



by Karen Stephens

# Counseling: How Parents Can Support the Process of Children's Therapy

If you are one of the families taking advantage of good counseling services (and there are more of you brave ones than most realize), this column is for you. It looks at ways to support children as they progress in therapy.

First, be clear in your mind about your goals. Work to develop realistic expectations. Therapists don't "fix" children or families. They don't make problems magically disappear overnight. Good therapists help children and families reflect upon their own motivations and behaviors. And they help people learn to cope with and solve their own problems.

During an interview, Connor Walters, Ph.D., certified Family Life Educator and former Marriage and Family Therapist, described therapy with an enlightening metaphor. She says that just as a house needs scaffolding to remain stable during construction, families benefit from the support of a therapist when working to create a stable home life. In therapy, Walters says, it's the child and family who must do the real work of construction. The therapist provides the setting and guidance so that family dynamics, such as attitudes, motivations, relationships, and behaviors can be discussed constructively.

If your child requires counseling services, there's a lot parents can do to help make the experience successful. I list some ways below. I hope they help both you and your child. When stress is overwhelming, therapy isn't the easy way out; but it is a wise one.

- Maintain a hopeful, positive attitude about the therapy process and possible outcomes. Express trust and confidence that the therapist will help your child.
- As applicable, encourage involved family members to be positive about therapy, too. Never let siblings or other family members tease a child for being in counseling. Verbally stand up for your child if necessary: "I won't let you hurt your brother/sister's feelings. She's brave and smart to be visiting with \_\_\_\_\_."
- Convey confidence in your child's ability to successfully cope. Openly tell them you are proud of them for speaking with someone. Reassure children that you understand it's hard to talk about uncomfortable feelings or events.
- Avoid treating your child like a helpless victim. Let your child know you believe they are resilient and can handle their emotions. Treating a child like a victim, or encouraging them to gain sympathy by acting like a victim, does not help them learn to manage life constructively.
- Let children know they have your permission to speak honestly with a counselor. Often children hold back feelings as a way to "protect" parents or family pride. When parents ask children to keep "family secrets," problems don't get resolved — just avoided. Buried problems often fester to undermine mental health. Let the sun shine in to promote healing.

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- Therapy can be both emotionally and physically draining for kids or adults. To bolster children's energy, keep family life as predictable and stable as possible. Be sure your child gets the basics of nourishment daily: food/water, exercise, sleep, and time with you.
- Avoid pressuring your child to talk about every detail discussed in counseling. And don't talk to your child only about "his or her problem." Too much focus on therapy may lead a child to think his/her "problem" is more important than any other aspect of life. Continue caring about kids' school work, friends, and participation in athletics.

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- Be prepared to listen when children initiate conversation. Connor Walters encourages parents to build in time every day for spontaneous conversation. You never know when "heart to heart" talks may occur, but they are more likely during quiet calm times when the television or radio is off.
- If the therapist invites you to be part of your child's counseling sessions, be open to it. Family therapy is a very efficient way of addressing issues that impact everyone; rarely do a child's struggles occur in isolation.
- Support coping methods the therapist teaches your child. For instance, some therapists encourage children to draw pictures, write a daily journal, or practice relaxation breathing. Avoid scoffing at such methods even if you doubt their value with your particular child.
- Keep up with written progress reports the therapist provides. Make it to requested meetings to discuss progress. Facilitate sharing of information between child care, school, and therapist if requested.
- And sadly, I must end with a caution. Be alert to your child's verbal as well as non-verbal communication. As occurs in any profession, there are some unethical or downright lousy counselors. If you have any doubts about your child's emotional or physical welfare during therapy, look elsewhere! And for other children's sake, if a therapist steps out of professional bounds, report him/her to child welfare authorities.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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