

Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy:



A guide for parents, carers and families

One in ten children and young people suffer from mental health disorders, including emotional and behavioural problems. Many more have less severe difficulties that can affect the way they develop, learn and have relationships.

Children and young people may respond to people and situations in ways they do not understand and cannot control. Their emotions can be very powerful and are often expressed through their behaviour, which can cause distress to themselves and those around them.

Children and young people with mental health problems, and their families, need help to overcome their difficulties. Specialist mental health professionals such as child and adolescent psychotherapists can help make sense of a child or young person's difficulties and their impact on the family.

What is child and adolescent psychotherapy?

Child and adolescent psychotherapy is a psychoanalytic treatment for children, young people and families. Child and adolescent psychotherapists treat a range of emotional and behavioural problems not easily addressed by other methods of treatment.

Therapists are trained to carefully observe a child or young person and respond to what they might be communicating through their behaviour and play. They have particular skill in putting into words the troubled feelings that children evoke in them.

They also apply their framework of thinking to work with parents, families and carers and to training and supporting other professionals who work with children and young people to ensure a deeper understanding of the child's perspective.

How do child and adolescent psychotherapists work?

Therapists may see a child or young person **individually**, in a **group** with other children or young people or **with parents or other family members**.

Therapists may also see parents or carers without the child being present. Sometimes the child is seen by another professional while work with the parents goes on; sometimes only the parents are worked with. The work may focus on helping the parent make sense of the child's behaviour, as well as how the parent's own issues might interfere with their ability to parent. It may also explore different possibilities in parenting styles.

Therapists also **help to support other professionals** who work with children and young people including teachers, social workers, health visitors, doctors, nursery staff and youth workers.

What happens in a typical session with a child?

Child and adolescent psychotherapists tailor their approach to the individual child and work in an age-appropriate way. They are trained to respond to the way a child wishes to communicate.

During an individual session, young children do not usually talk directly about difficult things but may communicate through play using the toys provided. Older children may also play or draw whilst teenagers might talk about their feelings. Infants and parents are seen together to think about their patterns of interaction.

To a trained eye, play is a powerful form of communication which may express how a child feels and the difficulties he or she may be experiencing. The relationship between the child and the therapist is central to the treatment.

How long does treatment last?

Interventions with children, young people and/or parents may be short-term or long-term, from as few as two to six sessions to regular appointments over several years. Research has demonstrated the existence of a 'sleeper effect', with adults who had been treated as children or young people still feeling its impact many years later.

What range of difficulties are treated?

Child and adolescent psychotherapists are able to treat a wide range of difficulties faced by children and young people across the age range, from infancy to adolescence, and work with their parents.

In work with under-fives, they might help parents and infants to overcome difficulties around sleeping, feeding, aggressive outbursts and tantrums.

In work with older children, they may see those who are experiencing problems with peer relationships, who are underachieving at school or who are demonstrating oppositional behaviour.

In work with adolescents, they may treat young people who have eating disorders, who self harm, who are depressed or anxious or who suffer from insecurity and a lack of confidence.

Child and adolescent psychotherapists may also specialise in particular areas, such as work with looked after or adopted children and their carers; children with learning difficulties and disabilities; children and young people with chronic, acute or long-term illness; and children suffering the effects of neglect or abuse.

"I never thought the sessions could help but they did. It makes you realise that other things affect you other than the physical that you need to address as well."

Young patient seen in hospital

"I think all children who have had a difficult start should be offered therapy, because it will give them a chance to express their feelings about what has happened to them."

Teenage girl

What are the benefits of child and adolescent psychotherapy?

For children and young people

Through the relationship with the therapist in a consistent setting, the child or young person may begin to feel able to express their most troubling thoughts and feelings.

“Why didn’t anyone ask me these questions before? I’ve been waiting such a long time for someone to help me understand. You don’t seem phased, it’s like I’m not that crazy, it all has a reason.”

Teenager

Confused, frightened, hurt, angry or painful feelings can gradually be put into words rather than actions. The therapist can help the child make sense of their own experience and develop their own individuality and potential.

The child or young person may begin to feel less anxious, more able to learn and better equipped to sustain friendships and other relationships.

Research has shown that improvements are long-term, with adults who were treated as children or young people still feeling its impact many years later.

“Some children need help to talk about things. When I finish going I hope I won’t find it hard to talk about my feelings, things that happen at school and about the past.”

Nine-year-old

For parents, carers and families

Parents, carers and other family members can feel overwhelmed by a child or young person’s difficulties and their impact on the rest of the family.

The input of a therapist can help them make sense of a child’s behaviour, explore how their own issues might interfere with their ability to parent well and look at different possibilities in parenting styles. The space to explore the relationships within the family in a supportive environment can result in improvements in the quality of life within the family.

“My son is developing better than we could ever have imagined and I am very proud to say that. He’s now able to be at the local school, which we could not have imagined before.”

Father of adoptive son

How much does it cost and how can I access this service for my family?

Child and adolescent psychotherapy is available free through multidisciplinary Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) within the NHS, though access does vary around the country.

It is also available in some schools, hospitals and through voluntary agencies. Ask your GP, health visitor, social worker or child's school for a referral to your local CAMHS or for information on whether child psychotherapy assessment or treatment is available in other local services. Some services accept self-referrals.

If you are interested in seeking the kind of help a child and adolescent psychotherapist can offer and are in a position to fund this yourself, you may be able to find a practitioner working privately in your area.

"The child psychotherapists were a real tower of strength to us as there were times when I felt I couldn't cope. Their involvement with us and the ward staff has been a lifeline to us and helped us through this difficult time."

Grandmother

There is no standard scale of fees and all therapists will discuss their charges on an individual basis with their clients. You should not feel inhibited about asking how much each stage will cost before you make an appointment.

To find a child and adolescent psychotherapist working privately in your area, please visit our website.

www.childpsychotherapy.org.uk

Positive long-term outcomes

Child and adolescent psychotherapists offer positive long-term outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Research shows that child and adolescent psychotherapy is effective in treating children with a wide range of difficulties, including depression, anxiety, behaviour and eating disorders, learning difficulties and disabilities, developmental issues and personality disorders, as well as those who have suffered maltreatment.

Child and adolescent psychotherapy is recognised by the government as a core profession within NHS Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and is recommended in NICE guidance on depression in children and young people.

Useful resources

To find out more about child and adolescent psychotherapy and how it can help your family, please visit our website:

www.childpsychotherapy.org.uk

There you will find useful resources including:

- Links to the **Understanding Your Child** series of books dealing with parenting from infancy to adolescence
- Access to **free leaflets** on many aspects of family life, including advice for fathers and information on dealing with divorce, separation and bereavement
- **Find a Therapist**: a searchable database of child and adolescent psychotherapists working privately in the UK and abroad
- Information about the **training** of child and adolescent psychotherapists
- Further information about accessing child and adolescent psychotherapy for your family

The **Association of Child Psychotherapists** (ACP) is the main professional body for psychoanalytic child and adolescent psychotherapists in the United Kingdom.

The ACP is responsible for ensuring that the training and practice of child and adolescent psychotherapy is of the highest standard. It also provides information to the public about child psychotherapy and is working to increase its availability to children and young people within the public sector, including the NHS.

Established in 1949, we have over 800 members working in the UK and abroad. Child and adolescent psychotherapists who have qualified at one of our five recognised training schools are eligible for full membership of the ACP, which enables them to work with children in a range of settings. Those accepted as trainees by any of the recognised training bodies are eligible for student membership.

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