

# Therapy for Children ~ What Happens in There?

Mental Health & Children Series



■ by Janet Irvine, PsyD, Licensed Clinical Psychologist & Clinical Coordinator

Children and adolescents are brought to therapy for a variety of reasons. Parents often seek help for a variety of reasons, including negative behavior at home, poor academic progress, adjustment to divorce or death, and any number of mental health or behavioral problems. Professionals may also refer for these same issues.

The first appointment is with a parent or guardian, without the child. Not having the child there allows parents to speak freely about their concerns. The therapist conducts an interview regarding the child's major issues or worries. Reviewing school records and a thorough developmental history is also part of this interview.



On the second session the therapist meets the child with the parent. It involves reviewing the positive side of the child. As the session ensues, the parent is asked what worries them about the child. The child may or may not join in the discussion but prefer to play with toys, or sit quietly (or sullenly!) Generally the parent is asked to leave the room and the therapist plays a game or simply "chats." Once the child is at ease, the parent re-enters. Usually I set a goal to try until our next session. Often I create charts targeted at replacing one or two negative behaviors with those that are appropriate. I assure them that if this is not achievable between now and the next appointment, we will figure other things out to make sure there is success.

At the third session the parents, child and I assess how well the child achieved the goal. Most of the time, there is enthusiastic conversation as the parents and child discuss the positive events that occurred.

Other sessions might include reinforcing the behavior we worked on, or adding other behaviors that need improving. Many times, therapy involves parent training, using good disciplinary techniques, and ways to handle annoying or upsetting behaviors.

If no improvement is noted after 3 or 4 sessions, I suggest having the parents and a teacher at school fill out some inventories (requiring true/false responses.) This helps pin-point underlying issues. Using the results, the parent and I decide collaboratively what might be beneficial to the child, including increased accommodations at school or sometimes medication.

Child therapy requires a team effort with lots of input from the parents, child, and teachers as the therapist attempts to define the issues and work on problem solving. It is challenging, gratifying work! ■



*Janet Irvine enjoys working with children and families in our Orland Park location.*

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