



What to Expect When You Bring Your Child to Therapy

If you're bringing your child in for therapy, it's likely you're concerned or worried that something might be wrong based on your child's behavior. Perhaps worse, you doubt your own ability to fix it and so you are bringing your child to see me. It seems only fair, under the circumstances, that I should tell you up front what I can do for you and how I will go about it in our sessions. When I see a child for treatment, I generally regard the family unit as the client. At the outset I will see your child together with one or both parents at some point if necessary to check in and discuss your child's progress. Thereafter we will decide together—you and I—whom is best to include in sessions. We will do whatever you and I feel makes sense to best support your child.

When children come for a first visit, I tell them that they're the boss in individual sessions with me. They decide whom to invite into the consulting room (parents, siblings, etc.) and whom to exclude. I tell them they can kick anyone out of the session but me. I put the child in charge of deciding what we talk about and what we don't. I also explain that I do not force children to talk about anything they don't want to talk about. I use games and creative activities in the consulting room, which will help put your child at ease so he or she may open up. I tell your child that I see myself as a consultant; people come to see me, I ask them what they want, and once I know what that is, we figure out together how to make it happen. I say, "If you don't tell me what you want, I can't do my job. I can't promise to get you all of what you want, but I can get you some of it." (I say the same thing to my adult clients.)

Where confidentiality is concerned, I typically tell all parties that I will not repeat what a child says to me privately unless it involves harm (or potential harm) to the child or to someone else. In other words, I won't keep secrets about cigarettes, sex, alcohol/drugs, cutting, weapons, or illegal activity. Other sorts of things that I think parents should know about may come up in sessions. However, I tell the child that when they do I will support him or her in telling their parents. At the end of the first session I will check to make sure the child is willing to see me for additional sessions.

When you and I meet without your child, I will ask about your concerns and take a developmental, social, educational, and family history, and offer a preliminary array of resources based on my first impressions of what's needed. Sessions alone with parents give me the opportunity to get valuable information and learn about issues that are best discussed out of the child's earshot. In addition, I can verify that the parents agree on house rules, parenting principles, and family values generally. After all, if you don't agree, your child will become adept at playing one of you against the other. Sometimes, too—for instance, in cases of separation or divorce—conflict between the parents is directly related to the problems that



brought the child into treatment. In cases like this is *occasionally* possible for me to resolve the issues without ever working with the child.

My view of myself as a consultant has certain implications for my work with you, the parents. At best I'm making a cameo appearance in your lives. You will see me off and on for a matter of months and always for just an hour at a time. I will probably see your child no more than once a week and, after a month or two, less frequently once you feel progress has been made. You, however, see your child every day for hours on end. Consequently you, not me, will always be the true change agent. I may offer suggestions and resources, and get feedback from you as to what works and what doesn't. Unlike me, you will always be on the front line. At the outset, during the first few sessions, we will need to do a brain transplant from you to me. You, the parents, know your child far better than I and I'll need to tap into your expertise and insight to formulate some ideas about how to proceed. Over time I will assess the child as he or she interacts with me, with you, and with others in the family unit.

When I meet with the child alone, our sessions are devoted to support, encouragement, empowerment, enrichment, and development of the child's relationship with me. Doing so will allow me to help your child develop healthy coping and communication skills. I like to ask kids about things that are important to them—favorite pets, foods, friends, games, and dreams. Together we may use creative activities or games. I will learn by seeing what your child selects for us to do, how he or she interacts with me and activities, and how he or she treats the rules and me as an adult companion. After I have earned your child's trust and respect, and when the child feels heard by me, we can often talk about problems at home or at school, but only when the child is *ready* to talk about them in a session.

When problems do reach the agenda, I highlight the child's choices. It's very important for the child to feel that there is more than one way to proceed. I may also ask about the strategy the child plans to use to reach goals. So for instance I might ask a teenager, "How do you figure that the bad language your mom hates is going to help you persuade her to buy you an electric guitar?" Sometimes I help a child decide how best to ask the parent for something. Often, when children start arguing about a privilege that the parent is denying, I will counsel them to ask instead, "What would I need to do before you would allow me to do this?"

When families first come in for a session, I like to ask what they do together. Do they eat dinner together, play games, go on weekend outings, visit frequently with extended family, and have weekly family gatherings? What is dinner table conversation like? How do the siblings get along? What are some of the best times everyone remembers? Eventually I will ask each member to say what he or she likes best about this family. Then I will ask each member to name something he or she would like to change. It often happens, in the course of preliminary discussion, that the family identifies a source of tension or conflict. Once the problem has



surfaced in the consulting room, we can talk about it openly. Session rules always include stipulations that when one person talks, everyone else must listen; that language must be polite; and that no one is to be punished after the session for things said during it. I try to include a game or activity for the last part of the family session, for several reasons. First, a good game will often ensure that the session ends on a positive note. Also, families usually need to learn more ways of having fun together. This point is very important. If people don't have fun together, where will they get the energy to undertake the hard work of solving problems? Some of the best games reinforce family ties, create positive memories, and make people laugh.

In my opinion, the issues that families and children bring into treatment generally revolve around communication. The questions I ask myself most frequently are (1) how (or whether) people's feelings are being heard and respected by other family members and (2) whether family members are able to ask for, and get, what they need from each other. In family sessions I can usually persuade people to honor their feelings and to get (or give) feedback. Relationships are key.

Individual sessions seek to improve children's appreciation of their talents, their abilities, and themselves generally. By encouraging children to try different activities and to pursue their special interests, I hope to plant seeds that will bring to light lifelong passions. Such passions are important tools for combating stress in childhood and in adulthood as well. By normalizing and validating a child's feelings, I can help him or her become more confident and secure. I want children to enjoy therapy and to experience it as a process of exploration and self-discovery rather than coming in because someone has made them feel something is wrong with them.

Children who let their feelings guide them to sources of joy—whether these are people, places, or the child's important work in the world—become stronger, more self-aware, more resilient, and happier!

I'm honored that you have chosen and trusted me to work with your child! Welcome!