



Quick Tips for Providers: *Referring to Therapy*

Many families will turn to their pediatric primary care provider first regarding behavioral health concerns and recommendations for treatment. PCPs have a unique opportunity to support patients and their parents/caregivers and can help facilitate timely referrals to mental health services.

Psychoeducation

Be ready to explain what might occur during therapy and answer any questions the patient/family might have. Share resources as appropriate. Remember, it's possible that the patient/caregiver simply might not understand what a condition like depression actually is, and that youth CAN and DO experience it.

- Shared Decision Making—Trust between provider and patient is a large factor... greater trust facilitates improved compliance.
 - Ask if the patient/caregiver has any concerns or questions about the recommended treatments. Is there an alternative approach that the patient has been using or considering? The use of open-ended, nonjudgmental questions can be very effective.
- The Mind-Body Connection—Emphasize how mental and physical health are intertwined.
- Address Barriers—What are some things that might stand in the way? Be aware of the potential impact of cultural perspectives on the treatment process, ask if cost of treatment or transportation is a problem. Be willing to engage the patient/caregiver in a collaborative and nonjudgmental manner regarding these barriers.

Frame It

The way you frame treatment is important. There is still a lot of stigma and misinformation around mental health treatment. Attempt to explain why therapy is important and recommended in simple and age appropriate terms.

- Focus on the specific issue you're observing but avoid labels and psychiatric diagnoses. “I know you've lost your appetite and have not been sleeping well since your parents’ divorce”.
- Make it Relatable—“If your child is playing basketball, of course he or she will have a coach. Even professional basketball players need coaches to learn new strategies, learn new skills, and think about different ways to succeed. Much like sports, your child can learn new skills in therapy and practicing them is important.
- “Therapists are like feelings doctors. They help us by talking about times when we feel sad, mad or bad and what we can do when we feel this way.”
- For older kids who may have some concept of therapy, start by asking them about their expectations for therapy. Many kids, and even adults, mistakenly think a counselor’s job is to tell you what to do. Explain to your older patients that a therapist’s job is to find out about you and help you figure out what you want and how to accomplish it.

Important Tips you can share with parents/caregivers:

- Take care of yourself first. Children depend on the adults around them to feel safe and secure. If you are very anxious or angry, children are likely to be more affected by your emotional state than by your words.
- Shop around—Find two or three therapists you can interview and choose the one that you and your child feel most comfortable with. Finding a therapist who is a good fit is extremely important and sets the stage for effective therapy. The more actively the patient is involved, the greater the chances that therapy will be helpful to them.
- It may also be a good idea for the entire family to go to treatment together. This is a good strategy to use when children are getting defensive or they are reluctant, because it doesn't single the child out.

For more information, please visit aacap.org and childmind.org

This handout is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service (HHS) as part of award U4CMC32913-01-00. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement, by HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

