



by Karen Stephens

# Counseling: How to Select a Children's Mental Health Therapist

It's hard accepting that your child needs professional help to cope with life. Sadly, reaching out beyond hearth and home continues to carry a taboo in a lot of circles. But I believe emotionally abandoning kids and failing to get them skilled help just so the false image of a "picture-perfect" family can be maintained is what should be taboo. A mature, compassionate parent ranks their child's need for skilled support higher than concern over judgmental public or family gossip.

I know that's not easy, but sometimes getting professional services is the most constructive way to maintain a dignified family life — and to save a childhood. Functional families get help early, so problems are nipped in the bud before they ferment into a pressure cooker explosion of chaos.

If you have decided your child could benefit from mental health services, there are good options within reach. Your child can't access them alone; he or she must depend upon you to be a faithful advocate.

## Locating a Child or Family Therapist

Finding mental health resources takes investigation. Following are sources to consider: pediatrician; county mental health agency; employee assistance program; trusted friend's word-of-mouth referral; phone book yellow pages (often listed under therapists, psychologists, mental health services), human service hotlines, or child protection agencies.

You can also search out web sites. They can inform you about therapists' certification, training, and licensing requirements in your particular state. Some web sites maintain directories of professionals and offer free consumer guides and resources. Following are a few: *American Association for Marriage & Family Therapists*: [www.TherapistLocator.net](http://www.TherapistLocator.net); *National Association of Social Workers*: [www.naswdc.org](http://www.naswdc.org); *American Counseling Association*: [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org); *National Board of Certified Counselors*: [www.nbcc.org/cfind/](http://www.nbcc.org/cfind/).

## Selecting a Therapist: Questions to explore

You'll be looking for a "best fit" match between a therapist and your particular child and family. That match will vary depending on your child's unique needs and the therapist's unique talents or training.

You can gather information by speaking with potential candidates by phone, or preferably in face-to-face interviews. Whether one or both methods are used, start by finding out if a fee for the exploratory interview will be charged.

There will be other logistical realities to consider. Can you find someone whose fee you can afford? Could services be covered by your health insurance? Location, hours of service, and even length and frequency of sessions will also affect your decision.

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Connor Walters, Ph.D, certified Family Life Educator and former Marriage and Family Therapist, suggests asking potential counselors specific questions before you make a final selection:

- What are the therapist's training, certification or licensing, and experience? Is the therapist well-versed in typical child development, rather than primarily atypical? She cautions that some challenging childhood behavior really is age-appropriate and not pathological at all. You want to find a therapist who knows the difference.

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- What age of child does the therapist prefer to counsel and have the most experience serving?
- What types of childhood problems does he or she have the most experience in counseling? (This may range widely, including, but not limited to: depression, chronic anxiety, excessive fears or phobias, aggressive behavior, eating disorders, chronic health conditions, family divorce, poor self esteem, learning disabilities, etc.)
- What therapy methods might be used with your child, for instance: play therapy, stress management, relaxation training, and/or family therapy? What type of testing will be involved?
- What confidentiality and ethics policies are followed for children and parents? Are there situations (such as suspected child abuse and neglect, drug abuse, or domestic violence) the therapist is mandated by the state to report?
- Does the therapist feel skilled in building trusting relationships with children as well as adults or is most of his/her work with adults rather than children? Walters cautions parents that some therapists may build a rapport well with parents, but not with children. You want someone skilled at communicating with adults *and* children, not one or the other. Skills with children should take priority if you can't find a counselor who communicates easily with both age groups.
- Who will be allowed, or even encouraged, to participate in your child's sessions?
- Is the therapist open to working as a team to help children? Will he or she consider child care or school professionals' input while counseling your child?
- In what ways and how often will the therapist expect to communicate progress or concerns to you? Will meetings be scheduled with you? Will progress be reported by phone or written report?
- What is the therapist's estimation for duration of therapy? Number of therapy visits kids require varies widely depending on particular issues. Walters reminds us that "therapy is a process." That means the timing of its successful accomplishment can't be predicted with pinpoint accuracy. Some issues really can be solved very simply, and thus will require just a few visits. However, other issues may require many months or even years of help.

**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*.