



**A guide for those working with children,  
young people and families**

**One in ten children and young people in the UK suffer from mental health disorders, including emotional problems such as depression and behavioural problems such as conduct disorder. Many more have less severe difficulties that can affect the way they develop, learn and have relationships.**

**Left untreated, these difficulties can impact on a child's development, potentially leading to emotional and behavioural problems in later life, sometimes including serious mental illness.**

**They can also be linked with educational underachievement, unemployment, crime, teenage pregnancy and substance misuse, all of which involve costs to the individual and society.**

## **Meeting the needs of vulnerable children**

Children and young people with moderate to severe emotional and behavioural difficulties require a range of interventions over time. Such interventions can be resource-intensive but the implications of under-investment are costly long-term problems into adulthood and inter-generationally.

The early intervention of effective services is likely to prevent the development or intensification of difficulties in childhood, preventing problems escalating to severe levels and helping to reduce the long-term demands on services.

In order to meet the needs of vulnerable children, services need access to a **set of distinctive skills** and competences that can be delivered at a high level by a small number of specialist workers including child and adolescent psychotherapists.

## What is child and adolescent psychotherapy?

Child and adolescent psychotherapy is a core profession within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). It offers psychoanalytic treatment for children, young people, parents and families. Therapists are trained to carefully observe a child or young person and respond to what they might be communicating through their behaviour and play. They have particular skill in putting into words the troubled feelings that children evoke in them.

Therapists also apply their framework of thinking to work with parents, families and carers and to training and supporting other professionals who work with children, young people, parents and families to ensure a child-centred approach.

Child and adolescent psychotherapists treat a range of emotional and behavioural problems not easily addressed by other methods of treatment. CAMHS professionals often refer children to child and adolescent psychotherapists after other interventions have already taken place.

## What can child and adolescent psychotherapy offer in a multidisciplinary team?

Child and adolescent psychotherapists offer a specialist function as part of a multidisciplinary team, offering competences including:

- Specialist assessment and treatment options, both short-term and long-term
- An ability to work with and treat the most complex cases and the network of agencies surrounding them
- An ability to work with the most disturbed and disturbing children and young people and contain the anxiety they create within the family and wider network, including school
- An extensive knowledge of child development and an understanding of attachment issues that can create difficulties in a child's relationships with others
- The depth of training and experience to manage organisational dynamics and processes
- Supervision and training of workers in specialist CAMHS as well as in universal services

Children and young people who have complex and co-morbid difficulties, and who are the most costly in terms of their use of resources, can most benefit from the highly skilled intervention of specialist services that include the input of child and adolescent psychotherapy.

## How do child and adolescent psychotherapists work?

### Individual, family and group work

Therapists may see a child or young person **individually**, in a **group** with other children or young people or **with parents or other family members**. They tailor their approach to the individual child and are trained to work in an age-appropriate way and to respond to the way a child wishes to communicate.

During an individual session, young children do not usually talk directly about difficult things but may communicate through play using the toys provided. Older children may also play or draw whilst teenagers may talk about their feelings. Infants and parents are seen together to think about their patterns of interaction. **Treatment can be short-term or long-term.**

Therapists may also see parents or carers without the child being present. Sometimes the child is seen by another professional while work with the parents goes on; sometimes only the parents are worked with. The work may focus on helping the parent make sense of the child's behaviour, as well as how the parent's own issues interfere with their ability to parent. It may also explore different possibilities in parenting styles.

### Training, supervision and consultation

Therapists help to support other professionals who work with children, parents and families including teachers, social workers, health visitors, doctors, nursery staff and youth workers in a range of settings.

The training, supervision and consultation they offer can help make sense of contact with highly disturbed and disturbing children and young people. Training and support in self-reflective practice not only encourages a more effective response to the child but is a factor in reducing staff absences and turnover and in helping to prevent conflict in the team around the child.

*"You helped us understand that his behaviour isn't about being provocative, it's because he's terrified. We've managed to find ways of understanding his fears... so that school is less of a scary place for him. We didn't realise how much we would gain from having your insight into his feelings, his own little world."*

**Headteacher discussing five-year-old pupil**

ACP-accredited training schools offer a range of **training courses for the children's workforce**, from short courses in child development and mental health to the full professional training. See **Further Reading** for more information.

## Where do child and adolescent psychotherapists work?

The multidisciplinary settings in which child and adolescent psychotherapists work with a range of other professionals include:

**CAMHS:** treating complex cases and the networks surrounding them; supervising and training fellow professionals.

**Early years:** parent-infant work; training and supervision of nursery staff, health visitors and other professionals to identify risks to child development.

**Schools:** supporting teachers and school staff in their work with disturbed and disturbing children, often helping to hold a child in school and prevent exclusions.

**Hospitals:** helping children and families address the emotional fall-out of chronic, acute or long-term illness and its treatment.

*"The child psychotherapists were a real tower of strength to us as there were times when I felt I couldn't cope. Their involvement with us and the ward staff has been a lifeline and helped us through this difficult time."*

**Grandmother of child with a life-threatening condition seen in hospital**

*"Working with a child psychotherapist has changed the way I work. I'm much more open to asking the right questions and investigating underlying problems in the family. The whole experience has been invaluable."*

**Educational psychologist working with under-fives**

**Looked after children teams:** working with severely traumatised children, supporting fosters carers and adoptive parents to help prevent damaging placement breakdown, consulting to staff in residential children's homes.

**Learning and behavioural difficulties:** identifying and treating obstacles to learning and development, including work at pre-school, primary and secondary levels.

**Youth justice services:** work in forensic settings offering individual and group therapy and consultation and training to staff in understanding and managing hostile and violent children and young people.

The **voluntary sector** and **private practice**.

## What are the benefits of child and adolescent psychotherapy?

### For children and young people

Children and young people with mental health difficulties may respond to people and situations in ways they do not understand and cannot control. Their emotions can be very powerful and are often expressed through their behaviour, which can cause distress to themselves and those around them.

Through the relationship with the therapist in a consistent setting, the child or young person may begin to feel able to gradually put confused, frightened, hurt, angry or painful feelings into words rather than actions. The child or young person may begin to feel less anxious, more able to learn and better equipped to sustain friendships and other relationships.

### For parents, carers and families

Parents, carers and other family members can feel overwhelmed by a child or young person's difficulties and their impact on

the family. The input of a therapist can help make sense of a child's behaviour, explore how their own issues might interfere with their ability to parent well and look at different possibilities in parenting styles. The space to explore painful or uncomfortable feelings in a supportive environment can result in improvements in the quality of life within the family.

### For those working with children, young people and families

The input of a therapist can help professionals to make sense of their contact with highly disturbed and disturbing children and young people.

Training and support in self-reflective practice not only encourages a more effective response to the child but is a factor in reducing staff absences and turnover. It can also help to manage conflict amongst those working with the child, which can impede effective working between professionals and agencies.

*"Why didn't anyone ask me these questions before? I've been waiting such a long time for someone to help me understand. You don't seem phased, it's like I'm not that crazy, it all has a reason."*

**Teenager seen in psychiatric hospital**

*"My son is developing better than we could ever have imagined and I am very proud to say that. He's now able to be at the local school, which we could not have imagined before."*

**Father of adopted son seen in CAMHS**

## Positive long-term outcomes for children, young people and families

Child and adolescent psychotherapists offer positive long-term outcomes for the emotional wellbeing of children, young people and their families. This can result in improved life-chances for children and young people – as well as cost-savings and better use of resources for the NHS, children's services and partner agencies.

Research shows that child and adolescent psychotherapy is effective in treating children with a wide range of difficulties, including depression, anxiety, behaviour and eating disorders, learning difficulties and disabilities, developmental issues and personality disorders, as well as those who have suffered abuse, neglect and deprivation.

Studies have found that improvements are long-term, with adults who were treated as children or young people still feeling its impact many years later.

Child and adolescent psychotherapy is recognised by the government as a core profession within CAMHS, as set out in Standard 9 of the National Service Framework (NSF) for Children, Young People and Maternity Services. It is recommended in NICE guidance on depression in children and young people.

## Further reading

Kennedy, E. (2004) *Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy: A Systematic Review of Psychoanalytic Approaches*. North Central London Strategic Health Authority.

Kennedy, E. & Midgley, N. (eds) (2007) *Process and Outcome Research in Child, Adolescent and Parent-Infant Psychotherapy: A Thematic Review*. North Central London Strategic Health Authority.

Midgley, J., Anderson, J., Grainger, E. Nestic-Vuckovic, T. & Urwin C. (eds) (2009) *Child Psychotherapy and Research: New Approaches, Emerging Findings*. London: Routledge.

Trowell et al (2007) 'Childhood depression: a place for psychotherapy: An outcome study comparing individual psychodynamic psychotherapy and family therapy.' *European Journal of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*.

**This material and information about training courses for the children's workforce is available on our website:**

[www.childpsychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.childpsychotherapy.org.uk)

The **Association of Child Psychotherapists** (ACP) is the main professional body for psychoanalytic child and adolescent psychotherapists in the United Kingdom.

The ACP is responsible for ensuring that the training and practice of child and adolescent psychotherapy is of the highest standard. It also provides information to the public about child psychotherapy and is working to increase its availability to children and young people within the public sector, including the NHS.

Established in 1949, we have over 800 members working in the UK and abroad. Child and adolescent psychotherapists who have qualified at one of our five recognised training schools are eligible for full membership of the ACP, which enables them to work with children in a range of settings. Those accepted as trainees by any of the recognised training bodies are eligible for student membership.

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