

TIPS ON SELECTING AN ADOPTION THERAPIST

Adapted from the National Adoption Information Clearinghouse

Adoption is an event that has a life-long effect on everyone involved. Adoption brings unique rewards as well as challenges to families, and sometimes families will need or want professional help as concerns or problems arise.

The type (e.g., individual, family, group) and duration of therapy will differ depending on many variables. Some families build a relationship with a therapist over years, “checking in” for help as needed. Other families might find they need a therapist’s help only once or twice. Clinicians with adoption knowledge and experience are best suited to help families identify links between problems and adoption and to plan effective treatment.

At a minimum, a therapist must:

- Be knowledgeable about adoption and the psychological impact of adoption on children and families.
- Be experienced in working with adopted children and their families
- Know the types of help available.

Check on Insurance: The search for a therapist can be complicated by restrictions imposed by insurance companies or health management organizations (HMOs); however, it may still be possible to choose from a list of approved therapist. Check with your insurance company to discern:

- The extent of your coverage for mental health treatment
- Specialty areas of approved providers
- Company policies regarding referrals to, and payment for, treatment provided by therapists outside the plan. *You may be able to justify using a therapist outside of the network for specialized services if the insurance company does not have providers with the required expertise. Although you might meet some resistance, persevere to secure the needed services—you are your own strongest advocate.*

Some therapists accept Medicaid reimbursement. The challenge is to locate a therapist who accepts reimbursement and also has experience in foster care and adoption. Your local public foster care agency may be able to give you referrals to therapists they use for children’s treatment.

Know the Types of Help Available: Many different professionals provide mental health services but not all may be available in your area. It helps to know the training and credentials various professionals attain.

Pediatrician or Family Practice Physician – (M.D.)

Medical doctor who specialized in childhood or adolescent care and who
Typically treats routine medical conditions.

Psychiatrist – (M.D.)

Medical doctor who specializes in the evaluation of major mental or

Emotional disorders which may require medication.

Clinical Psychologist – (Ph.D. or Psy. D.)

A clinical psychologist has completed a doctoral degree in psychology and usually has completed advanced courses in general development, psychological testing and evaluation, as well as psychotherapy techniques and counseling.

Clinical Neuropsychologist – (Ph. D.)

Clinical neuropsychologist complete undergraduate and graduate training in biological and medical theories pertaining to human behavior and doctoral studies in neuropsychology.

Clinical Social worker – (LCSW or MSW)

A clinical social worker has completed a master's degree in social work with emphasis on family structure and children's interactional strengths and weaknesses.

Marriage and Family Therapist – (MSW)

Marriage and family therapists have a master's degree in counseling techniques that mainly focus on family relationships and couples. Family therapists focus on communications building and on family structure and boundaries within the family.

Licensed Professional Counselor – (LPC)

A licensed professional counselor often has graduate training in a specialty such as education, psychology, pastoral counseling or marriage and family therapy. Licensed professional counselors focus on brief problem-solving therapies.

Pastoral Counselor –

A pastoral counselor has a minimum of a master's degree (many have completed doctoral training) and focus on supportive interventions for individuals or families, using spirituality as an additional source of support for those in treatment.

Ask for Referrals: Locating a therapist does not have to be difficult. You may want to contact community adoption support networks, use the Internet, and/or ask your placement agency. Many adoption agencies have either consulting mental health therapists trained in adoption on staff or referral resources in the community. Public agencies may have a list of therapists who have effectively worked with children in foster care and adoption.

In addition, there are independent social service organization throughout the United States that provide post-adoption services, which may include parent support groups, individual and family counseling, children's support groups, educational seminars, consultations and advocacy. Check with the following resources for therapist recommendations:

- Agency social workers involved in the original placement
- State or local mental health associations – most offer referral services and list specialty areas for therapist
- Public and private adoption agencies
- Local adoptive parent support groups
- Specialized agencies providing post-adoption services

Using these recommendations, call therapists for a phone or face-to-face interview. Many therapists will offer a 15 to 20 minute initial consultation free of charge. In contacting a community mental health center, parents should ask for names of the center's family and child specialist and then request a short phone interview with those clinicians.

Phone Interview Questions: Parents should start by giving the clinician a brief description of the concern or problem for which they are requesting help. Listed below are some questions to discuss.

- What is the therapist's experience with: Adoption, in general? Special needs adopting? Open adoption? Adopted children? Transracial adoption? Search and reunion? Adoptive families? Identity issues in the context of adoption? Children who have histories of loss, abuse and/or neglect? Children who may have learning or developmental disabilities?
- How long has the therapists been in practice, and what degrees, license or certification does he/she have?
- What clinical training does he/she have on adoption issues?
- Does the therapist include parents in the therapeutic process? What does this look like?
- Does the therapist prefer to work with the entire family or only with the children?
- Will the therapist give parents regular reports on a child's progress?
- Can the therapist estimate a time frame for the course of therapy?
- How successful has the therapist been in working with similar clients?
- What is the therapist's theoretical orientation regarding treatment?

Many therapists treat from one or more of the following approaches:

- Behavioral Therapy – focuses on treating overt behaviors.
- Cognitive Therapy – focuses clinical intervention on thinking processes, motivation, and reasons for certain behaviors.
- Family Systems Therapy – views family members as a unit and focuses on their interpersonal and communications patterns
- Psychoanalysis – based on psychosexual development theories, personality structure and psychotherapy techniques pioneered by Sigmund Freud.

Other Practical Consideration: Most therapists or clinical practices have policies regarding late or missed appointments, notices required for rescheduling appointments, and filing for insurance reimbursement. Parents should ask for this information.

- What is the therapist's arrangement for coverage when he or she is not available, especially in the event of an emergency?
- Are daytime, evening or weekend appointments available? What about after-school appointments?
- Does the therapist offer discounted or sliding scale fees if she or she is not an approved provider for your health coverage?
- Does the therapist accept adoption subsidy medical payments or Medicaid reimbursement payments/
- Does the therapist have experience working collaboratively with school personnel including attending any appropriate school meetings?

Once you have selected a therapist: During the first 6-8 weeks of therapy, evaluate your satisfaction with the treatment. (It may be helpful to schedule an evaluation meeting with the therapist at the beginning of the course of therapy).

- Are you satisfied with the “chemistry” between the therapist and members of your family?
- Were mutually agreed upon goals set up for treatment approaches, outcomes desired, etc.?
- Since one of your reasons for seeking help was for assistance in addressing one or more identified problems, have you seen improvement in those areas? Weigh that evaluation with the realization that some behaviors need extensive intervention before changes can be seen.
- Do you have a tentative diagnosis from the therapist?
- What has the therapist communicated to you about the chances that therapy can improve the situation(s) you identified? (You have a right to a second opinion.)
- Have you followed through with recommendations, kept regularly scheduled appointments, and practices any “homework” assignments? (Most of the “work” in therapy occurs between sessions; it is a reciprocal process.)

It is important that you communicate your satisfaction levels with the therapist; he/she needs your feedback about conditions on the home front. Successful therapy requires open, trusting communication.

We wish you success in locating a therapist who can assist you in achieving a healthy, happy, and fulfilling family life.