



# Steps for Telling Children About Starting Therapy

Do you want to encourage your child to try therapy but don't know what to say? It is normal for parents to question how to first introduce the concept of starting therapy with their child. Use the following steps and Do's & Don'ts to help you to communicate how therapy is a place where they can get help, be seen, talk about their feelings, and have fun playing.

## What We Can Tell Kids

- "Therapy is a place to go to for support and help. Lots of different kids and people of all ages go to therapy. All people can use support sometimes."
- Ask, "Who is someone in your life who *really* listens to you?" Let them answer and stay curious. "What do they do that makes you feel listened to? How do they show they care?" Then, you can tell them your therapist will be another person who supports them. "Your therapist is a helper who listens to you, helps you cope with big feelings, and can work with you as a team to problem-solve. Therapists who work with kids will also play with them, too!"
- "It is important that you feel like you can be yourself. Your therapist wants you to feel accepted."
- "Your therapist is there to help YOU. Their job is to learn about you so that you feel supported. That means that sometimes it will be important to talk with your family so that they can get to know all about you and work together as a team to help you."
- "Whatever you say to the therapist, stays with the therapist, except in four cases. The therapist's job is to keep you safe, so to do that, they will tell someone when:
  - Someone is hurting you.
  - You want to hurt someone.
  - You want to hurt yourself.
  - You give permission to share with another trusting adult."
- "The therapist cares about you. They will ask you what you like about therapy, what you want to change about therapy, and what you want to work on. Your voice matters!"

- “People go to therapy to discuss their feelings and what is important to them. You can talk about anything to your therapist, and that is okay. You can choose not to talk to your therapist, which is also okay.”
- “Therapy for kids is a little different because we will play! There are games, toys, fidgets, etc. Some may even use the playroom! Having fun is a big part of our work together, too.”
- “People don’t go to therapy to get ‘fixed.’ Only broken things get fixed, and you are not broken! We help you work on goals that you want to work on and find strategies and tools that work for you.”

## Do's & Don'ts For When Your Child Starts Therapy

### Do's

- Know that child therapists focus on working with the child. They are there for them. In many cases, ATLC therapists work as a team with the family, but the goal is to build a trusting and safe relationship with the child so they can feel heard, seen, and valued.
- Understand that, to do their work well, therapists must value the child’s privacy as much as possible. Children need a sense of trust with their therapist so they can work on hard things together.
- Collaborate with your child’s therapist. You have a right to know general strategies, information, and resources. Therapists may have mental health expertise, but – other than the child - you likely have the most expertise on them! We need your partnership to support the whole child.
- Tell your child that sometimes therapists will talk to you so that we can all learn better ways to support them together.
- Explain to your child that they can discuss all kinds of feelings. They can process challenging or uncomfortable feelings and celebrate moments of happiness and pride!
- Let them know that they can ask questions and give feedback. We want to encourage self-advocacy and help kids learn what works for them and what doesn’t.

### Don'ts

- Do not bring your child without providing some information about therapy. As much as surprise parties can be enjoyable, being surprised with therapy is not fun for anyone. It can increase anxiety, anger, and/or mistrust. It is a tough way to start our work together.
- Do not avoid using the word “therapy.” When we avoid using that word, we contribute to the stigma around mental health, and children start to assume that it must be “bad” if it is being silenced. We want to normalize that therapy is just one way that people use to get help.
- Do not ask them lots of questions after the session. It makes it harder for therapists to create a space in which they feel like they can have their guard down and feel

comfortable in truly being seen. Let them come to you and tell you how it went. They may choose to share, and they may not. That is OK.

- Do not force them to go to therapy if they do not want to go. We want them to want to go. It shouldn't feel like a punishment! If your child is resisting going to therapy, please consult with us.
- Do not ensure they were "being good" in session. We believe that all kids are good. There is no such thing as a "bad kid" – big behaviors mean that they are a good kid who is having a hard time.
- Do not expect things to change instantly. Although we wish there were a way to take away hurt, anger, fear, anxiety, or anything uncomfortable immediately. Alas, there is no such thing. Our goal is to give our clients tools to be able to handle a full range of emotions, not just make them happy. This is important work, and important work takes time. Let's work together to support your child's mental health and well-being.

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