

# Child Counseling

Child psychologists are trained to help children make sense of what is going on in their minds, bodies, and lives – in a way that they can understand.



Child counseling addresses issues that are negatively impacting a child's growth, development, mental health, and well-being.



By [Dr. R. Y. Langham, Ph.D.](#) | Updated: April 2, 2019

## What is Child Counseling?

Child counseling is a type of therapy that focuses on young children, teens, and adolescents with one or more mental illnesses. It also provides aid to youths, who have experienced trauma, and/or who are experiencing a dysfunctional or stressful home environment.

Many of the issues these children face mimic the issues adults face in their day-to-day lives. Some of these common issues include [anxiety](#), [depression](#), and [grief](#). The goal of child counseling, however, is to break down problems into manageable parts, so children can better understand and cope with them.

## Who are Child Counselors?

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Child counselors are mental health specialists, who offer invaluable insight into your child's social and emotional development and mental health. It is important to understand that many times "glitches" in these areas may not be visible to the people closest to the child. That is where child counselors come in.

These individuals have the knowledge and expertise to recognize, identify, pinpoint, assess, diagnose, and treat a wide range of mental health conditions, adjustment issues (divorce, new school, bullying, grief, etc.), and psychological distress.

More specifically, child counselors, also sometimes referred to as child therapists and child psychologists (depending on the level of education and licensure), have been trained to "get into the minds of children," so they can help them make sense of what is going on in their minds, bodies, and lives.

## What are the Functions of Child Counselors?

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Child counselors perform many services to vulnerable youth. Most importantly, these mental health professionals have the know-with-all to help your child receive the help he/she needs to resolve his/her issues and resume a healthy and productive life. It is important to understand that children, who are suffering from mental health issues or psychological distress, may not share these concerns with their parents. That doesn't happen because your child doesn't love you; rather, it occurs because he/she fears disappointing you.

Therefore, the aim of child counselors is to help children better interpret the issues they are experiencing and/or the trauma that occurred – in a way they can process and understand. When a child's social and emotional issues and psychological distress are left untreated, it can negatively impact his/her educational aspirations and developmental milestones.

More importantly, it can cause delays that persist well into adulthood. Keep in mind, however, that children of all ages, from toddlers and preschoolers to teens and adolescents, can benefit from counseling sessions.

Ultimately, this form of counseling aims to help children work through their emotions, so they can live normal healthy lives without the lasting effects of fear, confusion, anxiety, or trauma. The good news is you can play an important part in your child's mental health simply being observant.

If you notice that your child's behavior has suddenly and/or dramatically changed, or something feels "off" with your child, schedule a consultation with your child's pediatrician or [search for a child counselor](#) for a more in-depth assessment. Sound judgment can ensure that your child receives the best treatment possible for his/her condition or issue.

## When Should You Seek Child Counseling for Your Child?

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When a child is suffering from mental, social or emotional, or psychological distress and/or trauma, it can be hard to cope with, especially when you feel like nothing is working or there's nothing you can do to remedy the situation. [5] That is where a child counselor can be extremely beneficial.

This mental health professional can identify the underlying issues that are affecting your child's overall health and well-being, so he/she can quickly receive the treatment he/she needs to feel better. The truth is many children are unable to fully process the complexities that accompany the emotional and/or psychological issues they are experiencing, so counseling may be just what your child needs to work towards mental wholeness.

In addition, child counseling can be invaluable to children who suffer from [obsessive-compulsive disorder](#), [post-traumatic stress disorder](#), or general anxiety disorder. It is common for parents, pediatricians, and teachers to seek counseling services for children if they feel they are in need of professional help. Why? Well, because child counselors can observe, assess, and identify the root cause of your child's distress. Remember, the main goal of child counseling is to use the knowledge and expertise of a trained child counselor to calm your concerns and help your child get the help he/she needs to function properly. A child counselor can provide both you and your child with the tools needed to deal with issues and any mental health condition in a healthy and productive way. More so, this specialist can help both you and your child navigate uncomfortable, scary, anxiety-provoking, and challenging times with less stress and turmoil.

As a parent, you want nothing but health and happiness for your child, but sometimes situations occur that you simply can't "fix" on your own – especially when you are as emotionally-invested in the situation as you are as a parent. That is when it's best to lean on someone with expertise in the area.

Therefore, you should seek counseling for your child, when you notice that your child is struggling or behaving uncharacteristically. A child counselor will teach him/her helpful techniques that place his/her mental health and well-being at center stage.

## What Kinds of Issues Do Child Counselors Treat?

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Well, child counselors treat a variety of issues. For instance, they treat children who have experienced trauma or upsetting events like the loss of a parent, pet, loved one, siblings, home, etc. And, they also treat children, who have witnessed or experienced abuse and/or intimidation.

Basically, child counselors treat any issues that cause children social or emotional distress and/or any mental health condition that is affecting a child's life. The goal of these professionals is to help your child identify and cope with any issue or issues they are experiencing in a healthy way.

### **Some of the most common issues that child counselors treat include:**

- [Divorce](#)
- Grief and the death of a loved one, pet, home, etc.
- Witnessing or experiencing a trauma event(s)
- Mental health conditions and psychological distress (i.e. anxiety and depression)
- Bullying
- Sexual, emotional, and/or physical abuse
- Relocation issues (i.e. changing schools, homes, families, and/or cities/states)
- Family substance abuse or [addiction](#)

## How Can You Tell If Your Child Needs Counseling?

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Well, there are some signs that may signal that your child needs counseling. For instance, a child, who has begun to act “out of character” and/or one who has suddenly begun to have developmental problems or rebel – in ways that are not considered “normal behavior” for children of that age, may need to talk to a professional.

In addition, if your child has experienced a significant trauma (i.e. abuse, the death of a loved one or pet, uprooting, divorce, chronic illness, etc.) recently or in the past, but has not received treatment or therapy for it, he/she will most likely benefit from child counseling.

### **So, what are some signs that my child is in distress and could benefit from counseling?**

*Common signs of mental health issues or psychological distress include:*

- Unprovoked aggression
- Leakage of urine
- Difficulty adjusting to social situations and/or new situations
- Recurrent nightmares, night terrors, and/or sleep difficulties like insomnia
- Low grades or a sudden academic decline
- Constant worry and anxiety
- Social withdraw from activities your child once liked or loved to do
- A noticeable and/or sudden loss of appetite and/or extreme weight loss
- Repetitively performing rituals and routines like hand-washing
- Suicidal ideations (thoughts) or attempts
- Your child responds to voices he/she hears in his/her head
- Spending most of his/her time alone or engaging in voluntary social isolation
- Alcohol and/or drug use, abuse, or addiction
- Increased physical complaints, despite a healthy report from a medical professional
- Engaging in self-harm practices, such as cutting oneself

## What are Some Common Goals of Child Counseling?

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Common goals of child counseling vary, depending on the child’s issue(s). However, it typically focuses on and addresses issues in a child’s life that are significantly impacting his/her growth, development, mental health, and well-being. The aim is to help your child learn tools, techniques, and methods that can better prepare him/her for any challenges he/she faces – now and in the future.

*Therefore, a common goal of child counseling is helping your child successfully cope with challenging situations that trigger the following emotions:*

### **Anxiety**

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One of the main benefits of counseling for children is that it teaches them how to effectively manage emotional distress and anxiety – by themselves. More specifically, children learn how to prevent panic attacks, and deal with anxiety in healthier ways.

For example, an anxious child may learn breathing exercises, stress management/relaxation techniques for when he/she gets “worked up,” how to control his/her muscles, so they do not tense up when he/she is stressed,

positive self-talk, and the importance of talking to someone when feeling overwhelmed, mentally exhausted, confused, distressed, depressed, and/or anxious.

A child counselor can help your child understand that keeping these feelings bottled up inside only makes everything worse. By sharing these concerns and fears with a professional or at least a trusted friend or relative, your child can get the help he/she needs to deal with, manage, and/or resolve issues that are causing them turmoil.

Therefore, counseling can provide your child with an important toolbox of coping mechanisms that he/she can use when he/she experiences anxiety.

## **Trauma**

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The truth is some children are exposed to disturbing situations that traumatize them – events no child should bear witness to or experience. The negative and heartbreaking effects of trauma can include shock, disbelief, detachment, emotional or social numbness, fear, anxiety, and depression. And, unfortunately, in some cases, it can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

PTSD symptoms may include a strong desire to avoid trauma-related people and/or places, intense and upsetting memories, flashbacks, and/or nightmares, sleep issues like insomnia, and uncontrollable anger, aggression, and/or agitation. The good news is child counseling can give children suffering from PTSD an outlet to share their feelings, fears, and concerns.

In other words, it can give these children a voice – one, in which they can talk about what happened to them and how it made them feel then and how it makes them feel now. It can also encourage these individuals to share their feelings, regardless of what they are, instead of keeping them bottled up inside.

Lastly, counseling can help these children understand that they are not to blame for what happened to them. They are survivors – not victims or perpetrators.

So to sum it up, child counselors can teach your child that it's okay to talk about what happened to him/her. In fact, it's healthy to do so. And, they can teach your child a variety of coping mechanisms he/she can use when the "going gets rough." In other words, when your child experiences a memory or flashback that distresses him/her, he/she will be able to pull a tool out of his/her toolbox to deal with it.

These tools may include deep breathing exercises, taking a time-out to regroup, talking to a trusted friend or relative about how he/she is feeling, practicing stress management/relaxation techniques, focusing on the positive, and looking at the event or experience in a different way (reframing).

## **Divorce**

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When a marital union ends, it can be very distressing for a child. In fact, it is common for children to blame themselves for the divorce. It is also common for these children to feel that because they caused the end of the marriage, they are unlovable.

Then there's the unfortunate consequence of divorce – child custody issues. Sometimes custody arrangements are amicable, but sometimes they are tense – a custody battle between parents.

Having to choose between parents can make children feel uneasy, anxious, and guilty, especially when it comes to who they want to live with. In addition, children, whose choices don't align with their parents or siblings often feel sad, confused, distressed, and overwhelmed.

The good news is child counselors can teach children, who are going through or who have gone through a divorce how to cope with their conflicting and confusing feelings through a wide range of techniques, such as deep breathing, art or music therapy, positive self-talk, journaling, exercising, and talking to a trusted friend or relative about their feelings and thoughts.

## **Grief**

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The death of a loved one, pet, friend, home, school, and/or health can lead to a considerable amount of grief. If it is distressing to an adult, you know it's ten times worse for a child, who does not have the maturity level, life experiences, or coping mechanisms that an adult has.

In fact, for children going through the grieving process, it can be extremely difficult to wrap their heads around. In fact, they may become enveloped in confusing, conflicting, and fluctuating feelings like numbness, denial, loss, sadness, despair, depression, anxiety, and anger/rage.

They miss the person, pet, place, or thing they loved so dearly and do not know how to channel the pain into something healthier. These children may develop irrational thought patterns like they too will die or someone else they love will leave. They may honestly believe that the loss was due to something they did or did not do. Furthermore, they may feel immeasurable guilt that they could have done something to prevent the loss – but did not.

Child counselors help children better understand the grief process while teaching them that is okay to experience conflicting and confusing emotions. Counselors explain to children that grief is a normal emotion that often comes in waves. They also explain to children that it's important to experience them to heal from the loss.

These specialists also encourage children to talk about the loss as much and as often as possible until they are able to process it in a way that makes sense for them.

There is no time limit on how long one should grieve and there's no right or wrong way to do it. However, it is important that you, as a parent, keep an eye on your child, and if he/she appears to be sinking further and further away and not taking steps towards healing after a year – make an appointment with a child counselor.

A child counselor will teach your child coping strategies like how important it is to share his/her feelings with a trusted loved one or friend, channeling grief into creative pursuits like music, journaling, and/or art, and using his/her voice to share loving memories of the person, place, or thing the child has lost.

Mental health professionals teach grieving children that there are many layers of the grieving process and each one is important and must be experienced to successfully heal.

## **Change**

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For many children, change (i.e. changing schools, moving to a new city or state, being adopted or entering the foster care system, remarriage, divorce, going to live with another relative, the loss of a loved one or pet, etc.) can be traumatic.

Adults, like you and me, have the tools to accept and adapt to these changes, but many times, children don't. So, although changes may not significantly impair your ability to function, it may have a totally different effect on your child.

What effect? Well, children, who have experienced a significant change in their lives, may have a hard time expressing how they really feel about it. More specifically, a *big* change can lead to anxiety, low self-esteem, self-doubt, uncertainty, anxiety, depression, fear, phobia, worry, and/or anger/rage towards their parents – and everyone else.

While these are normal reactions to change, in general, some children may have a hard time moving past these feelings by themselves. That's where child counseling comes into play.

Child counselors teach children how to effectively cope with the change by focusing on the positive (and unchanging) aspects of their lives. They also teach children how to practice positive self-talk, when they feel themselves becoming overwhelmed with all the changes in their lives.

Lastly, they teach children how to breathe deeply when they are having a hard time coping with the “newness” of it all. The goal of these specialists is to help your child understand (and accept) that change is natural, and their feelings are temporary. Eventually, he/she will adjust and those feelings will fade.

## **Low Self-Esteem & Self-Confidence**

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The truth is some children struggle with low self-esteem and self-confidence. When this occurs it can also lead to anxiety, depression, substance abuse, [eating disorders](#), and even thoughts of self-harm and suicide. A child with low self-esteem may feel unlovable, empty, and worthless.

As a result, he/she may begin to believe that his/her loved ones and friends would be “better off” without them. Child counselors can help this child improve his/her self-esteem and self-confidence in a myriad of ways. For instance, a child counselor may teach a child with low self-esteem and self-confidence how to look at the big picture and dig deeper to find the root cause of the issues.

He/she may also help this child better understand how negative thoughts and self-talk is causing him/her to feel bad – mentally and physically. This specialist can also explain to a child how positive self-talk can dramatically improve his/her self-esteem, self-confidence, and overall life.

Some of the things your child will learn in child counseling include the benefit of using positive affirmations to boost self-confidence and self-acceptance and the importance of talking to a loved one or trusted friend about distressing feelings and thoughts. A child counselor can even help your child if his/her low self-esteem and self-confidence stems from something more serious like an eating disorder.

## **What are the Different Types of Child Counseling?**

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There are many different types of child counseling, such as cognitive-behavior therapy, trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy, and alternative therapies.



## Cognitive-Behavior Therapy (CBT)

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The goal of [cognitive-behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#) is to help children change negative thought patterns and behaviors by reframing the way they think about issues and events. The aim is to help children convert negative thoughts into more positive ones, so they can have a healthier response to the issues, themselves, and the world around them.

More specifically, CBT encourages children to challenge their belief systems, when it comes to themselves, so they can accurately view themselves and the situation through a more realistic and positive lens. Therefore, CBT can provide your child with the tools he/she needs to effectively cope with challenging and stressful situations when they arise.

## Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)

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The goal of trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy (TF-CBT) is to help children heal from the effects of trauma. Similar to CBT, these counselors teach children how to view the trauma in a more realistic manner – *without blaming themselves*.

TF-CBT also teaches children techniques they can use if they experience a flashback, with the goal of working through those memories from a place of control and understanding. As a result, TF-CBT can provide your child with the ability to use these tools when or if they become distressed from the memory of the trauma.

## Alternative Therapies

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A child, who is experiencing mental health issues or psychological distress may benefit from alternative therapies like music and/or art therapy, exercise, sports therapy, movement therapy, equine therapy, mindfulness, and/or aquatic therapy.

## What Should I Look for in a Child Counselor?

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There are several things you should consider when looking for a child counselor. Firstly, the counselor **must** be a good fit for your child. Why? Well, because there is a good chance your child will be uncomfortable, anxious, and/or a little (or a lot) embarrassed about seeing a child counselor. It's unknown and scary to a child. *Does that mean I'm crazy?* You and I know that is not the case, but a child may not.

So, it is important that you find a counselor that will “mesh” with your child. The truth is it may take a while before your child feels comfortable, so the counselor needs to know how to “break the ice” with him/her. If there is a disconnect or your child expresses unease or displeasure with the counselor, you will need to find another one. Why? Because counseling will be a bust if your child does not trust his/her counselor.

In addition, it is important that you research potential counselors – in advance. Consider his/her credentials – training qualifications, approach, and client reviews. All of those things are important. It is also imperative that the counselor specializes in child counseling. Why? So, you can feel reassured that he/she knows how to use therapy techniques in a way that will actually *help* your child – not *hinder* him/her.

And, because your child's mental health and well-being are paramount, do not hesitate to check the counselor's references. If all of that checks out, make an appointment to meet with him/her. Do you feel comfortable with the counselor? Does your child? If you both feel comfortable, proceed. But, if you don't get a



good vibe – go back to the drawing board and start again until you find one that meets your comfort level. It takes a village, after all.

The good news is most counselors offer free consultations, so you can find one that best fits your child's personality with ease.

## How Can I Find a *Good* Child Counselor?

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Deciding to seek child counseling is not an easy decision, and finding the *right* counselor may seem like an even more daunting task. Therefore, when researching therapists – ask around. In other words, ask for referrals from other parents and caregivers, teachers, and physicians.

There's usually nothing more valuable when looking for a good child counselor than word-of-mouth. Keep in mind, however, that what may be *good* for one child may be *bad* for another, so keep an open mind and make your own decision. If you're looking for a child counselor in your area, check out the [TherapyTribe Directory](#). It can help you find the *right* counselor for your child.

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<https://www.therapytribe.com/therapy/child-counseling/>