

Therapy for Children with ADHD: When Is It Useful? How Can It Help?

Ask the Expert Chat with Joyce Cooper-Kahn, PhD



A CLINICAL CHILD PSYCHOLOGIST who has been in practice for over twenty years, Joyce Cooper-Kahn, PhD, specializes in learning and emotional challenges that affect children and their families. She has a particular interest and expertise in attention disorders with an emphasis on interventions for executive functioning difficulties.

Cooper-Kahn maintains an active practice in Severna Park, Maryland. She is the cofounder of Psychological Resource Associates, where she provides consultation, treatment, psychological assessment, parent guidance, and school consultation. She is also the author, with Laurie Dietzel, PhD, of *Late, Lost and Unprepared: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children with Executive Functioning* (Woodbine Press, 2008).

What would you say are the most effective therapies for elementary age kids with ADHD?

It depends on your goals. Remember, therapy is a general category, sort of like “restaurants.” There are all different kinds of restaurants with different food and price ranges and styles. You have to choose therapy based on what you are looking for—what symptoms are you trying to treat? What are your goals?

Then you seek someone who specializes in those things. Sometimes it helps to set up a consultation with a therapist to help develop a realistic set of goals and a plan for reaching them. It helps to prioritize what you want to achieve and to think through the team you will need to help you get to your goals.

What is executive function training and is there a particular age to begin implementation? Who assists in this training?

If we define executive function training as teaching a child about his or her own strengths and weaknesses and how to compensate for the weak areas, then parents and professionals can begin quite early. For ex-

ample, a therapist might work with parents to come up with a plan for helping an impulsive young child to better manage difficult situations. Perhaps that would also involve building a team that includes the classroom teacher or day care staff. The earlier parents

learn an approach, the better they can help their kids over the long haul.

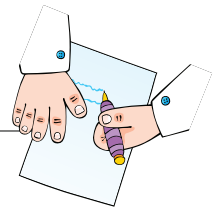
One of my twin girls is in the habit of telling tall tales, and now she takes things without permission. I set an appointment for behavioral therapy, but is that the correct way to go?

You are describing a behavior that could be due to impulsive behavior or might be more of an emotional issue. So, a meeting with a therapist who first works on understanding the behavior better and then decides on an approach would be the way to go.

What is to be expected from a behavioral therapist?

Behavioral therapy is a specific form of therapy that focuses on behaviors and how to





change them. In general, the focus is not on why things happen or the reaction to events but on specific behaviors that need to change. However, most experienced therapists incorporate a variety of different styles into their approach and apply these as needed. Most people who work with clients who have ADHD incorporate behavioral strategies.

When is play therapy useful for a child?

When the goal is emotional expression, then it can be quite helpful. The primary symptoms of ADHD, if it has been accurately diagnosed, will not change with play therapy. However, it might be useful for some of the secondary emotional problems that sometimes occur or for other issues in a child's life. Children often "speak" through imaginative play, and so it is a good medium for approaching some issues for children.

I'm trying to figure out which therapist or specialist is best to go to when a child with ADHD is having difficulty with sensory issues and picky eating. We've been bounced around all over the place and need to find the right person.

That is a confusing one for so many parents (and professionals)! There is some controversy over sensory issues and treatment. Often, an occupational therapist is involved and works on the sensory issues. At the same time, you may need a therapist who can work on ways for you and your child to manage frustrating situations.

I am interested in how effective socialization training is. Is the best method working with a behaviorist or are there therapists that specialize in socialization?

There are two general approaches to working on social skills—individual and group social skills training. It is often hard to find a good social skills group, but is also often very helpful when you *can* find one. If the problems occur with peers, then a group is often the best way to address that. However, if the socialization issues are more general so that they occur with adults, too, then an individual/family approach may be helpful.

What is the best type of therapy would be helpful for a child with ADHD and

ODD when it comes to the anxiety with homework and school?

Well, the issue here again is that there are a limited number of ways that human organisms can show distress, and anxiety is a generic symptom.

So, it is important to know what is causing the anxiety. Perfectionism? Experiences of failure? End-of-the-day fatigue? Oppositionality? Definitely, a therapist well versed in ADHD, ODD and general child development would be helpful.

My ten-year-old son with ADHD has such strong emotions that he yells almost every time he speaks. His therapist doesn't get to see that. I tried to videotape it, but he erased the first batch and now hides when he sees the camera. Do you have any suggestions?

Much of what happens outside the therapy is only available to the therapist by the parents' reports. Sometimes it helps to see the parents and child together. However, the therapist should incorporate the information you provide into a treatment plan. Check with the therapist to get a feel for whether he or she is taking your information into account, and if not, ask why not.

How do explain to a child why he or she is going to therapy?

With honesty and brevity! For example, you might say, "You seem to have so much trouble making friends and you have so much to offer. This is a person who can help to make the friends thing easier for you."

What about a child who is resistant to going to a therapist? Can you share any ideas for getting through to such an individual?

I wish there was one general answer here. Sometimes, we choose to work with the parents only when a child is very reluctant. And then I try to teach the parents what they need to know to help the child.

Other times, we may decide that we need to give the child time to adjust to the therapy situation and build an alliance with the therapist. With adolescents, sometimes I set a behavioral goal and the reward is that they get me off of their backs and out of the picture as soon as they reach the goal.

I have two daughters with ADHD. The eldest refuses treatment and denies there's a problem. We are trying to get her into art therapy to give her an opportunity to explore her inner self and her triggers. How would that kind of therapy compare to say, a talk therapist? Art therapy can be a less direct approach



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that bypasses some of the emotional hurdles. However, many talk therapists are quite skilled at tailoring an approach to the child, too.

We've had some bad experiences with therapy. How do I get my thirteen-year-old son who has ADHD/ODD to go to another therapist and trust him?

I'm sorry you and your son have had bad experiences. I think you need to carefully evaluate what you are looking for in a therapist, and then as the parent, you do a round of initial consultations with possible therapists first.

Rather than take him to possible therapists, you do the legwork. Then when you feel you have found the right person, tell him that you think this person has something helpful to offer. The therapist's job takes over then.

What are the negative effects of therapy? Sometimes I think that I try

too hard and that perhaps paying too much attention to my son's ADHD can make it worse, and instead I think it's sometimes best just to let him spend his free time hanging out and having fun instead of yet another appointment.

Well, you are certainly correct that kids with ADHD need free time, too! The decision about whether to include therapy depends on how much impairment there is and what the balance is in your lives at this time. Sometimes it changes over time.

If a child with ADHD does not get help will he become worse?

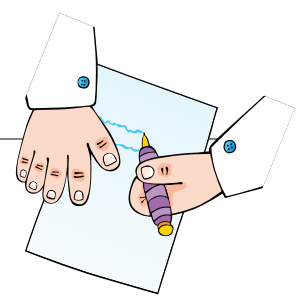
Worse in what way? It always comes back to what you are trying to change. We cannot "therapize" away the primary symptoms of ADHD. What we can do is help the child understand these symptoms, learn compensatory skills, and deal with the emotional fallout. With this kind of help, we get better adjusted individuals with ADHD.

How should one evaluate whether therapy is improving things?

You and the therapist should have a defined set of goals and think together about how you will know if the therapy is helpful. Together, you should come up with a set of realistic expectations regarding change and the pace of change. Sometimes the progress is immediate and obvious, sometimes not. But the yardstick should be something you think about from the beginning.

Has cognitive training been shown to be effective? My nine-year-old son was enrolled in a sixty-hour program last summer. He spent two hours each weekday with a cognitive education therapist at a local learning center. It was very expensive (\$6,500) and I am not sure there was any benefit.

It sounds like your experience mirrors what I know. It seems like cognitive training is an intervention that falls into the "promising but unproven" category. I have spoken with some who think it was helpful, but many who did not.



I do not think that the research is yet clear on who it helps and under what circumstances. On the other hand, I do not think it is harmful if you are willing to take a chance on the time and money you will expend.

What do you think of organizations that advertise “brain training” versus tutoring to improve short-term memory and focus for a nine-year-old girl with ADHD, inattentive type?

This is another controversial issue. In general, I would say that we do not yet know enough to know whether “brain training” is effective and, if so, for what kids under what circumstances. I do know one such group that has said that they have the most difficulty with students who have executive functioning weaknesses.

It is my general experience that the most progress comes when the student works with

a really good tutor who can tailor the interventions to that child and really hone in on building compensatory skills and habits.

How is “therapy” different from “coaching”?

Coaching is designed for individuals who are motivated to set goals and have the interest and maturity to work on these without a lot of emotional baggage. Therapy is more effective if there are significant emotional challenges, or if the work requires the participation of the family or other caretakers.

Because the brain is “plastic” and can be “retrained,” can the neuropathways that have been established revert if the therapy that created them is stopped? Basically, will the benefits of therapy stop when therapy is stopped?

When we create new neural pathways, as we

do by learning new behaviors, then it is the use of the behaviors that maintains the pathways. However, sometimes we learn things that we don’t use immediately and later can call into action. I see this often with young children.

I have tried various therapies along with medication for my child, but things don’t “stick” they way I’d like. Is that normal? If not, what would you advise?

I do think that is the normal course of things with many kids. I have found that I often first meet with a child when he or she is young, and then I may meet with him or her on and off over the years as new demands occur or new issues arise. Sometimes it is not until the mid-teen years that I start to see the child’s own motivation for therapy emerge. But they show signs that they have really taken in some of what we worked on early on. 🗣️