



Counseling and Therapy 101: What Every Caregiver Needs to Know



Have you ever brought your child to the doctor for behavioral concerns and, instead of walking out with a "fix," you left with a therapy referral?



Not fully understanding what therapy is and how it can be helpful is one of the top reasons families do not follow through with these types of recommendations. But therapy can be one of the most beneficial and effective tools you have in your toolbox for your child, as well as for yourself



Therapy focuses on the cognitive (thinking), behavioral, and emotional aspects of mental health. It can teach new skills but can also help people struggling to deal with hard situations and strong feelings.



The Treatment Triangle

When a child is having behavioral or emotional challenges, it is important to remember that many different kinds of services can be helpful. In fact, the most effective way to address behavioral problems may be a combination of behavior therapy, medication (if needed), and school supports. We call this the "treatment triangle." As you can see below, the sides of the triangle are all equal because each intervention at the points of the triangle are equally important to consider.

Not all children require all three types of services but what we do know is that medication alone may not be enough to improve behavioral and emotional challenges. We also know that parent participation is vital to the success of any treatment.

The types of therapies we discuss on the back of this page are "evidence-based," meaning that they have been studied a lot by researchers and have been shown to work.



The Importance of Family Systems in Therapy



When a child is referred to therapy, the family is one of the most important parts of treatment. The family system means everyone in the household, including siblings and other adults - anyone who is involved in caring for your child.

Caregivers sometimes think that therapy is something they take their child to, but don't participate in. That is not the case.

Family participation in therapy can look different depending on your child's needs. It might include you going in to sessions with your child, or it might involve talking to the therapist after or in between sessions. Practicing strategies in between sessions is vital to the success of therapy!





What type of therapy does your child need?

The type of therapy your child's provider recommends should be based on your child's individual needs. Keep in mind that it is ok to try a couple of therapists before you find one that is a good fit for you and your family.

Parent Management Training (PMT)

PMT is the most effective therapy for young children with behavior problems, as well as older children who have delays in their development. PMT helps caregivers learn strategies for encouraging positive behaviors, while reducing disruptive behaviors such as tantrums and aggression.

The ideas behind PMT are simple but not always easy to follow, especially when a child is in the middle of a meltdown and the parent is at their wits' end. Parents often know basic PMT strategies already but struggle to modify or implement those strategies in a way that is effective with their child.

PMT can be offered in individual or group settings and may be available both in person and online. PMT requires full parent participation in order to be effective.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

CBT is one of the most commonly therapies recommended for people who are struggling with anxiety and/or depression. CBT is based on the idea that our thoughts, behaviors, and emotions are all connected in some way.

For example, Gabe wants to make friends in school, but often thinks "no one likes me." When Gabe has this thought in his head, then he avoids other kids and sits by himself at recess. This behavior causes him to feel sad and lonely. These feelings help "prove" to Gabriel that his idea that no one likes him is true.

If we can teach Gabe ways to be more positive with his thoughts, then we can prevent him from doing behaviors that make him lonely, such as sitting by himself, and then he will be better able to engage with other kids and not feel sad anymore.

CBT is a way of teaching kids, and even adults, how to organize and control their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. To participate in CBT, children usually have to have a developmental age of at least 7-8. CBT can be done individually or in a group setting.

Tips for Finding a Good Therapy Provider



Locating a therapy provider for you or your child can be a challenging task depending on your insurance, location, and personal preferences. Keep in mind many therapists, even outside of your area, are still offering online services as well.

-**Know the type of provider you need and make sure they are licensed.** Typically you are looking for a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW), licensed professional counselor (LPC), or licensed clinical psychologist (PhD).

-**Make sure you are accessing therapy that is known to work (is "evidence-based") for your child's specific needs.**

-**Make sure to follow up.** Therapists are in sessions with people all day, so make sure you call, leave a message, and then call back.

-**Make sure you are getting homework.** It is vital that strategies are being practiced in between session, since it is unlikely change will occur after just 1 hour per week. If your child is in therapy, you should be getting homework (things to work on with your child at home).

-**Don't give up.** Do not be discouraged if the first provider is not a good fit. You may have to try a couple before you find one that is a good fit for your child and family.

For more information on finding a good therapist, see the websites below:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freudian-sip/201102/how-find-the-best-therapist-you>

<https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/features/how-to-find-therapist>