

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT THERAPY

Welcome to SLFS

Welcome to Smart Love Family Services. We are glad that you have turned to us to help your child. Bringing your child to therapy may be a new experience for you as parents/caregivers and we understand that you may have a lot of questions. Our professional staff has created this handout as a way to answer parents' commonly asked questions about child therapy at SLFS. (Child therapy here includes adolescent therapy). We hope that this information provides you with an understanding of how we help children. We are also available to answer any additional questions you may have in person: parents may contact their child's therapist at any time or Dr. Carla Beatrice, Director of Clinical Services at (773) 665-8052,

The Type of Child Therapy SLFS Provides

Smart Love Family Services uses an approach, Intrapsychic Humanism (IH), which was developed by two highly respected experts in the mental health field, Martha Heineman Pieper, Ph.D., and William J. Pieper, M.D. Inner Humanism® is the application of these ideas to caring for individuals of all ages in therapy. Smart Love® is the application of these discoveries to parenting and child development. Supported by the latest child development research, IH has been successfully applied by trained professionals in a broad range of settings for over four decades.

The Piepers, Chicago natives and parents of five, discovered that everyone is born with the capacity to achieve a stable and pleasurable inner well-being. They identified effective ways to foster this well-being, and hence avoid the development of self-sabotage. Children, adolescents, and adults who possess inner happiness are able to make constructive and healthy self-caretaking choices, enjoy a productive and fulfilling school/work life, and sustain close and pleasurable relationships with loved ones and peers.

Our professional staff receives ongoing training in IH and uses these principles when caring for the children and adolescents who come see us at SLFS. We have found this approach to be highly effective in helping children become more self-regulated and happier. As you read this brochure, you may find that this type of child therapy is unique in certain ways. We provide detailed explanations below for why we structure the therapy this way so that you can understand the benefits to you and your children.

How is Child Therapy Structured?

Therapists at SLFS meet individually with children and adolescents for 45 minute weekly sessions. Parents or other caregivers are not directly involved in the therapy sessions. However, we believe that it is very important for parents to receive support as well as be part of the therapy process by meeting with their own parent guidance counselor or parent coach at SLFS. (See below for details). The reason we meet with children individually is that it has many benefits in terms of effectiveness. We have found that children make much more progress when they know that the therapist is their therapist and not shared by other family members. This helps children feel taken seriously, which enhances their trust in the relationship. Further, child clients greatly benefit from knowing that the details of their therapy are kept private and confidential. While therapists will always share some information with parents, such as the goals of therapy, general progress updates, and any serious health and safety issues, we keep the specifics private because children are much more likely to share their feelings and concerns when they know it is private. Research in general indicates that one of the greatest predictors of effective therapy is when clients trust their therapists and know that what they share is confidential. At SLFS, we believe this applies to clients of all ages, including very young children

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How Do We Understand Children's Problems and Behaviors?

From an IH perspective, we believe that all people, including children of all ages, are born with a desire and capacity to be happy, loveable and loving. However, it is very common for children to develop what Smart Love calls inner unhappiness, which is when children unknowingly acquire motives to feel unhappy. We believe that children's acting out behaviors or symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, are an expression of inner unhappiness and reflects the child's difficulty with self-regulation and self-caretaking. In addition, we also understand that children's problems can be a sign of the difficulty they are having in response to painful losses that may be occurring in their lives, such as divorce, bullying, having a learning disability, to name a few. Many children that come to therapy are having reactions to losses.

Reactions to Losses: Children with inner unhappiness often react to losses in such a way that makes them feel worse or causes more problems for themselves. When children act out, we understand this as a maladaptive attempt to feel better. We all want to feel happy and when we don't, we do something to try to feel better—sometimes we turn to things that are good for us and sometimes we turn to things that are not so good for us. For example, a child may have a tendency to get angry or aggressive towards others in response to something going wrong (e.g., getting a bad grade), or another child may take it out on herself, such as being self-critical and feeling inadequate. Children can also isolate themselves or shut-down when there are problems. Therapy helps children learn that there is a better way to feel and a better way to deal with losses. We help children develop and turn to more constructive ways of coping and taking care of themselves when something goes wrong, such as learning to acknowledge and express their feelings, turning to healthy positive relationships, and renewing positive efforts to solve problems as ways to resolve problems. Over time, therapy helps children lose interest in their negative, unhealthy ways of relating, coping and taking care of themselves and transition to positive, constructive responses.

Children Can Also Have Reactions to Positive Experiences, Called Aversive Reactions to Pleasure: Children who have inner unhappiness can also respond to positive experiences with what Smart Love calls aversive reactions. Parents often wonder why their child may suddenly become unhappy while having a positive experience—for example, a child has a meltdown after receiving the exact birthday present he asked for. Or sometimes parents wonder why their child may be doing well in something, such as school, and then she sabotages herself by not turning her homework in on a regular basis. When children have needs to feel unhappy, they can then unknowingly react negatively to positive, pleasurable experiences. Through the type of therapy we do at SLFS, children's desire to feel internally happy and to be able to enjoy themselves and others grows significantly such that their aversive reactions decrease over time.

Overall, therapy helps children develop greater internal self-regulation and self-esteem so they are equipped to respond more constructively to the inherent losses in life as well as to be able to stably enjoy the positive pleasures in life, including school success and positive relationships with friends and family members!

How Do We Help Children in Therapy? — An “Inside-Out” Approach

In essence, our goal in child therapy is to strengthen children's inner happiness and their ability to turn more to their constructive motives to be happy, loving, self-regulated and self-caretaking. We believe that every child we see, no matter with how many problems, has the underlying motive and desire to take better care of themselves, to have better relationships, and to generally experience greater fulfillment and success.

Therapy first and foremost creates a comfortable, safe place and relationship for children so that they can trust that all their thoughts and feelings are welcome. Therapists let children know that they will not be judged and that they will not “get in trouble” in therapy. In order for therapy to work, children have to trust that the therapist really wants to know who they are and that we are there to help them. This immensely helps children bring their problems and inner unhappiness into the therapy, which needs to happen in order for progress to be made.

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Once that relationship is established, our goal is to help children gradually get to know their inner experiences and to be able to express their feelings and concerns, whether that is directly through words or metaphorically through play (see below on use of play). Children often come to therapy unaware of their feelings, yet your children have feelings that are just as complex and intense as yours. When they cannot express those feelings verbally, they tend to act them out with negative or isolative behaviors. The therapist helps the child turn to the therapy relationship to get help for their feelings rather than act them out in negative behaviors or symptoms. Therapists' expertise helps children better understand their conflicting wishes for happiness and unhappiness and the workings for their minds.

Parents will often ask whether we tell children what to do in sessions, such as directly teach them coping skills or have them do "homework". Inner humanism therapy is different in that we believe that real change comes from an inside-out approach. What does that mean? It means two things. First, children's symptoms and problems are an expression of an inner experience of something troubling the child. It is important to address the problem at the inner level to really resolve the issues, rather than only change an external behavior. A medical analogy can be helpful here. If your child has a rash, you would not only treat the external symptom with an ointment, but you would also find out what the cause of the rash is and treat it (e.g., steroids for eczema). Therefore, the goal of our therapy is to resolve the inner unhappiness and strengthen children's inner happiness and self-esteem. When this "inside" problem gets addressed, the "outside" problems eventually disappear, with the result that your child will function better both inside and "outside." When a child feels better about herself, she is much more likely to cope in a positive healthy way when something doesn't go her way (e.g., her friends don't invite her to a sleepover—she shares her feelings with you and then finds a friend to hang out with rather than sulk and feel rejected). Good coping and problem solving skills come directly out of this type of inner self-regulation. Everything else falls into place so to speak. As children start to feel happier and better about themselves, they are much more open to other adults, such as their parents and teachers, guiding and helping them and ultimately they perform better in school, with peers, and in family life.

Further, we give children the opportunity to share their feelings with their therapists on their own timetables. So our therapists do not pressure children to talk on any particular topic or about any specific problem. To do so is to get into a power struggle with the child. When the child brings feelings and problems to the therapist out of trust and a wish for help, the result is that the child's trust in the therapist deepens which makes the therapists' insights to the child transformational and powerful. We strengthen the child's innate motives to seek positive care and a positive experience of herself, and healthy self-caretaking. All children have this motive and it is more effective to respond to the child's own motive rather than force our agenda on children.

What Does the Child Therapist Do With My Child in Sessions?

Many parents wonder "What does my child do in there?!" The most important thing parents can know is that whether children directly talk about their problems, there is always an effective therapeutic process occurring. This includes even when children say, "All I do in there is play games and eat snacks!" Children and adolescents will "talk about their problems", but many do not. Child therapy is different than adult therapy. Often, children will express their problems metaphorically through play, or through the way they interact with the therapist. It is important to allow children to express themselves in ways they feel comfortable. The therapists at SLFS are trained to understand the meanings of these communications and then respond in therapeutic ways to facilitate the child's ability for self-regulation, including helping children learn that it is more constructive for them to turn to the therapist for help rather than negative ways of relating and coping.

Why Does the Therapist Give My Child Snacks?

You will probably notice your child and other child clients at SLFS come out of their sessions with all kinds of snacks. There is a therapeutic benefit to providing snacks. Initially, it can help children feel comfortable in being in a new setting and meeting a new person. When therapists respond to children's requests for certain snacks, it also helps children feel valued, cared about and taken seriously. In other words, there is a deeper meaning for the child of being emotionally nurtured and the experience that he/she can cause the therapist to respond, which facilitates therapy progress. Over time, as children internalize positive feelings about themselves, they become less reliant on needing external things to feel cared about and good about themselves. Because of the value of snacks, it is our recommendation to allow your child to have snacks in therapy and in general not to limit the amount (unless of course there are allergies or dietary restrictions). You may find that your child has more candy, for example, than you would normally provide as a parent. A therapist's role is different than a parent in that it is important for parents to regulate how many snacks children have. However, it is more beneficial if within reason the therapist allows children to have unlimited access to snacks during their sessions.

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How Long Will My Child's Therapy Take?

First, it is best to talk directly to your child's therapist so that she can give you a more accurate assessment of your child's treatment needs. The length of therapy will depend on your child and the type of problems he or she is experiencing. In general, we recommend that children stay in therapy for as long as is needed to resolve the underlying "inside" issues that caused the "outside" problems or symptoms. We strongly recommend that children stay in therapy even when the presenting problem is resolved so that the changes can be internalized and stabilized. When parents end their child's therapy too soon, the child will often backslide and revert back to negative patterns and behaviors.

It is important to understand that therapy is very effective but that the results are not immediate. Patterns and symptoms can take years to develop and, therefore, they often take time to change. Parents may feel pressed to end their child's therapy because they worry that their child will grow "dependent" on therapy. However, we have found that the opposite is really true: children who stay in therapy longer make more progress in their self-esteem and self-regulation, which are indicators of genuine autonomy. They actually become less dependent on their symptoms and their negative ways of relating and coping, and instead, become happier and learn to turn to healthier ways of taking care of themselves.

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Therapy Progress is Uneven

It is very common for children's progress in therapy to be uneven. Children will often have periods of progress followed by what we call backsliding. Therefore, it's often as though children take two steps forward and one step back. The reason for this is that children often have aversive reactions to the positive changes they are making. Why would that be? When a child has motives for unhappiness, she can react negatively to feeling happier and doing better because she has grown accustomed to feeling unhappy and that part of her mind can unknowingly disrupt the positive changes. It is very helpful for parents to understand this process. If you know what you are seeing is a common part of therapy and that the backsliding is in response to progress and is temporary, it can help you hang in there and not get discouraged with your child. It is best to be positive and patient while children are backsliding. Eventually, children's appetite for happiness outweighs their motives to feel unhappy, which means your child will experience less backsliding and more stable progress over time. You may be able to relate to backsliding as an adult because adults commonly experience setbacks when they try to make positive changes in their lives. For example, many adults have a positive motive to take better care of their health by eating better and exercising; however, it is not uncommon for people to make progress and then experience backsliding in the form of engaging in unhealthy behaviors, such as eating too much. The important thing to remember is that the motive to be happy and to take care of oneself is always there and that not all is lost when backsliding occurs.

Why Do Children Sometimes Say They Don't Want to Go to Therapy?

It is not uncommon for children at times to say that they do not want to go to their therapy sessions. This may confuse parents sometimes, especially in cases where the child appears to enjoy going to his therapy. Why does this happen? As discussed earlier, children who have needs for unhappiness can react to feeling better on the inside, and to the positive changes occurring in their lives. These reactions can cause them to refuse to continue to get help—a part of them unknowingly attempts to sabotage their progress as a way to maintain their inner experience of unhappiness. Further, children who have inner unhappiness can believe that it is better not to turn to others for help so that they can react strongly to the help available in the relationship with their therapist and the relationship pleasure that represents. So what should a parent do when this happens? It is important to insist that children attend their appointments and encourage the child to talk to the therapist about his feelings. You want to give your stamp of approval on your child's therapy. Children may overtly express anger about this decision, but a part of them will feel taken seriously and cared about by the parent. Parents may feel that the therapist is not listening to the child's feelings when she insists that the child come to his sessions. However, it is important to ask the question: which part of your child do you want to listen to? The part of him that wants to be happy and be able to take care of himself (no longer have troubling symptoms) or the part of the child that prefers to be unhappy and continues to have problems that cause him losses? Further, therapists will always listen to all of your child's feelings including the ones about not wanting to come to therapy—we will let your child know that we are happy that he could tell us about this part of him, and that we are there to help him with those feelings.

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How Parents Can Be Involved

Many people are involved in your child's life but you are the most important. Your child's therapist will meet with you for 1–2 parent feedback sessions after he or she has met with your child a few times. This time is used to hear your perspective on your child and to learn how we can best help your child and family. After that time, you can contact your child's therapist if you have questions or if you would like to schedule a parent meeting for a progress update or for parent support.

We always recommend that parents attend at least a few parent sessions with a separate parent guidance counselor at SLFS to get support in your efforts to help your child. It will help you enjoy parenting more and it makes the therapy progress go faster. We recommend that parents see a parent counselor separate from the child's therapist because this helps children maintain their trust in the therapist, and it also provides parents with more availability of their own parent guidance counselor

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Parents may want to meet with their child's therapist so that the therapist is aware of what is happening in the child's life—parents wonder how we can help children if we do not know the details. It is our experience that we are fully able to help children without being informed of all the details of the child's life and, in fact, it can make progress faster. The reason for this is twofold. First, it is best for children to be able to decide what information they want us to know or not know. Children can feel a real loss when parents share things that they would not have shared with their therapist. The only exception to this of course is if there is some health or safety concern. If a parent is worried about a child's health or safety, it is very important to call the child's therapist to share this kind of information. Second, as described earlier, the type of therapy we do focuses on helping children have a more positive experience of himself, and therefore, it is not necessary to know all about the child's external life. As the child's inner well-being increases, the external problems she or he is having will diminish and then disappear.

Finally, you can also take advantage of the Smart Love parent education seminars and resource books—information is available on our website and in our waiting rooms. We always want to hear from you if you have concerns or questions about your child's therapy. Call us and then we can decide together the best way to help your child.

We look forward to helping you and your family!

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