



SCHEMA THERAPY

FOR CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS & PARENTS

Understanding emotional needs, recurring patterns and healthier ways to cope.

A different question to ask

Instead of asking only "How do we stop this behaviour?", schema therapy also explores "What is the child feeling, needing and trying to protect?"

What is schema therapy?

Schema therapy is an integrative psychological approach that explores enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, relationships and coping. With children and teenagers, ideas are explained through age-appropriate stories, play, drawings and activities.

Why might it be helpful?

- When the same emotional or behavioural difficulties keep recurring.
- When a young person is highly sensitive to rejection, criticism or perceived failure.
- When avoidance, withdrawal, anger or excessive pleasing seem to protect them from difficult emotions.
- When parents and children become stuck in repeated cycles of conflict.

An individual assessment helps determine whether this approach is suitable.



The building blocks of schema therapy

These concepts help explain what sits beneath a child's behaviour.

1 Core emotional needs

Children benefit from connection, safety, acceptance, autonomy, room for feelings and age-appropriate limits. Needs are shaped by development, relationships and context.

2 Schemas: recurring beliefs

Repeated experiences can contribute to patterns such as "I am not good enough", "People will leave me" or "I must be perfect". These are hypotheses to explore, not labels to impose.

3 Modes: emotional states

A child may shift between feeling vulnerable, angry, detached, self-critical or capable. Modes describe moment-to-moment states, not separate personalities.

4 Coping responses

Children may respond to distress by giving in, avoiding, or overcompensating. The goal is to understand the protective function and build more flexible coping.

Notice the need → name the feeling → practise a helpful response



What happens in therapy?

Treatment is tailored to the child's age, developmental profile, strengths and family circumstances.

- Build trust and identify strengths, interests and supportive relationships.
- Explore emotional needs, important experiences and recurring patterns.
- Use child-friendly mode language, stories, drawing, puppets or cards to notice feelings and coping.
- Practise emotion regulation, flexible thinking, problem-solving and healthy boundaries.
- Involve parents or caregivers where appropriate, including coaching on emotional connection and responses.

Example: a child who reacts strongly to mistakes

A therapist might explore whether the child feels ashamed or fears disappointing others. Together they practise recognising this vulnerable feeling, responding more kindly to themselves and trying again with support.

Important clinical point

Therapy is not simply permissive parenting. It combines empathy and emotional attunement with developmentally appropriate expectations and safe, consistent limits.

Acute safety concerns or other severe symptoms require timely clinical assessment and may need different or additional care.



What can parents do at home?

- Connect before correcting: acknowledge the feeling while keeping the boundary.
- Be curious: ask "What was the hardest part?" rather than assuming motives.
- Notice patterns: what happened before, during and after the reaction?
- Model repair: apologise when appropriate and reconnect after conflict.
- Praise effort, flexibility and courage rather than only results.
- Make space for safe play, choice and age-appropriate independence.

Try this simple response

"I can see this feels really upsetting. I am here to help you. It is okay to feel angry, and it is not okay to hurt someone. Let us work out what you need."

About this resource

An original parent-friendly psychoeducation summary informed by Christof Loose's Schema Therapy for Children, Adolescents and Parents (ST-CA) introductory workshop materials (2024 and 2025). Not a reproduction of the training materials or a substitute for assessment.

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