As adults, we have far more developed coping skills, capable of processing difficult experiences, and yet, think of how often we struggle with transitions and crises. How much harder must that be for kids?

Youth are vulnerable—many have experienced neglect, abuse, witnessing domestic violence, parental substance abuse, and additional traumatic occurrences. They often need mental health services to help them with various emotional and behavioral concerns. The trauma, triggers, feelings of loss, and grief that youth in care experience may be extremely difficult, confusing, and overwhelming.

**Building a Therapeutic Support System**

Common mental health providers include psychologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, therapists, counselors, and social workers. They may all have different educational backgrounds, but they all provide mental health services in some capacity. You can find more information in the *Wisconsin Foster Care Handbook*.

Many therapists use one or more methods of therapy with children. Some methods you may encounter include:

- **Trauma-Informed Therapy** acknowledges the impact that trauma has on children, and focuses on specific ways to help traumatic memories and experiences become more tolerable, like using a trauma narrative.

- **Family Therapy** focuses on the relationships among family members.

- **Talk Therapy** helps the child talk through difficult or upsetting memories or issues and is often used with older children and teens.

- **Play Therapy** uses art, puppets, games, or play-acting instead of words and is often used with younger or more active children.

- **Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy** uses rewards or successes to replace negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

- **Pharmacotherapy** uses medications to help the child, usually in conjunction with another method of therapy.

- **EMDR Therapy**—Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy is a form of trauma-informed therapy that helps kids work through their past traumas and memories.

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Therapy “To Do” List
Therapy is a team effort among you, your child, the child’s parent, and the therapist, with others also becoming involved as needed. The team members should check with foster and adoptive parents, birth parents, and case managers when looking for a therapist. Additionally, you should:

- **Be available** to meet with the therapist when you bring in your child, or call or email regularly with updates. This helps assist the therapist in understanding the concerning issues and progress, as well as reducing any possible triangulation.

- **Have realistic expectations** of therapy. Ask yourself and the therapist if those expectations are realistic. Hopefully, you, your child, and the therapist will set goals together and review them on a regular basis. Sometimes we tend to forget that therapy is just one aspect of your child’s team—and something that usually only happens about one hour per week. The real therapy happens at home, over time.

- **Share only relevant information.** Think about recent developments since the last therapy session. Review your notebook or journal prior to meeting.

- **Talk to your children in care** before and after each therapy session. This will help you understand what they are thinking/feeling and how to support them.

- **Do the homework.** Sometimes therapists will give you and/or your child a homework assignment, such as reviewing a book or other resource, or doing an exercise for relaxation. Your feedback and insights are valuable resources to share with the therapist. Encourage the kids in your care to share their insights, as well.

**Potential Barriers**
Sometimes you may run into some obstacles in finding a good provider. These can include:

- Types of insurance accepted
- Lengthy waiting lists and signed medical consents
- Lack of a good fit or knowledge between your child in care and the therapist

Some families have found creative solutions to the insurance barrier by discussing the situation with the therapist and asking if a sliding fee or other options are available. Some counties are able to offer wraparound or discretionary funding to help pay for services.

If you have to wait for services, some ideas of what you can do while waiting include:

- Document the concerns that you and team members have.
- Learn by seeking resources from the Coalition’s lending library (available at wifostercareandadoption.org).
- Observe and

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document behaviors from a non-judgmental perspective.

- Gather useful information about your child’s history.

Another barrier encountered by many foster parents is having the medical consent form signed. This form must be signed by the parent, unless a court order gives another party the ability to sign for medical services. The whole process can be lengthy and may be frustrating for you.

However, the benefits the youth may receive from therapy often outweigh the systematic challenges. It’s the social worker’s ultimate responsibility to get the signatures you need, so if you’re having trouble, make sure to contact your worker.

**When to Suggest a Change in Therapist**

The best predictor that mental health services will be successful is based on having a trusting, honest, and open relationship with the therapist, where all who are involved feel supported and comfortable. If at any time you don’t feel like you have a trusting, open, and honest relationship with your child’s therapist, schedule a time to have a meeting about your concerns. Also discuss concerns with team members and ask for their support if you want to change therapists.

Changing therapists can be necessary to meet the child’s needs. If your child is too young to make the decision to change on his own, explain the reasoning to him clearly. If your child is old enough, he should get a vote in the decision on whether to keep the therapist or not. Hopefully your child and the therapist can have a closure session to help facilitate a smoother transition to a new therapist.

You are an essential resource in assisting your children

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towards developing and reaching their best potential. With the use of mental health services and a nurturing environment, youth in care will most likely blossom as they work through their past traumas and difficult life experiences.

You, the youth, the mental health provider, and the team will work together to identify and focus on meeting the mental health needs of the youth. However, even with the best mental health therapy services in the world, remember that the real magic happens every day, at home.

Resources from the Coalition’s Lending Library

- Straight Talk about Your Child’s Mental Health, by Dr. Stephen Faraone
- Fostering and Supporting Children with Mood Disorders (VHS tape)
- In Their Own Words: Reflections on Parenting Children with Mental Health Issues, by Linda Grillo, Dee Meaney, and Christine Rich
- Kids in the Syndrome Mix, by Martin L. Kutscher

Additional Resources

- “Selecting and Working with a Therapist Skilled in Adoption,” Child Welfare Information Gateway
  [www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_therapist.pdf](http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubPDFs/f_therapist.pdf)
- “How to Choose a Psychotherapist,” American Psychological Association
- “Values and Principles for Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and Supports for Children in Foster Care,” Child Welfare League of America