

Can a psychologist help your child?

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Parenting is extremely rewarding, but it is also one of the most challenging jobs anyone could undertake.

The job is made even more difficult because we receive no training in how to be parents, in what is normal behaviour for children, or in how to manage undesirable behaviour.

All parents have concerns about the development or behaviour of their child. We all worry, at times, whether the things our child does are normal and whether we are handling their behaviour in the best way. For some parents, these concerns are serious and often coping with the challenges of parenting can be difficult. At this stage, psychologists can be a valuable source of information and support.

What is a psychologist?

Psychologists are sometimes wrongly perceived as professionals people visit if you are "crazy" or "having a breakdown". In reality, most people who visit psychologists are simply seeking professional help to deal with some of the difficulties of everyday life.

Different to psychiatrists, psychologists use non-drug approaches to treating and preventing emotional and behavioural problems. Our focus is on teaching people how to manage everyday difficulties and providing strategies that help people take control of their reactions in these situations.

Psychology is a science, just like biology or chemistry, which focuses on understanding human behaviour, cognition (which includes thoughts, beliefs and reasoning), and emotion.

How can a psychologist help?

Clinical psychologists who are experienced in working with children and families can help parents in many ways:

- Behaviour problems like tantrums, refusing to follow instructions, or saying "no" to requests from parents are one of the most common reasons that parents seek help from psychologists. Usually, providing parents with a few simple strategies for how to manage this misbehaviour and how to encourage more desirable behaviour makes dramatic improvements and reduces the stress in the household. Other common difficulties such as sibling rivalry, aggression towards peers, behaviour problems at school or kindergarten, lying and stealing can be managed in similar ways.

- Sometimes the behaviour problems are a result of more serious concerns such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Autism or Learning Disorders. Psychologists are trained and experienced in assessing children for these types of difficulties and in providing appropriate assistance where needed.

- Many parents seek assistance for their children when there are problems evident at school. If your child has difficulty concentrating, problem solving, managing their time, dealing with exam stress or is behaving poorly at school then a psychologist can help you and your child overcome the difficulties.

- Emotional problems such as anxiety and fears are very common in young children, and early intervention is best to prevent them from becoming worse. There are very effective techniques which psychologists can suggest which can help children and parents deal with them. Psychologists can help parents learn how to manage their child's separation anxiety, specific fears (e.g. dogs or going to the dentist), or school-related anxiety.

- Many children become sad or depressed and it is often difficult for parents to know how to respond. Psychologists can help by working with your child to teach them ways to manage their sadness, and also by providing you with strategies to help your child.

- Psychologists can also help children and parents manage children's behaviour when they are faced with life problems such as grief and loss of a family member or pet, managing the separation or divorce of parents, and dealing with an illness.

- Sometimes parenting is difficult, not because of the behaviour of your child, but because you are finding coping with the stress of parenting difficult. If you, or your partner are finding the demands of parenting hard to manage, are not completely satisfied with your marital relationship, or are feeling depressed, anxious or stressed, a psychologist may also be very helpful. Psychologists understand how difficult it is to juggle parenthood with the demands of everyday life and are able to provide you with strategies to make this easier.

It is important that you find a psychologist who is trained, qualified and experienced in the specific area you are seeking help in. The best way to do this is to make sure your psychologist is registered as a psychologist in Queensland, is a member of the Australian Psychological Society, and has experience in the area you are needing help.