

West Side Spirit
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Seeking Emotional Help for Your Child

No matter how much we parents love our children and wish the best for them, things can go wrong! We often bring our own emotional baggage or “old stuff” from the past into our child-rearing. Our marriages may be conflicted, and the resulting unrest can bring about overwhelming reality problems – not enough money or time, raising children without a partner, etc.

We are all imperfect as parents, as children, friends and human beings. It’s hard to admit, but sometimes we need to recognize that we are having trouble. And there is no harder area than in our roles as parents!

Even when we make the painful admission that we are somehow missing out with our children, however, we may still be very confused as to what is temporarily difficult behavior that will be outgrown and what is not.

There are many signals our children give us when they are troubled. They become consistently argumentative and “obnoxious.” They act resistant to rules and often fight with teachers and peers at school. They appear sullen and unhappy a good deal of the time, have trouble concentrating on schoolwork or getting it done in a neat and timely way. There can be stealing and breaking basic societal rules. A child may deny what is clearly “wrong doing” or blame others all the time for his or her mistakes. Impulsive, even dangerous behavior may occur. And a child, even under 10 years of age, may begin to experiment with or become addicted to various harmful substances.

Other children may signal the need for help by being “too good.” They are quiet, even withdrawn, have difficulty making friends, daydream too much of the time and live in an imaginary world with make-believe friends, while other children are out in the world learning to get along with others. Such children may be extremely self-conscious and shy, afraid of all new situations, and fearfully cling to parents and home (A prime example of this is school phobia)

Some children alert us to problems by developing eating difficulties – which later become serious disorders such as anorexia nervosa (starvation to a life-threatening degree) or compulsive overeating. They may sneak food, crave sweets, and have difficulty eating normal amounts of food.

Other symptoms include constant nightmares, bedwetting or soiling. The clue to whether professional help is needed depends on the severity of the behavioral problem, the consistency with which it occurs, the length of time over which it happens, what situations have set it off and the child’s age.

For example, a normally contented child may become temporarily cranky and even bed wet after the birth of a new baby. After a period of settling in, this behavior should fade. Or temporary temper tantrums in a two-year-old going through the “no stage” are quite different from those of a five-year-old who should have more mature, verbal ways of handling frustration.

And what about the teen years? These can be very rocky for both parents and children. Most of us do manage to survive them intact. With the onset of adolescence, however, many problems can surface for the first time, from earlier years as the child struggles to become more independent, and parents struggle with the hard process of “letting go.”

If there are significant personality changes such as quiet child who becomes aggressive and overly friendly, a “good child” who starts to steal, stay out late, flout rules or show evidence of substance abuse, or overwhelming problems with the opposite sex, these are signs that help is needed.

Late adolescents may have problems adjusting to being away from home in college and temporarily lose their way under the pressures of having to be truly independent for the first time in their lives.

What are the ways in which we can help our children and ourselves? Play therapy is used with younger children from about three to ten or eleven years of age, since it is difficult for such children to “talk” about their problems. Through the use of games, dolls and drawing materials the therapist engages the child in play. How the child plays and interacts with the therapist will provide valuable clues to what is wrong.

For older children, such as pre-teens and teenagers, games like checkers or cards can “break the ice” and help create a safe atmosphere in which the child can express troubled feelings. Almost always the parents will also be engaged in treatment in one way or another – to help the therapist better understand the child and situation, to better understand their own possible part in the difficulty and to learn more effective methods of child rearing.

Where can you find the help you and your child need and from whom?

Child psychiatrists generally work with children who exhibit more serious behavioral problems and who may need medication. Psychologists often specialize in children with learning as well as emotional problems. Social Workers are trained to deal with the social and interpersonal as well as the inner worlds of the child. Fees vary, with psychiatrists and psychologists on the higher end and social workers on the somewhat lower end of the scale.

Parents need to seek out therapists who specialize in parent-child counseling, and in play therapy for younger children. Referrals can be sought through friends who have already found reliable help, school guidance counselors, pediatricians, or child psychiatry departments of major teaching hospitals.

Whether a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker, the therapist you choose should be experienced with children, emphatic and non-judgmental. He or she should be able to create a comfortable atmosphere in which to explore the painful issues that have led to the need for help.

And as the problems become more clear, a good therapist should be able to educate parents about better ways of dealing with their children, offering specific advice and new ways of handling old problems. The therapist should also be able to engage the child’s trust as well as that of the parents.

It is not an easy process to admit the need for help. Often, parents minimize the problems or sometimes even fail to see them because it is so painful to feel they have troubled children or that their best is not good enough. It can be a remarkably successful venture, however, that can turn our children around before self-defeating and unhappy patterns have a chance to “set” and haunt their adult years. And it can also help parents to learn better parenting skills with their children and thus enjoy the sense of success they all rightfully wish to have in raising them!