Child & Adolescent Psychotherapy

Talking to Children about Starting Therapy

the therapeutic consultants

Lots of children have really different feelings about going to therapy. Some are really keen on the idea and some are really worried, shy or anxious. The guidelines below can be used in conjunction with our other leaflets to help prepare your child for therapy and talk to them about what to expect.

Talk to the child about therapy in a calm moment

Parents are often tempted to tell their child during/following an argument or crisis. This can start therapy off feeling like a punishment or a scary, serious thing that they have to do because things are so awful. If at all possible it's important to talk to your child about therapy in a calm moment.

What to Say

In a simple and compassionate way, parents can tell their child that they notice s/he has been struggling and empathize with how hard it must be for them.

If anyone else in the family, parent or child, has been to therapy before then it can be useful to talk about this, what it was like and how it helped.

It helps to talk about therapy as something that helps you understand yourself better and not feel sad or worried all the time. If you can frame it in the context of something the whole family values, understanding, the capacity for clear thinking, being able to be brave and honest about thoughts and feelings, this helps to give the message that seeking support is a sign of strength and health, not weakness or failure.

If the parents are also seeking support then it is really helpful to let the child know and to talk about how the issue is not just their problem but one the whole family needs to think about and understand better.

Explain psychotherapy

Parents can tell their child in a developmentally appropriate way that they have spoken with someone that can help. You can let them know that a therapist is someone who is really good at understanding children. They help children think about things that are difficult for them.

It's really important to explain that they don't have to talk, they can play with the toys in the room, with the sand-tray or they can draw or paint, throw a ball at the wall, build things out of the materials ther... basically they can use the room in any safe way they like and the therapist's job is to understand them and help them.

If you have a picture of the therapist you can show this to the child and discuss with them what sort of person they might be.

If your child is resistant to going to therapy then you can encourage them to try it. Explain that the first few sessions are for them to see how it goes and that it is important they go because the problems they are having are not going away on their own so we need some help in thinking about them.

Normalize therapy

Therapy is becoming more and more usual for children and adolescents. The culture that children are brought up is in difficult to navigate. Many of their friends will be in therapy even if they don't know it. You can talk to your children about how therapy is something may people do at some point in their lives. If there are other people in the family that have been to therapy then you can talk about it as being something the family values.

While it is important that children are careful about who they trust with the information that they are going to therapy, it's important not to present it to them as a secret as this implies that it is in some way shameful.

When should a parent tell the child that s/he is going to a therapist?

Children need time to assimilate information just as adults do. It is helpful to tell them at least a few days before the first appointment so that they can have time to think about it and ask questions. For younger children just a few days is helpful, but older children and adolescents often need longer to get used to the idea and it can be helpful that they know about the process as you go along.

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