



# How Do I Choose A Therapist For My Child?

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As a parent of a child with special needs and an Occupational Therapist, I know that one of the most important and difficult decisions we are asked to make is choosing a therapist for our child. It can be any type of therapist: occupational, speech, physical, psychologist, psychiatrist, counselor, etc. It isn't easy to determine what qualities and qualifications we need to look for. It can be, at its best, stressful and at its worse detrimental to our children. Take a deep breath, because you know how to do this.

First of all, you know more about your child than any professional that you are hiring or taking your child to see. You may not know the industry language or the intervention strategies, but you know your child. Secondly, your gut instinct should be respected, and you should honor your instinct when you get a "feeling" one way or another. Also, pay attention to what your child says whether in words or actions. Kids are smart and can pick out an "imposter" quickly. By imposter, I mean someone that doesn't really like to work with children, or they don't know how to work with children. Yes, they are out there! You should also know what you are looking for; what are your goals for your child and family? Ask open-ended questions so that you can get a feel for how knowledgeable and/or willing a therapist is to answer your questions. If they seem annoyed or don't want to answer...walk away!

Here are some questions you should consider asking:

1. What is your treatment philosophy? This will tell you a great deal about how they will work with your family and child. Are they play-based, behaviorally based, child-centered, therapist-directed? A therapist should be able to

- clearly articulate what their approach will be. That is not to say that they won't change that approach based on the responses of your child, but they will have guiding principles that governs what they do.
2. Do you have specialized training? This will indicate how dedicated they are to their specialty. If they have not taken the time and resources to get advanced training and certifications in something that they say they specialize in, you want to know that. Some therapists are young and have not had the time to get advanced training, so it is important that they are being mentored by someone that has the experience and training. Are you supervised by someone that has advanced training and certifications?
  3. Tell me about a client that was very challenging and how you handled that. Tell me about a client that responded well to your interventions.
  4. How are you going to measure progress; what should I expect to see changing in my child's life? Given the description of my child, what goals do you think you will have? During this course of conversation, they should be asking you what your priorities are for treatment. What changes you want to see as a result of intervention. Some of my favorite goals are the ones that parents come up with. I have had goals such as "riding the merry go round at the zoo", "going on the Buzz Lightyear ride at Disney" or "coming up on his own to give me a hug". Therapy should impact your life. It isn't enough that the child can perform when he or she is with the therapist, we must see it generalize into their lives or it isn't a success.
  5. Is therapy with you fun? A child's occupation is play. Play should be fun. Period.

Don't be afraid to make a change. If you choose a therapist and it isn't working, end it. Not all therapeutic relationships are a success. Sometimes it is not the fault of the therapist, but the child just doesn't respond or "gel" with that particular therapists personality. You cannot worry about hurting their feelings or making them sad. Your only responsibility is to your child. They will get over it and maybe even learn from it.

It may seem like you are interviewing your therapist for a job...oh, wait, you are! It is important to remember that not all occupational therapists are the same; all Speech Therapists are not the same. You have to discern what qualities are important to you, your child and your family.

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