

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

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Psychotherapies for Children and Adolescents

Psychotherapy is a form of psychiatric treatment that involves therapeutic conversations and interactions between a therapist and a child or family. It can help children and families understand and resolve problems, modify behavior, and make positive changes in their lives. There are several types of psychotherapy that involve different approaches, techniques and interventions. At times, a combination of different psychotherapy approaches may be helpful. In some cases a combination of medication with psychotherapy may be more effective.

Different types of psychotherapy: (alphabetical order)

- **Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)** helps improve a child's moods, anxiety and behavior by examining confused or distorted patterns of thinking. CBT therapists teach children that thoughts cause feelings and moods which can influence behavior. During CBT, a child learns to identify harmful thought patterns. The therapist then helps the child replace this thinking with thoughts that result in more appropriate feelings and behaviors. Research shows that CBT can be effective in treating a variety of conditions, including depression and anxiety. Specialized forms of CBT have also been developed to help children coping with post-traumatic stress disorder.
- **Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)** can be used to treat older adolescents who have chronic suicidal feelings/thoughts, engage in intentionally self-harmful behaviors or have Borderline Personality Disorder. DBT emphasizes taking responsibility for one's problems and helps the person examine how they deal with conflict and intense negative emotions. This often involves a combination of group and individual sessions.
- **Family Therapy** focuses on helping the family function in more positive and constructive ways by exploring patterns of communication and providing support and education. Family therapy sessions can include the child or adolescent along with parents, siblings, and grandparents. *Couples therapy* is a specific type of family therapy that focuses on a couple's communication and interactions (e.g. parents having marital problems).
- **Group Therapy** is a form of psychotherapy where there are multiple patients led by one or more therapists. It uses the power of group dynamics and peer

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interactions to increase understanding of mental illness and/or improve social skills. There are many different types of group therapy (e.g. psychodynamic, social skills, substance abuse, multi-family, parent support, etc.).

- **Interpersonal Therapy (IPT)** is a brief treatment specifically developed and tested for depression, but also used to treat a variety of other clinical conditions. IPT therapists focus on how interpersonal events affect an individual's emotional state. Individual difficulties are framed in interpersonal terms, and then problematic relationships are addressed
- **Play Therapy** involves the use of toys, blocks, dolls, puppets, drawings and games to help the child recognize, identify, and verbalize feelings. The psychotherapist observes how the child uses play materials and identifies themes or patterns to understand the child's problems. Through a combination of talk and play the child has an opportunity to better understand and manage their conflicts, feelings, and behavior.
- **Psychodynamic Psychotherapy** emphasizes understanding the issues that motivate and influence a child's behavior, thoughts, and feelings. It can help identify a child's typical behavior patterns, defenses, and responses to inner conflicts and struggles. *Psychoanalysis* is a specialized, more intensive form of psychodynamic psychotherapy which usually involved several sessions per week. Psychodynamic psychotherapies are based on the assumption that a child's behavior and feelings will improve once the inner struggles are brought to light.

Psychotherapy is not a quick fix or an easy answer. It is a complex and rich process that, over time, can reduce symptoms, provide insight, and improve a child or adolescent's functioning and quality of life.

At times, a combination of different psychotherapy approaches may be helpful. In some cases a combination of medication with psychotherapy may be more effective. Child and adolescent psychiatrists are trained in different forms of psychotherapy and, if indicated, are able to combine these forms of treatment with medications to alleviate the child or adolescent's emotional and/or behavioral problems.

[Click here to find a Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist near you.](#)

For more information see *Facts for Families*:

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The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 8,500 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

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