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What to expect when your child starts talking therapy

Sending a child for therapy can be daunting both for the child and for their parents. So how can we best prepare our children – and ourselves – for their first therapy session?

We all know that childhood can sometimes be a struggle. For some children, perhaps finding it hard to control their emotions, or coping with a difficult situation, intervention from the [right therapist](#) at the right time can be a great support.

The right therapy

For many adults, the idea of therapy conjures up an image of a patient reclining on a couch, telling a therapist about their inner emotions. However, this type of [talking therapy](#) may not be suitable for your child.

"The type of therapy suitable will depend on your child's level of development. For example, a ten-year-old might be developing their emotional vocabulary, but their language will be fairly basic: good and bad, black or white, sad or happy. In terms of emotional vocabulary it might be better for them to have a more non-verbal experience of therapy – for example, drama therapy, music therapy or art therapy," explains [Dr Michele McDowell](#), Educational Psychologist.

In order to find the right therapist, talk to your child's school or GP for guidance, and to find out what options might be available.

Shedding the guilt

As a parent, accepting that your child needs help from outside the family can be difficult. So before you introduce the idea of therapy to your child, you need to make sure you deal with any unhelpful emotions of your own. "Parents sometimes feel guilty, or worry they might have done something wrong," says Dr Oliver Sindall, Chartered Clinical Psychologist. "It's important to realise that engaging outside help is a parenting strength - they're doing something to help their child."

Parents also need to make sure they present a united front about therapy, even if one parent has misgivings about the process. "Sometimes parents have differing opinions," says Dr Sindall. "Try not to have that kind of conversation in front of the child. For it to work, children need to see their parents are on board."

Introducing the idea

Long before their first session, parents need to introduce the idea of therapy to their child, explaining what it is and how it will help them. "Children sometimes assume it's almost a punishment that they've been sent to therapy," Dr Sindall says. "As if, because they are struggling to control their emotions, they need to be 'fixed'."

He adds, "Change that narrative so that it feels like a joint decision. For example, say 'I think you're struggling and I can see how upset you are. Wouldn't it be great if there was someone you could go to talk about that?' Highlight how helpful it could be and why it's a good thing.

"I sometimes liken it to shaking a can of coke - if it's all going on internally it's going to burst out. Talking about it isn't going to make it disappear but having it out in front of you can help to make sense of it so it doesn't surprise you," says Dr Sindall.

"It might be better not to use the word 'therapy', which may be an alien or loaded term," adds Dr McDowell. "Explain the situation in language they will understand - help them to feel calm and relaxed around the idea."

Establishing trust

All children have trusted adults in their life. But they may struggle with the idea of spending time with a new adult. It's important that they understand that it's OK to talk to this particular 'stranger' as their mum and dad know and approve of them.

However, it's not a good idea to rush or force the child if they're reluctant to go. Prepare them slowly and listen to any misgivings they may have. "Plan it through carefully and break it down into little stages," agrees McDowell. "If you're still finding it hard to get your child to attend, speak to the therapist who will be able to advise you."

A safe space

For a child to open up, they need to understand that their conversations with the therapist are taking place in a safe space. Although parents will be given feedback, it's crucial that the child feels they can talk freely. Parents should avoid asking the therapist questions in front of the child.

"The most important thing is the therapist and the child having a good relationship so that the child is relaxed and feels they can talk," explains Dr Sindall. "If they are having a difficult experience, this may take time."

In addition, parents should not expect the child to open up fully about their sessions afterwards. "The child needs to feel that this is their space," explains Dr Sindall. "Have a conversation about how it's gone, but explain that this is their space and they don't have to talk to you about what they say."

Taking the time

Establishing trust, and encouraging a child to open up and deal with their emotions can take time. As parents, it's hard to cope with the idea of our children struggling, but it's important to be realistic about the time therapy might take, and its trajectory.

"You won't necessarily see an improvement after every session," explains Dr Sindall. "There will be steps forward and back. Therapy can bring up some difficult emotions and it takes time."

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