Child & Adolescent Psychotherapy

A Brief Guide for Parents

the therapeutic consultants

Supporting your child through psychotherapy may be a new experience. The following information is offered to help with this process. Please do not hesitate to ask if you find anything unclear, or wish to question or confirm any details.

A Brief Guide to Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy

Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy is usually considered when a child is experiencing problems that are having a significant effect on their everyday life or relationships.

Child Psychotherapy is a child-centred approach for children and young people who may be experiencing a wide range of problems where there are underlying emotional issues, anxiety or depression, or diagnoses of either neurodevelopmental differences or mental health problems.

Individual child psychotherapy aims to bring about change and psychological awareness as well as a resolution of emotional problems for the child or young person. The purpose is to facilitate change through self-understanding and in this way not only address the presenting problem, but also build a solid foundation with which to meet challenges throughout life.

Child Psychotherapy can take a number of forms depending on the needs of the child. Older children may wish to use it purely as talk therapy but children and young people of all ages can also use other mediums to communicate such as art or play. In this way children do not need to be able to know or articulate what they are struggling with in order for the therapist to help them.

What can Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy help with?

Child psychotherapists treat individual children and young people with a wide variety of difficulties. Problems may include:

- Difficulties with relationships or social interaction
- Aggression and angry outbursts
- Lack of motivation and low mood
- Irrational fears and worries
- Obsessive and compulsive behaviours
- Anxiety (often expressed in behaviour such as bed-wetting, sleep difficulties, soiling, refusal to eat or drink, refusal to go to school)
- Risk-taking or self-harming behaviour, suicidal thoughts
- Developmental problems
- A child being unhappy, anxious or withdrawn for no apparent reason
- The lasting effects of bereavement, family breakdown, chronic illness, disability, trauma, neglect or abuse

What can Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy help with?

Child psychotherapy uses the consistency and regularity of time, the same room and the presence of the therapist to establish an emotionally containing relationship in which the child's own view of the world can be expressed, through words and/or actions including play and creative work. The work of the therapist is to find a way of carefully helping children to make sense of how they see the world, so that distorted or fixed misunderstandings can be recognised together and reviewed, to enable healthier understandings to develop. Over time this understanding can be internalised by the child so that they can begin to independently recognise and understand their own feelings and behaviour.

Sometimes it may not be necessary to offer a child individual psychotherapy but the child psychotherapist can offer support and guidance to parents or other agencies involved with the child.

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Talking to children and adolescents about starting therapy

It is good to be as honest as possible with children about the reasons you are bringing them to therapy. You can let them know that the therapist is there to help them understand the things that are causing them difficulty. They can either talk to the therapist or they can play, draw or use the sand-tray to find ways to communicate. They don't have to worry about what they will say or about not knowing what to say, the therapist will help them with that.

On our website you'll find leaflets you can give to children or adolescents that explain about therapy in age-appropriate language.

What is the Process?

INITIAL APPOINTMENT

Usually a family will be invited along for an initial appointment in order to establish what everybody is concerned about and whether everybody has the same concerns and worries. The therapist may also ask questions about the early history of the child to try and put any current problems into the context of the child's experiences.

ASSESSMENT

Assessments are usually carried out in 3-5 sessions with the child/young person. These sessions are very similar to the way that on-going therapy sessions would be carried out, although the therapist may start by asking some more direct questions if the child is old enough to be able to answer. The purpose of the assessment is to gain:

- An idea of whether the child will work well in psychotherapy
- An understanding of the issue the child is facing
- A treatment plan that can then be fed back to parents in a review

REVIEW

After the assessment sessions the therapist will provide feedback to the parents in a review. While the review is usually for parents, older adolescents may be asked if they would like to attend the reviews too.

How to support your child

It can be a very generous act for a parent to allow their child to find their own voice and understanding of their emotional life. It is understandably difficult for parents to trust the therapist and allow their child the confidentiality that they need in order to feel safe and trust the therapeutic space.

Children can often be anxious before therapy and may also be emotionally affected by the session and need quiet time to assimilate. It is most helpful for parents to support a child by being 'available' for them, but not to enquire too much about what was said or done in therapy. Often a simple question such as, 'How did it go?' can be enough. Some children may want to tell parents more information; others may choose to keep things private. It is important to give your child the message that it is really okay with you for them to tell you as much or as little as they are comfortable with.

Every child responds uniquely and variably to therapeutic help. Some seem to respond positively almost immediately and others can take longer to engage initially before improvement is felt. Some children may also find that things are stirred up at the beginning of therapy and they feel more unsettled for a short period. It is helpful if parents can support them in these times by explaining what is going on and that feelings can be more painful when they are first thought about but that overall they will feel better when they have been understood. Parents may be tempted at these points to want to find a quicker way to alleviate their child's distress, pulling them out of therapy. However, this is the worst point to stop and would leave them vulnerable and with all their feelings stirred up, without the space to then think them through.

As psychotherapy is a dynamic and developmental process, there are often challenges along the way. During the process of therapy, there may be periods which are harder and children may not want to attend. Additionally children may feel or appear to be suddenly 'better' and either the child or parents my wish to end therapy before adequate integration has occurred. It is really important then for parents to support children in continuing to attend until things have been properly worked through and integrated.

Reviews and Parent Work

All therapists will offer regular reviews to parents so that they can be involved in the process. These will not be to break the child's confidentiality but more to help the parents understand the child's process and trust the work that is being carried out. It is also helpful for the therapist and parent to think together about what can be done at home to support the child and the changes they are making as a result of their therapy.

Parenting a child who is struggling can be a difficult, painful and often distressing process. For this reason the therapist might well suggest that the parents work with a parent therapist. This would be to help understand the difficulties their child is facing, to understand the dynamics which are in play within the family, to think through any generational patterns that might be a factor and to understand how to support the child though some of their more difficult times.

Parent work can be anything from weekly to once a month, or more infrequently with the child psychotherapist included in the regular reviews. We have a separate leaflet which explains the process of parent work in detail which you can find on our website.

Confidentiality

In general children and young people's sessions are private and confidential and the therapist will not discuss the content of a child's therapy with parents. However, to some extent this is dictated by age. Very young children are used to adults communicating openly about them and are usually happy for the therapist to talk to their parents about some of the themes in the work. For older children and adolescents, therapists would not discuss the details of the session but will keep parents informed about their child's progress. The therapist may also talk to parents about how to manage difficult situations or behaviour based on their knowledge of the child in therapy.

If there is a clear risk to the child or anyone around them, then the therapist will inform parents in order to keep the child safe. If you have further questions about this do ask the therapist in the initial meeting.

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