

## Child Therapy: 19 Counseling Techniques & Worksheets for Kids

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<https://positivepsychology.com/child-therapy/>

- 10-04-2020



Child therapy is not always easy for parents to discuss.

With the stigma of mental health, nobody wants their child to “need therapy,” which is unfortunate because therapy can change lives.

Whether kids have traumatic issues or are struggling with the brave and simple act of being human, qualified professionals can help kids deal with really hard subjects.

It makes sense that parents and guardians need professional insight, especially for tender subjects or developmentally appropriate issues of growing up. Many people consider child therapy for huge topics like abuse, neglect, and trauma, but it can have an equally weighted focus on positive growth and strengths.

Therapy sessions can focus on working towards an optimistic future, developing positive coping methods, as well as boosting self-esteem, self-confidence, and other positive states and traits in children.

Whether the child is participating in play therapy, behavioral therapy, or expressive therapy, it can provide them with opportunities to survive after trauma and eventually, thrive.

Before you read on, we thought you might like to **download our 3 Positive Psychology Exercises for free**. These science-based exercises will explore fundamental aspects of positive psychology including strengths, values and self-compassion and will give you the tools to help foster the wellbeing of your children, students or young clients.

You can download the free PDF [here](#).

This article contains:

- **What is Child Therapy/Child Counseling?**
- **When is Child Therapy Effective?**
- **How an Emotional Child Can Benefit from Kids Therapy**

## What is Child Therapy?

Child therapy (also called child counseling) is similar to therapy and counseling for adults: it offers a safe space and an empathetic ear while providing tools to bring about change in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Just like adult clients, child clients receive emotional and goal support in their sessions. They can focus on resolving conflict, understanding their own thoughts and feelings, and on thinking of new solutions to their daily problems.

The only big difference between adult therapy and child therapy is the emphasis on making sure children understand what is happening, and how they are not alone.

Child therapy can be practiced with one child, a child, and a parent or parents, or even with more than one family. It is often administered by a counselor or therapist who specializes in working with children, and who can offer the parents and/or guardians insights that may not be immediately apparent.

The therapist and client(s) can cover a wide variety of issues that include:

- Divorce or separation;
- Death of a loved one;
- Trauma;
- Bullying;
- Sexual abuse;
- Emotional abuse;
- Physical abuse;
- Family or child relocation;
- Substance abuse or addiction in the family;
- Mental illness, like depression, anxiety, and **obsessive-compulsive disorder** (TherapyTribe, 2018).

Good therapy will be present and forward-oriented (meaning there will be little looking back or digging up the past) and will likely utilize non-verbal modalities like play, games, art, etcim.

## Goals of Child Therapy Sessions



**BUILD  
SELF-ESTEEM**



**IMPROVE  
COMMUNICATION  
SKILLS**



**DRIVE  
HEALTHY  
DEVELOPMENT**



**BUILD  
EMOTIONAL  
REPERTOIRE**



**BUILD  
EMOTIONAL  
VOCABULARY**



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In addition, the therapy sessions may focus on five important goals on top of any situation-specific goals:

1. Building the child's **self-esteem**.
2. Helping to improve the child's communication skills.
3. Stimulating healthy, normal development.
4. Building an appropriate emotional repertoire.
5. Improving the child's emotional vocabulary (Walker, 2014).

To summarize, child therapy is quite similar to therapy for adults in terms of the purpose, goals, and problems it can address, but it differs with the focus of explaining these topics to young children.

Techniques and exercises offer ways that are appropriate, for the child's age, to understand themselves in the world.

See our article on CBT for Children for more information.

## When is Child Therapy Effective?

If a parent or guardian is not sure whether the child needs counseling or not, the list of symptoms below can be a good indicator. If the child is experiencing one or more of these symptoms, coupled with the parent's concern, it's a good idea to take him or her in for an evaluation.

The following are symptoms that may indicate a problem that therapy can correct or help with:

- Unwarranted aggression;
- Incontinence;
- Difficulty adjusting to social situations;
- Frequent nightmare and sleep difficulties;
- A sudden drop in grades at school;
- Persistent worry and **anxiety**;
- Withdrawing from activities they normally enjoy;
- Loss of appetite or dramatic weight loss/gain;
- Performing obsessive routines like hand washing;
- Expressing thoughts of suicide;
- Talking about voices they hear in their head;
- Social isolation and wanting to be alone;
- Alcohol or drug use;
- Increased physical complaints despite a normal, healthy physician's report;
- Self-harm such as cutting (TherapyTribe, 2018).

In addition to these issues, the child may be dealing with:

- Persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness;
- Constant anger and a tendency to overreact to situations;
- Preoccupation with physical illness or their own appearance;
- An inability to concentrate, think clearly or make decisions;
- An inability to sit still;
- Diets or bingeing behavior;
- Violent acts such as setting fires or killing animals (Thompson Jr., 2010).

If parents decide to bring their child to therapy, they need to stay engaged throughout the therapy process.

The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry suggests asking the therapist or counselor the following questions:

- Why is **psychotherapy** being recommended?
- What results can I expect?
- How long will my child be involved in therapy?
- How frequently will the therapist see my child?
- Will the therapist be meeting with just my child or with the entire family?
- How much do psychotherapy sessions cost?
- How will we (the parents) be informed about our child's progress and how can we help?
- How soon can we expect to see some changes?

Similarly, there are some suggestions on how to talk to a child about going to counseling. It can feel uncomfortable to both the parent(s) and the child to talk about mental health treatment, but following these tips can help make it approachable:

- Find a good time to talk and assure them that they are not in trouble. **Listen actively.**
- Take your child's concerns, experiences, and emotions seriously.
- Try to be open, authentic, and relaxed.
- Talk about how common the issues they are experiencing may be.
- Explain that the role of a therapist is to provide help and support.
- Explain that a confidentiality agreement can be negotiated so children—especially adolescents—have a safe space to share details privately while acknowledging that you will be alerted if there are any threats to their safety (Wells, Sueskind, & Alcamo, 2017).

There are many effective forms of child therapy with evidence to back them up, including Applied Behavior Analysis, Behavior Therapy, **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy**, Cognitive Therapy, **Family Therapy**, **Interpersonal Psychotherapy**, and Organization Training (Society of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 2017).

Younger children may also benefit from **Play Therapy**, and older adolescents may benefit from **Dialectical Behavior Therapy**, **Group Therapy**, or **Psychodynamic Psychotherapy** (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2017).

These therapies may be administered on their own, in combination with other therapies, or as a hodge-podge of techniques and exercises from several different types of therapies. In addition, it may or may not be accompanied by medication, depending on the situation.

One of these therapies may work for a child far better than the others, and the type chosen will depend on the issue(s) the child and family are dealing with. Like with any

form of therapy, it is most effective when everyone involved is on board, supportive, and contributing to its success.

## How an Emotional Child Can Benefit from Therapy



An overly emotional child (or one that struggles with inappropriate emotional expression or emotional dysregulation) may be suffering from one or more of a variety of issues, including ADHD, mental illness, anxiety, or even an autism spectrum disorder.

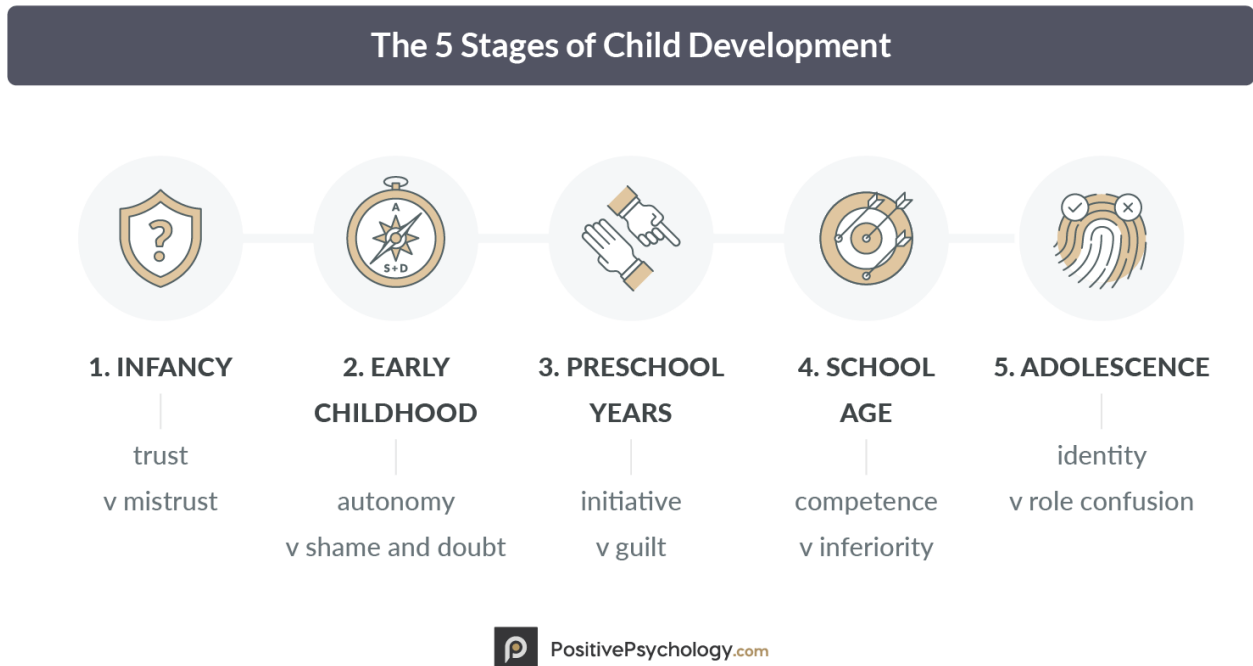
Whatever the issue they are facing, child therapy can help them deal with it.

Cognitive therapy is a good choice for emotional children, as it involves reducing anxiety and learning new ideas and new ways to channel the child's feelings and energy. It will also help him or her to identify their inner thoughts, and try to replace the negative ones with more positive, helpful ones.

Applied behavior analysis can help the child learn how to respond to situations in better, more effective ways, and will teach them about rewards and punishments for their behavior. Play therapy is a good choice for younger children with emotional issues since they can act them out through toys or dolls (KidsMentalHealth, 2009).

The type of therapy and techniques that will work best for the child may also depend on which stage of development they are in; Erik Erikson's groundbreaking theory on the eight stages of psychosocial development is a commonly recognized and accepted theory and can help differentiate between normal, age-appropriate issues and more

troublesome symptoms.



The first five stages of development are:

1. *Infancy*: Trust vs Mistrust. In this stage, infants require a great deal of attention and comfort from their parents, leading them to develop their first sense of trust (or, in some cases, mistrust).
2. *Early Childhood*: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt. Toddlers and very young children are beginning to assert their independence and develop their unique personality, making tantrums and defiance common.
3. *Preschool Years*: Initiative vs. Guilt. Children at this stage begin learning about social roles and norms, their imagination takes off at this point, and the defiance and tantrums of the previous stage will likely continue. The way trusted adults interact with the child will encourage him or her to act independently or to develop a sense of guilt about any inappropriate actions.
4. *School Age*: Industry (Competence) vs. Inferiority. At this stage, the child is building important relationships with peers and is likely beginning to feel the pressure of academic performance; mental health issues may begin at this stage, including depression, anxiety, ADHD, and other problems.

5. *Adolescence: Identity vs. Role Confusion.* The adolescent is reaching new heights of independence and is beginning to experiment and develop their identity. Problems with communication and sudden emotional and physical changes are common at this stage (Wells, Sueskind, & Alcamo, 2017).

The final three stages are not relevant for the purposes of discussing child therapy, but they are listed here if you're curious:

1. *Young Adulthood: Love – Intimacy vs. Isolation*
2. *Middle Adulthood: Care – Generativity vs. Stagnation*
3. *Late Adulthood: Ego Integrity vs. Despair*

Based on these life stages, we know that it is common for children in early childhood to throw tantrums when they don't get their way; tantrums alone aren't reason enough to seek a therapist. However, if someone of school age is still throwing tantrums, it may be time to explore therapy and counseling options.

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