional help are: How intense is the problem? How long has it lasted? Is it inappropriate at the child's age? Does it interfere with the life of the child and family? Just like physical problems, the outlook for emotional problems is better when the problem is treated early and children can resume healthy development.

Talk directly and honestly with the child, using age-appropriate language, to allay his/her concerns and answer questions about seeking professional help. It may be useful to point out how the problem interferes with the child's enjoyment of life. If the parents' attitudes are positive, it will affect the child's responses and make participation in therapy more likely.

Getting started with the right treatment

Once the decision is made that help is needed, parents should begin to gather pertinent information. Here are some helpful sources:

- Talk things over with the child's pediatrician, teacher or guidance counselor.
- Get a recommendation from a trusted friend or family member.
- Check with a clinic associated with a local hospital or medical school.
- Contact national or local professional organizations. Mental health professionals include psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, or marriage-and-family therapists.

It is important for the child or teen and parents to feel comfortable and to trust the therapist selected. Parents often benefit from having an initial consultation and one or two sessions before making a definite commitment. Some questions to ask when first meeting with a mental health professional include:

- The credentials of the therapist.
- Training and particular experience/expertise in dealing with the problem.
- If the clinician works with other professionals in the child's life.
- Type and format of treatment, such as frequency of sessions and cost arrangements.
- Extent of parents' involvement with treatment.

Common treatment strategies

Medication is one option among many for certain disorders. Whether medication is part of the treatment plan depends on the nature of the problem and discussion with the professional, the parent, and in some cases, the adolescent. Some treatments are carried out alone, some in combination with medication. Many therapists draw from various schools of therapy and modify their approach according to each child's needs and capacities. Some common treatment strategies include:

- *Cognitive behavioral therapy*: focuses on symptoms and current goals. Helps the child identify faulty beliefs and learn new ways of thinking and behaving.
- *Verbal psychotherapy*: current problems are discussed in light of past difficulties and options for coping with feelings and behavior in more effective ways are developed.
- *Group therapy*: issues are explored within a group setting with individuals who share similar problems.
- *Interpersonal psychotherapy*: feelings and responses are explored within the context of different interpersonal or social relationships and situations.
- *Family therapy*: members of the family are helped to understand how their behaviors affect one another and instructions and strategies for making changes are provided.

To be helpful, therapy usually requires an investment of time and hard work on the part of both the professional and the child or teen and family. The therapist's job is to act as a guide, instructor, mentor and confidante. The job of the child or teen and parents is to work and to try and put what they learn into practice. Successful collaboration results in better functioning and life satisfaction for both the child and family.

Written and developed by Anita Gurian, Ph.D. and the staff of the NYU Child Study Center.

ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, AboutOurKids.org.

AboutOurKids.org

THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER ONLINE

**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health
NYU Child Study Center**

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