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Psychotherapy for Children and Adolescents: Definition

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Psychotherapy refers to a variety of techniques and methods used to help children and adolescents who are experiencing difficulties with their emotions or behavior. Although there are different types of psychotherapy, each relies on communications as the basic tool for bringing about change in a person's feelings and behaviors. Psychotherapy may involve an individual child, a group of children, a family, or multiple families. In children and adolescents, playing, drawing, building, and pretending, as well as talking, are important ways of sharing feelings and resolving problems.

As part of the initial assessment, a qualified mental health professional or child and adolescent psychiatrist will determine the need for psychotherapy. This decision will be based on such things as the child's current problems, history, level of development, ability to cooperate with treatment, and what interventions are most likely to help with the presenting concerns. Psychotherapy is often used in combination with other treatments (medication, behavior management, or work with the school). The relationship that develops between the therapist and the patient is very important. The child or adolescent must feel comfortable, safe, and understood. This type of trusting environment makes it much easier for the child to express his/her thoughts and feelings and to use the therapy in a helpful way.

Psychotherapy helps children and adolescents in a variety of ways. They receive emotional support, resolve conflicts with people, understand feelings and problems, and try out new solutions to old problems. Goals for therapy may be specific (change in behavior, improved relations with friends or family), or more general (less anxiety, better self-esteem). The length of psychotherapy depends on the complexity and severity of problems.

Parents should ask the following questions about psychotherapy:

- Why is psychotherapy being recommended?
- What results can I expect?

- How long will my child be involved in therapy?
- How frequently will the doctor see my child?
- Will the doctor be meeting with just my child or with the entire family?
- How much do psychotherapy sessions cost?
- How will we (the parents) be informed about our child's progress and how can we help?
- How soon can we expect to see some changes?

A child and adolescent psychiatrist will be able to provide you with answers to your questions and concerns. Child and adolescent psychiatrists and other child mental health professionals are specifically trained and skilled to provide psychotherapy to children and adolescents.

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The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 9,400 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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