

## Talking to Children About Starting Therapy

Naturally, children have different feelings about starting any new relationship, especially a relationship with a clinician they do not know; yet they are aware that this relationship is special and is only about them and only about what they feel. Some children are keen to commence such a relationship, whereas others may feel worried or anxious.

The suggestions below can be a useful guide as to how to talk to your child about going to therapy.

### **Talk to the child in a moment of shared tranquillity**

Sometimes parents may tell the child that they need therapy during or immediately following an argument. This should be avoided: the child may feel that the therapy is a punishment for something they have done. Instead, it is much better to wait for a moment of calm to introduce the idea.

### **What to say**

It is helpful to say to the child that sometimes we have thoughts and feelings we are struggling with and that there are people who have been trained to understand those thoughts and feelings and know how to help children feel better.

If you as a parent have been to any form of talking therapy, it may be helpful to describe, in line with the child's age and developmental stage, what you have found helpful.

'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.' (op.cit. TTC)

It is always important to explain to the child that talking about their difficulties does not mean that it is only the child's problem, but that the parents, indeed the whole family, will also endeavour to understand what is going on for them too.

### **Explain psychotherapy**

Depending on the child's age, parents can tell the child that they have spoken to me and that they think I can help because they think I am good at understanding children and helping children to think about things that they feel are difficult.

It always helps if parents explain to the child that I have lots of toys for them to play with and that the child can choose to play, draw, throw a ball or do whatever they like, as long as they use the room in a safe manner. In this way, you can help your child to feel less pressure to talk, if they don't want to.

There is a photo of me and my consulting room on the home page; you can show this to your child.

If your child is reluctant to go to therapy, you can gently encourage them to try by explaining that the first few meetings are for them to come to know me and see how they feel about continuing to see me. It also helps to tell the child that sometimes the problems don't go away by themselves, that other people are needed to make the problems easier to manage.

### **Normalise psychotherapy**

Attending appointments with professionals who assist with mental health issues and / or emotional issues is nowadays an ordinary occurrence for many children, adolescents, parents and families. Some of your child's friends and their parents will be in therapy, even if your child is not aware of it. You can help your child by telling him / her that many children and their parents need help at some point in their lives.

It is very important that attending sessions with me is not presented as something shameful; you will of course help your child decide who can be trusted with this information from his or her immediate circle, but it is important to insist that there is nothing wrong in seeking help.

## **When to tell the child that s/he is going to see a psychotherapist?**

For younger children, it is usually helpful to speak to them at the very least a few days before the first appointment, in order to allow them sufficient time to assimilate this information.

Adolescents will need to be told sooner, rather than later: the most helpful thing is to keep them informed from the point at which you make initial contact with me.