

Parent Management Therapy/Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (PMT/CBT) for Behavior Problems

What is Parent Management Training/Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Behavior Problems?

Parent Management Training (PMT)/Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT) helps parents/caregivers learn how to respond to their children in ways that promote more positive behaviors and less negative behaviors and improve parent-child and family relationships. It can also involve teaching children (and their parents/caregivers) skills to handle negative emotions like anger or teaching the whole family skills to communicate better or solve problems effectively.

How to tell if PMT/CBT for behavior problems is the right plan.

PMT/CBT is one of the best evidence-based treatments when children are diagnosed with behavior problems by a qualified mental health professional. Behavior problems include disobedience, defiance, disrespectfulness, destructiveness, aggression, lying, and behavior problems at school, with peers, or in the community.

How do we know that PMT/CBT for Behavior problems is effective?

Many studies have shown that behavior problems improve the best with PMT/CBT compared to non-specific therapy or therapy that does not include parents/caregivers. This is true for boys and girls, and children from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. There are many different versions of PMT/CBT for behavior problems; some are “brand name” approaches (e.g., Parent-Child Interaction Therapy, Triple P, Incredible Years) whereas others follow the basic principles and steps. These treatments can all work well as long as they stick with the key component of helping parents/caregivers change how they respond to their children. Individual therapy for children typically does not work for behavior problems—parents and caregivers need to be involved.

What are the key components of PMT/CBT for Behavior problem?

1. Education. Parents/caregivers learn about normal behavior for their children’s age and about behavior problems and what maintains them (positive and negative behaviors keep happening when they are reinforced). Parents/caregivers learn how to analyze their child’s negative behavior to see what is maintaining it (e.g., getting OUT of something? Getting attention?). An important piece of information is that most children will improve when parents/caregivers start responding in new and more consistent ways to negative and positive behaviors and the family starts using the new skills.

2. Paying attention to positives. Parents/caregivers set up plans to spend regular small periods of positive time with their children. They learn ways to let their children know when they are behaving well and learn how to ignore the minor but irritating behaviors.
3. Using rewards. Parents/caregivers learn how to set up systems for natural and free/low cost rewards to reinforce good behavior. This is especially important in the beginning to change negative patterns to positive ones. The plans are made with parents/caregivers in session and then carried out in between sessions.
4. Setting standards and sticking with them. Parents/caregivers learn the most effective ways to give commands and be consistent about following through.
5. Using consequences. Rewards-based systems work best, but sometimes consequences are necessary. Parents/caregivers learn consequences such as time out and removing privileges for misbehavior. The plans are made in session and then carried out in between sessions.
6. Emotion regulation. Parents/caregivers and children learn to handle strong negative feelings that can come up when children are misbehaving. Learning how to handle these feelings helps parents/caregivers respond in a way that does not make the situation worse or lead to violence.
7. Skills. Two key skills that are very useful for families to learn are how to communicate in direct and respectful ways and how to solve problems together. These skills can be practiced in session and then put to use in between sessions.

What to expect in PMT/CBT for Behavior problems.

PMT/CBT is a structured intervention where parents/caregivers learn new and better ways to react to their children's positive and negative behaviors by practicing them in sessions and then trying them out at home in between sessions. Sometimes the children will need to be involved in the sessions to learn what is expected and what will happen, but it is not always necessary for children to attend sessions, especially younger children (e.g., ages 2-7). The key is the parents/caregivers getting back their authority and sticking with their plans.

How long does PMT/CBT for Behavior problems take?

Many families complete PMT/CBT in 12-15 sessions. Some families need fewer sessions, and others need more especially when the negative behaviors have been going on a long time. Sometimes the negative behaviors even get worse before they get better as children adjust to new responses and new systems of rewards/consequences. PMT/CBT is flexible and individualized to the needs of each family but always involves parents/caregivers reacting to children in new and different ways until there is positive change in their behavior.