

Finding a Therapist for Child and Youth Evidence-Based Treatment

This handout is for youth, families and community professionals who are looking for a therapist who delivers “evidence-based treatment”. Evidence-based treatments are programs of therapy that have been shown in scientific studies to be more helpful than no treatment or alternative treatments. Evidenced-based treatments target specific problem areas (depression, anxiety, behavior problems), are structured and focused, and teach children and families new practical skills to change behaviors and cope with difficult feelings.

There are different types of evidence-based treatments. Most evidence-based treatments for child and adolescent problems are *cognitive behavioral* or *behavioral*. Some are “brand-name” and you can ask for the particular therapy by name (for example, “Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy”, “Parent-Child Interaction Therapy”, “Triple P”, “Incredible Years”). In general, these therapies contain standard components that directly address changing the behaviors and thoughts that are causing difficulties for the child, the family or the community.

Evidence-based treatments generally have the following characteristics:

- In addition to a clinical interview, the therapist often uses specific checklists or questionnaires that are scored to find the main clinical problem area(s) and help to decide on the best treatment. The results of the interview and questionnaires are discussed with clients to get agreement on the clinical problem area and the steps for treatment. Questionnaires may be given throughout treatment to find out if the treatment is working.
- Therapy is active and involves changing thoughts or behavior, not just talking about problems or listening to the therapist give advice.
- There is a plan, or agenda, for every session that is based on what the clinical problem is and the steps for learning new information or skills.
- Clients and often their parent/caregiver(s) learn and practice specific practical skills in session with the therapist.
- Learning new skills starts right away. Therapists do not take a lot of sessions just getting to know the children or parent/caregiver(s). They build a relationship with the family WHILE teaching and practicing new skills.
- Clients and their parents/caregivers are asked to practice skills in-between sessions. Evidence-based therapies usually involve homework!
- When children’s main problem is **behavior** (acting up), the therapist will plan to meet mainly, or only, with parent/caregiver(s). They will learn different ways to respond to child behavior to change it. Individual therapy with children is not the most effective approach. When the main problem is **depression or anxiety**, the therapist will spend more time meeting alone with children but the parent/caregiver(s) will usually be involved to learn how to reinforce the new skills children are learning.
- Treatment is short-term, usually 12-20 sessions.

Training for evidence-based therapists:

- Sometimes therapists have received a certificate that documents the training or certification in a particular evidence-based practice. You can ask to see it!
- Often the training includes a period of clinical supervision while providing the treatment to clients.
- It is best when the therapist receives ongoing clinical supervision or consultation in evidence-based practice.

As a consumer of therapy services, you are encouraged to ask questions and find out more about the type of therapy that is offered and the training and supervision of the therapist. It is up to you to decide what kind of therapy and which therapist you think is best for the situation. As you ask questions, if the therapy is evidence-based, you would expect to hear some of the information provided above. Consider this an interview—the therapist is “interviewing” to treat your child.

Suggested questions for therapists:

1. What type of therapy do you offer? What is it called? Tell me how the therapy works, and about the main components of the therapy.
2. How do you decide what type of therapy is best for a particular problem or diagnosis? Do you use standardized measures or questionnaires as part of your clinical assessment?
3. What is your approach to treating behavior problems? Who do you meet with mainly?
4. What is your approach to treating anxiety and depression?
5. In what evidence-based treatments have you had training? Tell me a little about the training? Did you receive any type of certification?
6. Do you receive clinical supervision or consultation for the evidence-based therapy that you do?
7. To about how many clients have you delivered the therapy?
8. Where can I learn more about the therapy? Can you direct me to websites or other resources that have information about the therapy? Do you have any materials that describe the therapy?
9. What will be expected of us for the treatment to work the best? How long does it typically last?
10. How do you monitor if the treatment is working? How do you decide when the treatment has worked or has been successful or when it may need to be changed because there is not enough progress?

Choosing a therapist is like choosing any other professional who delivers a service. The decision about whether it is the right fit is up to the client.