



"Change is Hard"

A peek into how therapy can positively impact a child and family. A Hypothetical Story by Tina Borsa, LCMHC

Parents often feel like they must have all the answers to raising a healthy child. It's okay to ask for help! This story explains how reaching out for help can be beneficial.

The First Appointment

An 8-year-old child is struggling with adjusting to the new baby in the family. The parents reassure the child that both the child and the infant are equally loved. Despite their effort, the child starts to wet the bed at night, there is a call from the school that the child has hit another student, and the child is being disrespectful toward parents by refusing to do anything they ask. The parents decide that their child needs help that is beyond their capacity to give. The parents connect their child with a therapist who can hopefully fix these behavioral problems. The therapist asks the parents to have the child seen by a pediatrician to rule out medical problems with the bladder. Then, the therapist gets to work.

At the first appointment, the therapist asks the child why they are visiting today. The child responds, "because my parents want me to". The therapist smiles. The therapist inquires further about why the parents want the child there. The child responds, "to talk about my feelings". The therapist emphasizes that this is a safe space to express all kinds of feelings.

Establishing a Relationship

The therapist meets with the child alone for the first few appointments to establish a trusting therapeutic relationship. The child comes out of therapy sharing about the activity or games that were played. The parents are concerned that all the child is doing in therapy is playing games, so they bring this concern to the therapist. The therapist provides psychoeducation to the parents about how playing games is more than just fun and that it helps develop skills. The therapist shares with the parents that many skills are gained from doing an activity and playing a game such as accepting limits and direction from authority figures and developing the ability to resolve conflict to name a couple. The parents are awe-struck by this as they recall a teacher reported that their child was in a conflict with another student and practiced the art of compromise.

Involving the Parents

The therapist begins to involve the parents in the therapy appointments by engaging the child and parents in an art activity. The therapist has the the child design a reward jar meant for pom-poms or marbles that represent when the child has demonstrated a positive change in behavior. Next the therapist has the parents identify the positive behaviors they would like to see. The child helps to write these down on a piece of paper. Then, the therapist has the parents identify intrinsic rewards that the child and parent agree on such as play Uno with a parent, have teatime with a parent or grandparent, and other ways to spend time together. The therapist emphasizes the importance of intrinsic rewards because it encourages the child to foster a relationship with other people rather than objects. The parents and child agree on 10 pom-poms or marbles to earn a reward. As the weeks continue, the parents share that there is less refusal and surprisingly the bed wetting has stopped. The therapist explains how the intrinsic rewards that encouraged spending one-on-one time with the child reinforced positive behaviors.

The child is ready to go to therapy less often. The child asks, "Who will I play with every week?" The therapist reminds the child about their team of supports that includes both parents as well as grandparents. This is one way therapy can help a child.