

Jill Crawford, LCSW

In my counseling practice, I often find myself fielding the same question over and over again from exasperated parents: “How can I get my child to agree to come and see you? I know she needs help, but she’ll never go for it.” This is, unfortunately, a common phenomenon, especially with adolescents, due to popular stigmas about being in therapy. “It’s for people who are *crazy!*” “Only people with *real* problems go to therapy.” “I’m not going to talk to a stranger about my personal business!” “Nothing’s wrong with me!” Teenagers also often have legitimate concerns about having their confidentiality protected, believing (falsely) that whatever they say to their therapist will be funneled directly to the ears of their parents. Here are some tips to help ease the blow when you approach your child with the idea of going to counseling...

- **Do NOT apologize.** You should never feel sorry for seeking help for your child.
- **Assure your child** that the counseling sessions will be her personal time, space, and agenda, not yours...**and mean it!**
- **Do NOT negotiate.** Your child may try to bargain with you, for example, “Okay, I’ll go once,” or “I’ll go for a month.” Don’t agree to terms you may not be willing to stick by once therapy gets underway.
- **Do NOT make empty threats** of consequences you cannot or will not follow through on. All this will do is alienate your child and undermine your credibility.
- **LISTEN** to your child’s concerns. Be sensitive to his or her feelings. Even though you, as the parent, always have the final word, listening attentively will not only keep the lines of communication open and make her feel genuinely supported, but it will also model respectful behavior for your child.
- Remind your child that **YOU ARE THE PARENT, and it is your responsibility to take care of her.** I often advise parents to liken the situation to getting your child a doctor if she is sick or a tutor if she needs help in school. You can assure your child that she is not crazy and that **therapy is not a punishment**, but that you are concerned about certain things and believe that counseling will be helpful.
- **Regarding confidentiality...** Assure your child that it is not just the therapist’s promise, but state and federal laws that require client-therapist confidentiality. There are strong penalties for privacy violations, and confidentiality may only be breached under very

specific circumstances, such as child abuse, court order, or imminent risk of danger. If there is an issue that the therapist feels the parents should be apprised of, he or she may encourage the child to share the information, however, ultimately, it will be the client’s choice.

- **Present therapy as an OPPORTUNITY** for your child to share (vent) things that are troubling her in an emotionally safe, nonjudgmental place where there are no consequences for having individual beliefs, perhaps unpopular opinions, and strong feelings. Counseling, when entered into with a positive attitude, can also be an opportunity to learn about oneself and grow in areas that have been personally challenging along the way.
- Finally, **NEVER, EVER bring your child to therapy under false pretenses!** If your child arrives for a first appointment believing she is there for some other purpose, this will immediately anger her and make the therapist seem suspicious and mistrustful. Your child may believe the therapist has colluded with you to get her there, and the therapeutic process will be sabotaged before it has even begun. **No matter how difficult, be honest with your child about your intentions!!**

Parents often report to me that their *anticipation* about addressing the subject of therapy with their child was far worse than the actual conversation. It is often the case that children know they need help, and are actually quite relieved to be approached about going to counseling. On the other hand, some such discussions do not go well. There may be door-slamming, the silent treatment, or a lot of shouting. Nonetheless, if you are strong in your convictions that your child needs professional help, stay the course and don’t give up. Be firm, but supportive. Stay consistent in the messages you deliver. Most important, remind your child that, above all else, you love her. Eventually, your child will realize you are serious and that you are committed to her well-being....whether she’ll admit it or not.

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