

Seeing our Psychologists

A Parents Guide to Support Your Child

Initiating help for your child can sometimes be a daunting experience. A build up of worry or frustration may have instigated your decision to seek psychological intervention, which is a great step in finding solutions. As parents, we understand you want to know what's happening, what they are experiencing and how you can help. Therefore we have put together some helpful information to allow you to stay in the picture, make appropriate decisions and guide you as to how to best support your child.

What should we bring to our First Session?

- Where possible both parents (or carers) are welcome at the first session. The more information we have about the situation, the better we can help.
- Please bring a list that outlines concerns, and if relevant, evidence of these. Evidence of these behaviours may include observations over time, learning assessments or reports. It is also helpful to note when concerning behaviours occur and do not occur, when they started, therapeutic goals, and any questions you may have.
- If applicable, bring your child's Referral Letter &/or GP Mental Health Care Plan (MHCP).

What can I expect in the First Session?

- The first session takes two hours and is an opportunity for us to understand your perspectives and develop a working relationship with you, the parent. The psychologist will ask a variety of questions to get a sense of what has instigated you seeking help for your child, as well as discussion around your child's life history. An in-depth discussion about why they are experiencing their difficulties and treatment options will also occur.

What can I expect in the First Session my child has with their Psychologist?

- The first session is an opportunity for your child to develop a working relationship with their psychologist. The psychologist will spend time with your child understanding their perspective of the situation, and explore other life areas, such as school and interests.

What can I expect after their First Session?

- Children's emotions and behaviours after the first session are a bit of a mixed bag – they largely vary between children and it can also be difficult to predict.
- Some children may feel exhausted after talking about their emotions and want a quiet car ride home. Others may be visibly distressed after talking about difficult emotions and thoughts for two hours; this is particularly likely for children who avoid talking about the 'bad times'. These children may desire physical comfort and want to talk about the session, or may prefer space and quiet time.
- Some children may feel content and relieved after expressing themselves and being listened to by another adult.
- Do not be surprised if your child does not want to immediately discuss the session with you. They may choose to later at a time you are not expecting it.

What should I do after the First Session?

- It is difficult to predict how your child will react to the initial session, even for themselves. For this reason, after the session the best approach is usually to let your child know that you are happy and willing to talk about the session if this is what they want. But if not, it is most helpful to accept this.
- Your child not wanting to talk after the session is not a reflection the session went poorly or they are withholding information from you, rather it is an indication that they need time to process their own emotions and thoughts. In these times, it is helpful to tell your child that you will be there to listen to them and speak about the session, when and if they choose to.

What should I tell my child before their First Session?

- It is helpful to explain to your child the initial session process prior to the session. Let your child know that the initial session is for two hours, with subsequent sessions for a one hour period. You can let your child know that their psychologist will be friendly and relaxed. They are excited to get to know you, what you like and if you have any worries.
- Initially you will accompany them into the session and there may also be times when the psychologist may also need to spend one on one time with your child.
- It is also helpful to explain that although the psychologist's aim is to make you feel better, this may take time and it will be necessary to talk about difficult emotions and maybe even feel a little worse for a brief amount of time. Explore the benefits that may arise with your child, for example what behaviours they might no longer experience (e.g. avoiding certain situations) and what might they be able to do (e.g. enjoy certain activities more).
- It can be helpful to ask your child how they feel about talking with someone they do not know and how they expect to feel after. Ask whether there is anything you can do to make them feel more comfortable during the process.
- Encourage your child to ask their psychologist any questions that they might have. Let your child know it is important to be honest with their psychologist so that they can be helped. Explain to your child that after sessions they will be given an at-home task that may include writing a list, completing a sheet or doing an activity.

What will my child need to do between sessions?

- Psychologists will typically give your child a task or handout to complete between each session. The psychologist may either explain the at-home task to you, ask your child to explain it to you, or ask your child to independently complete it. It is very important that at-home tasks are practiced so that the skills learnt and practiced in session are generalised into daily life.
- One of the biggest predictors of treatment success is the regular practice of at-home tasks. It is helpful for you to remind and encourage your child to complete their tasks.

When will I see a change in my child?

- Noticeable change takes time. Most children have developed their unhelpful thoughts, emotions or behaviours over years. These patterns have become habits, and like any habit, they will take time to shift and this process may at times be challenging for your child.
- In the first session issues are identified. At the beginning of therapy, children often feel confused and overwhelmed. The following stage of treatment typically involves skill development. During this time a trusting relationship with the psychologist should emerge and the child may begin to feel more comfortable. As a result, after the middle stage of treatment parents may be able to observe 'glimpses' of change, such as an increased willingness to come to therapy, experiencing a greater sense of 'good times' at home. This may include less angry outbursts or fewer instances of emotionally shutting down, and more enjoyable family and peer interactions.
- More noticeable change likely takes longer. For your child to feel more confident in their daily life, strategies will need to be implemented and reinforced regularly in different situations. Often parents, and sometimes even members outside of the family can observe clear changes after 10 sessions. However, longer term traits and more engrained patterns of thoughts, emotions and behaviours can take longer to shift, and therefore reaching observable change may be a longer process.
- If your child's therapeutic journey is likely to take some time, your child's psychologist will explain this to you during your sessions.



Why your Child may be hesitant about treatment

- All parents have their child at the forefront of their mind and it makes sense that as a parent you may be naturally concerned about your child's progress. Times when it can be particularly easy to doubt progress is when a child becomes unwilling to attend therapy, especially if they previously had been enjoying it.
- Around the middle of treatment, your child's psychologist will begin to challenge their unhelpful thoughts, emotions and behaviours, and encourage them to engage in more helpful ones. This may be difficult for your child to do; although at the same time is vital to their progress.
- As a parent, your role is to encourage your child to stick with therapy, letting them know it will get easier over time. Reminding your child about a change earlier on in their lives (such as when they first started school) and how difficult that was initially, but how easy it seems now may be a helpful starting point.
- The second reason that your child may be reluctant to attend sessions is that children often avoid talking about negative thoughts and emotions as this makes them feel 'bad'. However, at times it will be necessary to discuss these thoughts and emotions, which may feel challenging for your child.
- Sometimes this may result in them appearing more distressed after a session. This is largely a reflection that your child is not used to speaking about difficult thoughts and emotions, although with practice this will get much easier over time.
- As a parent, your role is to comfort and empathise with your child, reminding them how brave they are and how brave you know they will continue to be.
- It is also helpful to explain to your child that by choosing to talk about their negative thoughts and emotions now, they will be unlikely to 'pop up' at times later without their control.

As a parent, what will my involvement in therapy be?

- Your level of involvement will depend on their age and level of independence. Most often for children under 10 years of age, your child's psychologist will typically spend most of the session only with your child, and have you in the session for the final 15 to 25 minutes. For children aged over 10 years of age, similarly your child's psychologist will spend most of the session only with your child, and have you in the session for the final five minutes.
- However, your involvement in each session will also vary depending on the focus of the session. For instance, early on in therapy, your psychologist might explain to you normative child development. Later on, they might update you on your child's progress and discuss any barriers to progress.
- Some sessions might also involve parent management strategies to help you feel more adept at managing your child's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours at home. Specifically, this can include skills to modify your home environment or changing the way you interact with your child so as to help them progress towards their goals. The psychologist may also ask for your support to ensure completion of at-home tasks.
- If you think you would like to be more involved in your child's therapy, it is helpful to just let the psychologist know. Open communication with the psychologist about your concerns is always encouraged.