

A STARTER GUIDE TO CHILD AND YOUTH THERAPY

Professional mental health care is like physical care. There are generalists, specialists, and various treatments to consider. Approaches and effectiveness range by condition, circumstances, and child. Mental health care can happen in person, online, or a combination. Some therapists even check in with young clients by text or meet in a virtual platform using avatars. Young people are digital natives and may prefer tech and text options. Be sure to follow a young person's lead and preferences when considering and choosing care.

The different types of therapy can be overwhelming, but there are common ones that are good to be aware of. Before referring a child to an individual therapist, you can ask for an interview. Here are some questions you might ask and discuss:

- What are your specialties?
- What's your professional training and experience?
- What types of therapeutic techniques do you use most often?
- Have you worked with children like [describe the child and situation], and can you tell me about how you would approach this child and situation?
- How have you seen your strategies and training work with children like [again describe the situation]?

If a child is dealing with a specific issue, they might need multiple mental health specialists and therapeutic options. Children can also benefit from having a therapist with a similar background (e.g., faith, race, gender). Sometimes this is hard to find, but it is appropriate to share that desire with a prospective therapist as a way of discerning whether they are a good fit.

Here is a breakdown of common types of specialized therapy. Most require professional training and certification beyond a general counseling or social work degree:

- *Talk Therapy* - Talk therapy is what many of us think of as "therapy." This is when a trained professional uses verbal sharing, processing, and reflection techniques to help people work through their mental health challenges. Talk therapy can be done individually or in duos and groups. Talk therapy is effective for general mental health challenges and concerns, including depression, family and school challenges, life changes, grief, and emotional regulation. Talk therapy relies heavily on the chemistry and communication between client and therapist or the group, so it is important for kids to find a talk therapist they can trust.
- *Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)* - CBT blends cognitive therapy with behavioral therapy. This approach focuses on challenging thoughts and beliefs, with the identifying behaviors that perpetuate them. CBT is a direct, specific, and goal-oriented therapy type. CBT can be extremely effective for a range of childhood mental health challenges including depression, eating disorders, and addictions. It is the treatment of choice for anxiety, phobias, and OCD.¹²
 - *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)* is a targeted CBT strategy that can be used to help kids accept their thoughts and feelings and commit to making behavioral changes that are good for them, no matter how they feel about those changes at the time.

- *Exposure and Ritual Prevention (ERP)* is a targeted CBT strategy that can be used to help kids overcome obsessions and compulsions.
- *Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)* - DBT is a variation of CBT used to manage overwhelming and destructive emotions and behaviors. It can help kids develop distress tolerance, mindfulness practices, emotional regulation skills, and relationship/interpersonal skills.¹³ DBT is a great option for kids who haven't been helped by other therapy types.
- *Pharmacotherapy (Psychiatric/Psychotropic Medication)* - Pharmacotherapy is the treatment of mental health conditions with medication. This should only happen under the direct care and supervision of a trained medical professional. Pharmacotherapy can be an effective treatment option—or part of a multipart treatment plan—for kids with attention and hyperactivity disorders, severe depression, bipolar disorder, and other serious mental illnesses. Medications should be carefully considered, chosen, monitored, and adjusted if needed.
- *Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)* - EMDR is a specific therapy type used to heal from trauma and painful life experiences. During EMDR sessions, a specially trained therapist supports a young person who talks through a painful memory while simultaneously watching a repetitive outside stimuli, like the therapist's fingers going back and forth or tapping.¹⁴ EMDR is a proven therapeutic intervention for children who survived traumatic events.
- *Play Therapy* - Play therapy is an interactive and interpersonal therapeutic technique where a therapist uses play to help children prevent or resolve difficulties and encourage healthy development and life skills. Play therapy is an effective treatment for children experiencing developmental and learning delays, disabilities, and for younger children.¹⁵
- *Art and Music Therapy* - Art and music therapies are interactive and expressive therapy types that use creating and viewing art and music to tap into and express deep emotions, which can be unspoken and unrealized. Art and music therapists provide young people with materials to create, view art, or listen to music and then use those experiences to help them process feelings and worries. Art and music therapy can be good for kids experiencing situational stressors like illness, divorce, or grief. It can also be helpful for kids who already consider themselves artistic or musical, or for those who don't want to talk about their problems.
- *Dance and Movement Therapy* - Dance/movement therapy focuses on body movement. It is highly individualized and aims to help young people improve self-esteem, body image, and strengthen their coping skills. Dance and movement therapy can be a great option for kids with developmental delays, those who are nonverbal, those who live in hospital or residential settings, and those with chronic or serious health issues.¹⁶

For more information on specific mental health conditions and recommended treatment options and guidelines, check out the book *Child & Adolescent Mental Health: A Practical, All-In-One Guide* by Dr. Jess P. Shatkin.