

Bradenton Herald

Living>Health

Special to the Herald May 13, 2014

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Mental Health Minute: Is counseling the right choice for your child?

"Should my child go to counseling?" This is a question that gets asked by nearly all parents at some point. But it's the wrong question. The right question is, "Should the family go to counseling?" Whatever the issue, a child's family is a critical part of the solution and should be included at the very beginning of counseling.

Before you start this process, parents should do their homework: Become familiar with normal child development milestones from reputable sources (cdc.gov has an excellent guide). Try to stay away from blog or comment-based websites for such information. You should also talk with your child about things that concern you as a parent. Parents can have very active imaginations about why Joey isn't paying attention in 3rd period, until they find out that he is sitting next to a very entertaining class clown. Mostly, however, parents think of counseling when they notice their child and/or their family is not functioning as well as they could. Then, you need to determine if this is a medical or a psychological problem. If you have any doubts, consulting with your child's pediatrician is a good first step; however, finding a counselor that the family can trust is also a good start. If either health care professional feels that the issue better belongs with the other, they will swiftly refer you to the right place. So there is no wrong door here.

There may however be a wrong financial door, so be sure that the selected health care professional takes your insurance. It is not uncommon for counseling fees to run well into triple digits per session if you are paying out-of-pocket or out-of-network.

Choosing among the many mental health care professionals can be a daunting task -- and quite confusing. Here is a short primer on the players. Psychiatrists mostly solve problems by altering a child's mis-functioning brain biochemistry through medications. If there is a history of autism, major depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia or ADHD in direct biological relatives, seeking out a psychiatrist may be a good first step.

However, the research is clear that medication alone does not work as well as medication with ongoing counseling. So just taking that little blue pill each morning will not be enough. Therapy can be provided by a number of mental health professionals: psychologists, social workers, counselors. Psychologists are all doctors who can do extensive testing to get the right diagnosis and then work with the family to treat the issue. Social workers tend to focus on improving a child's functioning within a larger social context (family, school, society), so family therapy is a natural offshoot of their approach. Mental health counselors provide a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, educational and career goals.

Clearly, there is substantial overlap between these professionals. So pick the counselor you and your child feel will get the family functioning better. Please note that psychiatrists, psychologists, licensed mental health counselors and licensed clinical social workers all must be licensed by the state. But the term "counselor" can be used by anyone, so be careful out there. Using established agencies, licensed clinicians and people on your insurance panel are likely to help you avoid any difficulty with getting an unqualified counselor.

Dr. Boxley is the supervising psychologist for Manatee Glens. He has more than 25 years of clinical experience in individual, couple, family and group therapy with specialization in psychological testing, depression/anxiety, autism spectrum disorders, child/adolescent counseling and substance abuse.

Manatee Glens, a nonprofit health care provider that delivers services from seven Manatee County locations, produces this monthly column and welcomes your questions about mental health and substance abuse matters. For further information, call 782-4299 or send an email to Sondra.guffey@manateeglens.org