

# Finding the Right Mental Health Therapist

For Your Child  
Under 6 Years Old

**Why Does it Matter?** Finding the right mental health therapist for your child can be challenging. You want to find a therapist who has experience working with young children and with whom you and your child are comfortable. It is important to ask questions and listen carefully to the answers to make sure that any therapist who may work with your child has the training and experience to effectively provide help. It is helpful to schedule a phone interview or a brief meeting to “interview” the therapist.

## Some questions to ask the therapist:

### What is your educational and training background?

A child therapist should have a master’s degree or doctorate in marriage and family therapy, clinical social work, psychology, counseling, or a similar field. They should have also had many hours of clinical experience (most professionals are required to work under a clinical supervisor before they are licensed). They should be licensed in the state of California.

### What type of training do you have in working with children under age six?

Work with young children is very specialized. The therapist should have some type of specific training and preferably more than one type so they can choose the best techniques for your child. Types of therapy include: non-directive play therapy, Filial therapy, family therapy, DIR/Floortime, and attachment-focused therapy (for example, Theraplay).

### For how many years have you worked with young children? Or, what percentage of your clients are under age six?

The therapist should be able to tell you about working in settings with young children and give examples of types of issues he/she has worked with.

### What methods do you use when working with young children?

The therapist who works with young children has play materials such as a sand tray, toy figures, art supplies, and games. He/she can describe play activities and how they are helpful. The therapy room is child friendly.

### Have you worked with children who have similar issues?

Explain the issues that bring your child to therapy. Has the therapist treated other children of the same age who have these issues? Ask them how they would approach the situation.

### How do you involve the parent(s)/guardian(s) and family in treatment?

Depending on the child’s age, the issue, and the family situation, a therapist will decide how best to involve the parent(s)/guardian(s). You should be included at intake and throughout the process and the therapist’s plan should feel comfortable to you.

## Then, ask yourself:

### Does this therapist sound like a good fit?

As a parent, you should feel comfortable asking questions of the therapist. You can contact another therapist if the one you are interviewing does not sound like a good fit or does not have experience with young children.

## Finally, try it out.

### Does your child enjoy being with the therapist?

Try several sessions and make sure your child gets along with the therapist.

## Not a good fit?

**It is important to find the right match in a therapist.** If the level of comfort and rapport you experience with them isn’t what you’d expect, than you should consider trying someone else.

If you have individual or group health insurance, contact the customer service number on your ID card for suggestions, or visit your health plan website to view their provider directory. If you have Medi-Cal, referrals to providers can be made through the Holman Group, CenCal’s mental health managed care provider, at (800) 321-2843. Even if you don’t have insurance there are low-cost and sliding-scale options available.

For help finding a therapist for a child under six, visit [www.slohealthaccess.org](http://www.slohealthaccess.org) to contact a First 5 Health Navigator.



First 5 SLO County Health Access Training Project  
[www.slohealthaccess.org](http://www.slohealthaccess.org)  
January, 2015