

CASA Conversations



California CASA
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

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Therapy

Introduction

Children and youth are often referred to therapy, or you may wish to have your child/youth go to therapy. It is important that the young person you are working with understands what therapy is and how it can benefit them in dealing with and healing from the trauma they have undergone.

The Facts

The most important predictor of success in therapy is the relationship between the client and the therapist. No matter how wonderful or credentialed the therapist is, if there is not a trusting relationship, there won't be much progress.

Therapy can help the child or youth understand that the neglect or abuse they experienced is not their fault. Therapy can take many forms, not just "talk therapy", which may not be appropriate for the child or youth you serve, due to their age or preferences. There are many types of therapy, including play therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, art therapy, equine therapy, conjoint therapy, family therapy and many, many others. A therapist may use several different types of therapy for a client, based on the client's needs and what feels comfortable to them.

Starting a CASA Conversation

If your youth has been referred to therapy, or you think it would be appropriate for her to see a therapist, you can have a conversation about what therapy is, what she can expect, and why it might be helpful.

Therapy

You might start a conversation by saying “You’ve been through a lot, and you might like to have someone special to talk to who is trained to help support people work through hard times”. If the youth says I can talk to you, my friends, etc., you can agree **and** say that a therapist can be a helpful addition.

You can let them know that the idea of therapy is to help them feel better, and a therapist is there just for them and to be on their side. The therapist can offer helpful tips on how to deal with things that are troubling or challenging or painful.

Share with the youth that she gets to decide what she talks about with a therapist, and she doesn’t have to talk about anything she doesn’t want to talk about.

Confidentiality

If the youth is in therapy, or is considering therapy, you will want to discuss confidentiality.

Confidentiality can be complicated by the fact that the youth is a dependent. You can suggest that the youth ask the therapist if the therapist will tell anyone about what they discuss, and if so, what would be kept confidential and what will be shared, with whom?

You can also make an appointment with the therapist and youth to have that conversation together, so the youth is completely clear, and you are too, about what will be kept confidential, and what may be shared with parents, caregivers, judge, or social worker.

“If the CASA explains to the youth what therapy is, then that helps. If the youth knows the therapist won’t be talking at them, it helps the youth feel less hesitant”

- Marcella

“Going to therapy, they really don’t tell us that everything you’re going to say is only between you and them. If I was going to talk about my situation at home, was my mom going to find out?”

- Maritza

If your youth is in therapy, you may ask him if he likes going to therapy. You can also ask him if he likes his therapist. You are not trying to find out what he talks about in therapy. Instead, focus on if he is satisfied with going to therapy, with this therapist. If he says he doesn’t like the experience or the therapist, invite him to share more with you about it.

Therapy

Remember, therapy can be uncomfortable at times, so if they have liked the therapist in the past and are feeling less enthusiastic at any point in time, it may just be due to dealing with difficult topics. If your youth says s/he doesn't want to talk about therapy it is important to honor that wish.

You may also want to ask your youth if they feel comfortable in therapy, and if they feel they can trust their therapist. If therapy has just begun, they may not trust their therapist right away, just as they didn't trust you at first! This is not a sign that the therapist isn't a good therapist, just that the relationship needs time to grow.

Another question to ask is if the therapist lets your youth decide what to talk about or directs the conversation. Therapy should mostly be driven by the client, not the therapist. This is not to say a therapist can never introduce a topic, but it should mostly be led by the client. If you hear that the child/youth consistently over time does not feel comfortable with the therapist assigned to them, for whatever reason, you may wish to advocate for a change in therapist to someone who they may feel more comfortable with. This is not necessarily a reflection of the skill or qualifications of the therapist. This is a very personal relationship, and it is crucial that the child/youth feel comfortable.

Perhaps it is a man, and they would prefer a woman, or the therapist reminds them of someone from their past. If the child/youth has given it several sessions, and still doesn't feel comfortable, you may wish to advocate for a transfer to another therapist.

One last thing you may want to discuss with your child/youth is having a mental health diagnosis. Most of our children/youth will be given a diagnosis, or several diagnoses. One reason for this, and perhaps the main reason, is it is required for most providers that pay for the therapy, including Medicaid. If the child/youth has been diagnosed, you may want to help them ask the therapist what the diagnosis means, why they were given the diagnosis, and if they will always have it. Again, you can schedule an appointment with the child/youth and go together to have this conversation with the therapist. Not all children will be aware they have been diagnosed, but the child/youth may find out by reading the social worker's court report, or from the caregiver, or from the therapist themselves. It is very important that the child/youth have a clear understanding of the diagnosis, and not feel stigmatized.

*"I have had the same person for 7 years. I trust her a lot. It took me a couple of years to get to trust her."
- Jacob*

"My therapist allowed me to talk about what I wanted to talk about. We played games every session. I feel like I am proud that I worked through stuff as a kid." - Michael

"When I was diagnosed, no one told me what I was diagnosed with, they kind of just gave me my med and told me when to take it-nobody told me what the med was for, why they put me on it, what it was going to do. I needed to figure all of that out on my own. It would have been really helpful for someone to tell me what my diagnosis was and why I was on those meds." - Maritza

Pitfalls to Avoid

- You do not need to know what specifics are discussed in therapy. If a child/youth chooses to tell you something about a therapy session, that is of course fine, but it is important to respect the therapeutic relationship.
- You may think therapy is very important for the child/youth you are serving, and they may want no part of it. Don't coerce them! You may bring it up periodically, or suggest they try it for 2 or 3 sessions, but you can't force them to go.
- Therapy may not look like you expect it to look. It may be going rock climbing to develop trust, playing basketball or doing something else physical to help them feel comfortable, or playing in a sand tray, or with toys.
- Especially with children, talk therapy may not be very appropriate. If you wonder why the therapist is doing a certain activity, just ask them. They should be able to tell you why making puppets, playing hide and seek, or going through a magazine together is part of therapy.

Additional Resources

A Home Within

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ryann-blackshere/foster-care-therapy-options_b_1523296.html and <http://ahomewithin.org/>

Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

<http://acestudy.org/>

National Alliance on Mental Illness

http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=88551

National CASA - The Connection

http://www.lisetteaustin.com/pdfs/CASA_MentalHealth.pdf

Teens Health from Nemours

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind/mental_health/therapist.html#

Your local Mental health agency

Every county has a mental health (sometimes called behavioral health) agency. You can talk to someone there on staff about what they offer, how to refer, waitlist, etc.

