

Brighter Sky Counseling

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EMDR Therapy & Children: A Guide for Parents

What is EMDR Therapy?

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy is a treatment method aimed to resolve emotional difficulties caused by disturbing, difficult, or frightening life experiences. In 1989, psychologist Francine Shapiro began to research the ability of EMDR therapy to reduce the intensity of negative, disturbing thoughts and to treat adult victims of trauma. Since then, EMDR therapy has developed through the contributions of therapists and researchers all over the world. When an upsetting, scary, or painful experience happens, sometimes the memory of the experience stays ‘stuck’ in the mind. The experience may return in a distressing and intrusive way such as nightmares or a child may cope by avoidance behaviors, such as fear of trying new things. Most experts agree that one way to get ‘unstuck’ and free from the symptoms is through exposure to the traumatic experience. This means to face the memories or troubling events until they are no longer disturbing. EMDR therapy combines elements of several well established clinical theoretical orientations (e.g., psychodynamic, cognitive, behavioral, and client-centered) together with bilateral stimulation to dissipate the upset associated with the experience. Bilateral stimulation refers to the use of alternating, right-left tracking that may take the form of eye movements, tones or music delivered to each ear, or tactile stimulation, such as paddles or hand taps. EMDR therapy helps to process the troubling thoughts, feelings, and memories and as a result, strengthens the feelings of confidence, calmness, and mastery so that children can return to their normal developmental tasks.

How is EMDR Therapy used with children?

EMDR Therapy has been applied to help children overcome traumatic events and other childhood problems and symptoms. When children are traumatized, they lose a sense of control over their lives. This can result in symptoms of anxiety, depression, irritability, anger, guilt, and/or behavioral problems. Even common upsetting childhood events, such as divorce, school problems, peer difficulties, failures, and family problems can deeply affect a child’s sense of security, self-esteem, and development. EMDR therapy is part of an integrated treatment approach and is often used in conjunction with other therapy practices, such as play therapy, talk therapy, behavior therapy, and family therapy. EMDR therapy will be explained and used when agreed upon by the family and child. Children and parents are always in control of the process.

A typical EMDR therapy treatment begins in a positive way by having children use their imagination to strengthen their sense of confidence and well-being. For example, children may be asked to imagine a safe or protected place where they feel relaxed and comfortable or to remember a time when they felt strong and confident. These positive images, thoughts, and

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feelings are then combined with the bilateral stimulation. These beginning experiences with EMDR therapy typically give children increased positive feelings and demystify the process of EMDR therapy so that children know what to expect. When agreed upon between the parent, child, and therapist, the child is asked to bring up an upsetting memory or event that is related to the focal problem. Bilateral dual attention stimulation (BLS) is used again while the child focuses on the upsetting experience. When an upsetting memory or event is desensitized, that means that the child can face the past events or memories and no longer feels frightened, disturbed, or avoidant of the thoughts and feelings attached to the event. The result of reprocessing simply means that the child has a healthier perspective on the upsetting memories or events. The meaning attached to the event is no longer distorted nor interferes with the child's functioning or development. When the event is reprocessed, children can more comfortably believe and trust, "It's over", "I'm safe now", "I did the best I could", and "I have other choices now".

What are children's reactions to EMDR Therapy?

Parents and professionals can explain that EMDR therapy is a way to get over troubling thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The EMDR therapy process is different for each person because the healing process is guided from within. Some children report that EMDR therapy is relaxing and have an immediate positive response. Other children may feel tired at the end of an EMDR therapy session, and the benefit from the treatment comes in the days to follow. After some children have experienced EMDR therapy, they will specifically request EMDR therapy in other sessions. And then there may be times when the child tries EMDR therapy but will ask to discontinue the procedure because they are not ready, or they feel overwhelmed by the process. In such cases, EMDR therapy is stopped and other forms of therapy are used (e.g., play therapy, talk therapy and/or cognitive behavioral therapy).

How does EMDR therapy work?

While it is not clear how EMDR therapy works, there are ongoing investigations of the possible mechanisms by which EMDR therapy facilitates a reprocessing of the human experience. It may be that EMDR therapy works similarly to what occurs naturally during dreaming or rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, where certain information is processed. It is thought that dual attention stimulation may help both hemispheres of the brain communicate to one another, and therefore may allow for accessing the body's natural healing mechanisms. In EMDR therapy, all of the information across all modalities (images, sounds, emotions, sensations, thoughts, and beliefs) is accessed together and metabolized.

For further information about EMDR, please visit <https://www.emdria.org>