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Helping Your Child Make the Most
of Their Time in Psychotherapy

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by Dr. Sara Schwartz Gluck, PhD, LCSW: Clinical Director, Five Towns Wellness Center

It has been my honor and privilege to have been entrusted with many child clients over the past decade. These children have made it to my office for many different reasons- anxiety, ADHD, behavioral problems, and changes in their family structures, just to mention a few. In recent years, I've noticed that parents have become even more educated about the benefits of early intervention services, and have begun to bring their children in for treatment when small warning signs begin to emerge.

It can be very difficult for parents to welcome an outsider in to help their child with emotional difficulties. I am in awe of each parent who is able to put aside their own feelings of inadequacy, of shame, of guilt, and show up in my office to ask for help on behalf of their children. As a parent myself, I know how hard it can be to admit that sometimes we cannot meet all of our child's emotional needs. Sometimes we just don't have the necessary tools, practically or emotionally, with which to ease our children's pain. And it takes a

superhuman level of strength to trust a stranger with our children's mental/emotional well being.

This is for all of you superhuman parents out there, all who have taken the step of choosing to begin the process of psychotherapy; here are just a few tips about how to make sure that the time and resources you invest in the process are maximally helpful to your child.

1. **Your attitude determines your child's attitude:** If you are calm as you bring your child into session, and if you project a sense of confidence in your child's therapist, it'll be easier for your child to feel calm and positive about therapy. When parents come into session with furrowed brows, or asking lots of anxious questions, I can almost always sense that their child is also anxious about being there. When parents view the therapist as a friend, a collaborator, a kind helper, then children are more likely to open their young minds to the idea of treatment.
2. **Do not use therapy as a threat or a punishment:** Please don't say, in moments of anger, "THIS is why you HAVE to go to therapy!" or "I'm going to tell your therapist what you just did!" This makes children see their

therapist as a disciplinarian. Even if the therapist is kind and nonjudgmental, children who have been exposed to threats related to therapy will likely treat their therapist with the same wariness as they would a school principal.

- 3. Communicate with your child's therapist:** If you have a question or concern about your child's treatment, it is your absolute right to bring it up. It is important that you understand the treatment plan that your child's therapist is using. In addition, most therapists find it very helpful when parents provide a quick weekly update regarding their child's therapy-relevant successes or challenges. This can be done at the start of session, or by email prior to the session, based on your mutual arrangement with the therapist. Make sure to attend regular parent sessions as well, so that you can ask questions and ensure that your child's home and therapy environments are both supporting his or her progress.
- 4. Make sure your child is physically ready for sessions:** I have had children seem very restless and uncomfortable in my room, and when asked, they say they missed lunch, or came straight from school and haven't had a

snack yet. Sometimes they really need to use the restroom but don't want to waste precious play therapy time. It is hard for kids to focus when they are hungry, tired, or are in any other physical discomfort. If your child's session is at 4:00 PM, you may want to consider picking him or her up from school at 3:30, instead of 3:45, to allow time for a snack and restroom break. I hate to waste parents' time and money on searching the office for a snack for a child who is just too starving to participate in the session.

5. **You may need to make some changes in your life in order for your child to change:**

Try to keep an open mind about this. Sometimes parents have a very understandable wish that the therapist will "fix" the entire problem during a 45 minute per week therapy session. We call that the "dry cleaners" fantasy- wouldn't it be wonderful if we could drop our children off at therapy, and then pick them up all pressed, polished, and happy? In real life though, there is often no magic cure or instant solution. If there were, you probably would have been able to find it on your own without the help of a therapist.

Therapy works best when you are ready to make small changes along with your child. Even something as simple as setting aside several moments per day to do therapy “homework” with your child is an effective way of reviewing the skills learned in session and helping your child learn to use those skills in real time. The more involved and invested you are in your child’s treatment, the easier it will be to achieve the treatment goals.

And most importantly:

6. **Celebrate small successes:** If your child is able to take *one* concept or skill learned in the therapy room and apply it in a single real-life situation, that means that s/he is capable of change. When you show your pride, you allow your child to recognize success and continue to work toward further change.

Once you’ve begun the treatment process, you are no longer alone. Signing your child up for psychotherapy sessions allows you to have another person on your team to support your child’s growth and happiness. As the traditional African

proverb states, "It takes a village to raise a child."

Welcome to the village. Come on in.

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