

THE PARENT LETTER



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

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PSYCHOTHERAPIES FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Just what is psychotherapy? That is the most frequently asked question by parents when a mental health professional recommends psychotherapy for their child or adolescent. Psychotherapy refers to treatment aimed at helping someone with problems that are considered to have a psychological component, such as difficulties related to learning, emotions, the family, friends and life situations or experiences. A wide range of approaches, styles, techniques and interventions can be used. In practice, however, most psychotherapists adapt their approach according to each child or adolescent's age, problem, ability, temperament and situation. All therapists share a principal goal: they aim to enable the child to resume a healthy, age-appropriate course of development by relieving discomfort, teaching new strategies and ways of coping, enabling the child to utilize innate abilities and talents, and improving functioning with friends and family at home, in school, and in the community.

The following are brief summaries of the types of psychotherapies generally used with children and adolescents:

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

CBT is based on the concept that emotional problems are not caused by bad or unfavorable events, but by how the person interprets the events. During CBT, the child learns that negative thoughts cause feelings and moods, which in turn influence behavior. CBT focuses on "here and now" symptoms and helps the child identify faulty beliefs and learn new ways of thinking and behaving. For example, consider a child who usually expects to fail, exaggerates negative events, and minimizes positive events ("I know I'll fail this test; I always fail, studying won't help me."). CBT would help him challenge the reality of these ideas and replace it with more rational thinking that results in more positive feelings and behaviors to cope with problems. Through therapy targeted at specific symptoms, such as social withdrawal or aggressive behavior, a child learns to monitor the negative thoughts, evaluate and challenge their validity, and set more realistic goals. A body of research has shown the effectiveness of CBT for certain types of problems, such as depression and anxiety.

Verbal Psychotherapy

Through verbal or "talk therapy" children explore thoughts, feelings and experiences and are helped to understand their motivations and behaviors in the light of past difficulties. This type of therapy helps to identify the child's defenses and ways of dealing with inner conflicts. Treatment involves assisting the child to develop adaptive ways of coping with feelings and behaviors and for engaging in relationships in more effective ways.

Play Therapy

Play is considered a natural and comfortable form of communication and interaction with children. Through dolls, puppets, drawing and games, the therapist observes the way the child uses materials and "listens" for themes related to developmental issues (such as individuation, separation and loss) or experiences (such as a trauma or a divorce) as they are enacted in the safe presence of a supportive adult. The therapist gives permission for feelings to be expressed and makes the feelings less overwhelming and more understandable by labeling them. Working with parents is a critical component of play therapy to insure that the therapist is informed of the child's daily life and that practical parenting problems are addressed.

Group Therapy

Individuals who share similar problems often find it helpful to explore these issues within a group setting. Group therapy can be used for a variety of emotional and behavioral problems; groups may consist of children and adolescents with social, academic, substance abuse and other issues. Some children find it easier to express their feelings in a group of peers rather than in individual therapy. Through peer interactions and group dynamics, members increase self-understanding and improve interpersonal relationships.

Interpersonal Therapy (IPT)

IPT is a brief treatment in which feelings and responses are explored within the context of different interpersonal or social relationships and situations. IPT was specifically developed and tested for helping adolescents with depression.

Parent Management Training

Based on the belief that children's problems are due to difficulties in parent-child interaction, parent management training is conducted primarily with parents and focuses on teaching behavioral observation skills and making changes based on social learning principles.

Family Therapy

Therapy that includes the family as a group, helps members to understand the ways in which the functioning of the whole family is impacted by a child's problems and vice versa. Through support and education, family members come to realize how their behaviors and patterns of communication are interrelated and affect one another. Family therapists utilize the assets and resources of the family to help them make changes, generate strategies for solving conflicts, and to guide the individuals and the family to function in more positive and constructive ways.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)

DBT is helpful in treating older adolescents who have chronic suicidal feelings/thoughts and who engage in intentional self-harm. DBT emphasizes taking responsibility for one's problems and helps the person examine how they deal with conflicts and negative feelings. Through DBT, the person explores problem behaviors or events, including precipitating factors, generates alternative solutions, and identifies the factors that interfered with adaptive solutions. A combination of group and individual sessions is usually involved.

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 mental health professional, the parent, and in some cases, the adolescent. Some treatments are carried out alone, some in combination with medication.

What can I do as a Parent?

How can parents decide which form of therapy is best for their child? One means is by considering what the scientific and research literature has to say about the effectiveness of psychotherapy for children. The field of treatment outcome research, however, is relatively new and that specifically devoted to the study of psychotherapies for children even more recent. In fact, the first reviews of treatment literature, published in the 1950s and 1960s, appeared to indicate that therapy did little to benefit children – that is, it appeared that the simple passage of time was as effective a “treatment” for children as psychotherapy!

The conclusions, however, were based on studies with small numbers of participants, less-than-ideal scientific rigor, and nonspecific therapies. Fortunately, in the 1980s and 1990s there was an explosion of psychotherapy outcome studies in children – with much improved scientific procedures. Reviews performed in the last decade have shown unequivocally that psychotherapy for children “works” – that is, children who receive psychotherapy are much better off than those who do not.

The field of research treatment studies has recently focused on determining which treatments may be termed *evidence-based* – that is, which specific treatment for which specific disorder has amassed solid evidence that it works. To date, very few treatments for children and adolescents have been deemed evidence-based. Those that have, included CBT for depression and some anxiety disorders, and parent management training for behavior disorders and ADHD. Many large treatment studies are on the way, however, which means that our knowledge of the most effective child psychotherapies will continue to expand. Parents should consult with the mental health professional recommending treatment as to which form will be most appropriate for their child and can keep up-to-date on the latest in treatment research via reputable websites such as those listed below.

Useful Resources

- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/index.cfm
- American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: www.aacap.org/info_families/index.htm
- American Psychological Association: www.apa.org

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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
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