

Making the Most of Therapy for the Child in Your Care

Mental health providers, such as therapists, can be invaluable navigators on a child’s or youth’s healing path. As a caregiver, involvement in therapy can range from merely providing transportation to sitting in on sessions and assisting in developing therapy goals. The child in your care may have a long-standing relationship with a particular therapist, or you may be actively involved in finding a therapist who is a good fit for the child’s personality and needs. Regardless of the level of involvement you are asked to provide by the child’s team, there are things you can do to help make the most of this critical component of healing.

Establish good communication with the child’s mental health provider.

Although the child’s therapist may be the expert on therapeutic approaches, you bring invaluable information about the child’s day-to-day behaviors. Do your best to share anything relevant and notable with the child’s therapist. For example, if you notice any specific behavioral triggers, patterns of moods or behaviors, changes in moods or behaviors, or information the child has shared with you that may be relevant. Depending on the child’s particular situation, it may be appropriate for you to sit in on at least a portion of the child’s session or meet with the therapist separately to discuss concerns or progress.



Be responsive to the child’s feedback concerning therapy or the therapist.

If the child expresses that they do not like or are not comfortable with the therapist, communicate that information to the child’s case manager. Pay particular attention if the child has not made any progress over an extended period, is triggered by the mention of therapy, and/or is resistant to a particular therapist. Not every therapist or therapy approach will be a good fit for every child,

and that child may need your help in advocating for working with someone they are more comfortable with. Progress may mean working through some difficult memories or issues that leave the child feeling shaken or emotional, but that is different than the child expressing that they do not feel safe with or

trust their therapist. If the child strongly dislikes a particular provider, it’s unlikely they will progress toward therapeutic goals or healing.

Be present to talk with the child before and after therapy sessions.

The child may or may not wish to talk about therapy, but knowing you are available to listen actively can go a long way in helping make sessions more productive. Some children and youth express that they don’t know what to say in therapy or how to bring up what they’d like to address. The drive to the therapist’s office can be a non-threatening time to offer suggestions if the child is open to it. You may offer a gentle

Continued on page 2

reminder of something that came up since the last session that was difficult or challenging. (“Remember how angry you got with Maya last week, and you didn’t even understand why?”) Has there been anything on their mind they would like help processing? Be careful to approach the conversation in a supportive and helpful way rather than accusatory. And be available to help the child process their feelings after a session without pressing the issue if they don’t wish to talk.

Advocate for a foster care or adoption competent therapist.

Not all therapists are experienced with children and youth who have experienced the grief, loss, and trauma of foster care and adoption. It makes a difference. Don’t be afraid to ask mental health providers about their experience with foster care and adoption.

Check your feelings about therapy.

Perhaps you came from a family culture that believes that “family business” should remain in the family, and you’ve had little to no experience with therapy or mental health professionals. While that approach may work for you, children and youth in out-of-home care have experienced trauma that is going to require some level of intervention. Regardless of your feelings about the value of therapy or your level of comfort with it, supporting the child’s established therapeutic plan is crucial.

Remember to be mindful of confidentiality.

What’s said in therapy should stay in therapy. If you are a part of the child’s therapy session or if the child shares with you things discussed in sessions, it’s crucial not to betray that trust by using that information against the child or sharing it with anyone else. The therapist’s office needs to be a sacred, safe place where things don’t

get leaked to birth family members, other foster family members, etc.

Ultimately, the most important thing you can do to help make the most of the child’s therapy is to be cooperative and supportive of the process. Just as teachers alone cannot be responsible for a child’s education, mental health providers don’t solely hold the healing for children who have suffered trauma. Open communication can help assure you and the child’s team are on the same page about the therapeutic plan and goals and how they can be collectively supported outside the therapist’s office.



Resources

Tip Sheets

- [The Wider Scope of Therapy](#)
- [Uncovering Myths about Therapy](#)

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *In Their Own Words: Reflections on Parenting Children with Mental Health Issues*, by Linda Grillo, Dee Meaney, & Christine Rich
- *Some Bunny to Talk to: A Story about Going to Therapy*, by Cheryl Sterling, Paola Conte, & Larissa Labay
- *Parenting with Theraplay – Understanding Attachment and How to Nurture a Closer Relationship with Your Child*, by Helen Rodwell & Vivien Norris

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Youth and Mental Health](#)
- [An Introduction to Trauma's Influence on the Brain, Body, and Behavior](#)