Child & Adolescent Psychotherapy

A Brief Guide to Parent Therapy

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the therapeutic consultants

Why has my therapist recommended parent work?

Child and Adolescent Psychotherapists often recommend parent work alongside the work that they do with children. It has a long-standing history of being regularly used in the NHS and CAMHS until recently when resources have been too stretched to allow two therapists to work consistently with one family.

There are several good reasons for parents working with a therapist while their child is in therapy. Firstly, the child's therapist and the parent worker can liaise regularly. This allows the child's sessions to be confidential, but the parent worker can use the information from the sessions to guide and inform the parents about how things are going and what will best help their child or adolescent.

The parent worker will also speak to the child's therapist, and while the session material remains confidential, they can give information about the child at home and school which will help the therapist in their work with the child or adolescent.

The parent therapist can think carefully with the parents about the best way to manage complex behaviour in their children. Many children or young people come to therapy when things are both complicated and delicate and it is really difficult to know how to manage their behaviour at home, how to find a balance between careful, containing boundaries and relaxing the rules to be compassionate.

There may also be other complex dynamics within the family that are contributing to the child or adolescent's difficulties and these can be thought about and worked through. Difficulties in the sibling relationships, differences in parenting styles, or particular dynamics between one parent and child.

Sometime the changes the child starts to make as a result of their experiences in therapy can be very small at first, almost imperceptible as they take tiny risks in doing things differently. Because of this its easy to miss these changes and as a result the child can often retreat back into their old, safe behaviour. If these changes are talked about and thought through in parent therapy then they are more likely to be spotted and positive cycles can begin as the child sees that the changes they make are taken positively and risks further changes.

In really complex situations when the child or young person is in real distress, parent therapy can make an enormous difference to the outcome of the therapeutic work.

What can I expect to happen in Parent Therapy?

Each therapist works slightly differently and will try to tailor the way they work to the needs of the particular set of parents. Many parents want 'answers' as to how to manage situations or 'techniques' for managing difficult behaviour. These can be a part of the work, but if there is to really be lasting and significant change then it will be important to think more deeply about how and why things have come to be difficult in the first place.

In the first session or two parent therapists will want to understand the following:

- A history of the issues that have brought them to therapy
- An understanding of each person in the family and the specific dynamics between each family member
- An understanding of each parent's own histories and in particular their experience of being parented
- A history of any traumas, changes, etc in the family

In later weeks there will always be a space to think about any specific incidents that have gone on in the week; an argument at home, an incident at school etc.

The therapist will give time to thinking about what you bring, to understand the incident and what might have been in your child's mind, thoughts and feelings. They will try to understand the issue in the wider context of the school or family dynamics and to understand what the child might be trying to communicate with their behaviour.

How long does parent therapy go on for?

It's a difficult question to answer and really depends on the issues that have brought the family to therapy. Parent work often continues for as long as the child is in therapy but it does not have to be as frequent. Parent therapists will usually want to start regularly so that you build a relationship and get a head start on thinking about the issues. However, when things are starting to ease it may well be that you can attend less frequently and more for reviews or at times of more difficulty or stress.

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