

NAVIGATING THE PATH TO THERAPY:

5 TIPS FOR PARENTS TO DISCUSS THERAPY WITH THEIR CHILD

Making the decision to bring your child to therapy is an important choice that involves both sensitivity and open communication. Thoughtful consideration to how you introduce a new idea (like going to therapy) can create a powerful way to strengthen or build healthy connection with your child. Here are five helpful things for parents to consider when introducing the concept of therapy with their child:

1. Reflect on Your Own Feelings about Therapy:

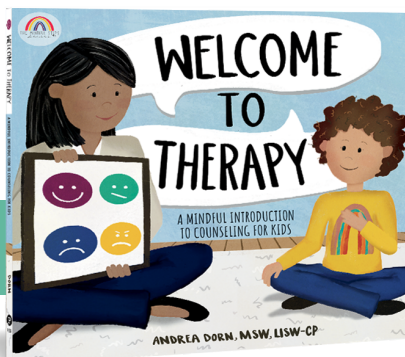
Before broaching the subject with your child, take a moment to reflect on your own feelings about therapy and your feelings about your child's mental health challenges. Sometimes, societal stigmas or personal biases can inadvertently affect how we communicate about mental health. It's important to approach the conversation with an open mind and a positive attitude, demonstrating that seeking help is a healthy and normal part of life. (Check out the accompanying handout to explore your own beliefs about therapy and your child's mental health challenges to help get you started.)

2. Assess Your Child's Knowledge about Therapy:

Gauge your child's understanding of therapy by gently exploring what they already know. Ask open-ended questions to understand if they've encountered this concept before, either through school, friends, or media. Older children and teens likely already know what "therapy" or "a therapist" is, however, there may be some confusion about what therapy is for or how it works. Understanding your child's existing knowledge will help you tailor your discussion to address any misconceptions or fears they may have.

3. Introduce and Discuss Therapy in an Age-appropriate Way:

When introducing therapy, choose a calm and neutral setting. Consider the age and temperament of your child to choose an appropriate time and place for your discussion. Frame therapy as a positive and supportive space where kids and even adults can share their thoughts and feelings with a grown-up. Emphasize that therapy is a tool for growth and self-discovery during tricky times. For young children, simple and concrete terms are usually most effective and books can be a helpful way to communicate in a way that is engaging and easy-to-understand.



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4. Ask if Your Child has Any Questions:

Encourage an open dialogue by inviting your child to ask questions. This empowers them to express any concerns or curiosities they may have. Be prepared to provide honest, age-appropriate, answers. Reassure them that their feelings and questions are valid, creating an environment of trust and understanding. Additionally, don't worry if your child doesn't have any questions. Younger children, especially, may not have any or may need some time to process this new information.

5. Follow Up Before and After the First Session

Before the first therapy session, consider briefly checking in with your child to see if they have any lingering questions or concerns. After the session, consider another quick check-in. Afterwards, keep the line of communication open by checking in every once in a while, regarding how therapy is going. It is possible to overdo checking in, so keep it brief and follow your child's lead here. This ongoing communication reinforces that their feelings and thoughts are important, fostering a sense of support and connection.

Helping children understand what to expect is an important way to maintain a sense of security and felt-safety when doing something new. By approaching the topic with sensitivity and openness, you lay the foundation for a positive, and beneficial, therapeutic journey for your whole family.

Written and illustrated by therapist (and mother) **Andrea Dorn, MSW**, *Welcome to Therapy* walks children through the process of starting therapy and normalizes the experience in simple, concrete, and developmentally appropriate terms **or use at home, in schools, or in session!**



pesi.com/welcome

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Welcome to Therapy

Caregiver Beliefs and Feelings Exercise

Deciding to bring your child to therapy can feel like a big step, and it's normal to have a mix of emotions. Before diving into conversations with your child about this new endeavor, take a moment to reflect on your own beliefs and feelings about therapy and the challenges your child is currently experiencing. This personal exploration can set the stage for open and honest discussions, making sure the journey starts off on a note you can feel good about.

Directions: Consider your beliefs in the first column below. **If needed**, work towards shifting your belief to be more neutral or positive in the second column. *Example:* Notice it: "Normal people don't go to therapy." Shift it: "Reaching out for help is a healthy and proactive step towards personal growth and well-being."

Notice it:

What is a belief I have about what it means to go to therapy?

How does this belief make me feel?



Shift it.

What might be a true and more helpful belief to focus on?

How would this new belief make me feel?

Notice it:

What is a belief I have about my child's mental health challenges?

How does this belief make me feel?



Shift it.

What might be a true and more helpful belief to focus on?

How would this new belief make me feel?

Notice it:

What is a belief I have about my parenting?

How does this belief make me feel?



Shift it.

What might be a true and more helpful belief to focus on?

How would this new belief make me feel?

Welcome to Therapy

Helpful Language for Caregivers

Sometimes, it can be difficult to know how to explain to a child why they may need to see a therapist. Simple, positive, and concrete explanations are usually best. Here are some helpful suggestions you can use as a starting point to help you better discuss any questions your child may have about why they are meeting with a therapist.

ADHD or attention difficulties: “Everyone’s brain works a little bit differently. Your brain has lots of energy and loves to be curious. Sometimes this can make it hard to focus on important things! A therapist can help you learn ways to focus when it feels tough.”

Anxiety or OCD: “When life gets tricky, it can sometimes make kids and adults grown-ups feel worried and nervous. A therapist can help you learn ways to help your body and mind feel calm and peaceful.”

Behavioral struggles: “Sometimes our brains and bodies can feel very busy, excited, and curious, and we might have a lot of energy. When this happens, it can be hard to focus and respect other people’s space. A therapist can help you learn ways to feel calm and peaceful and to respect others.”

Grief: “When someone special dies, kids and adults can have a lot of tricky feelings. A therapist can help you learn ways to feel better and remember the person who died.”

Depression: “When life gets tricky, it can sometimes make kids and adults grown-ups feel sad. A therapist can help you learn ways to help your body and mind feel better.”

Trauma: “When something scary happens, it can be tough on our bodies and minds. A therapist can help you work through tricky feelings and find ways to feel safe again after something scary happens.”

Bullying or friendship concerns: “Making friends and setting healthy boundaries can be tricky for kids and adults. A therapist can help you learn ways to find healthy friendships, stick up for what you think is right, and get help if you need it.”