

# CBT WITH KIDS: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



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As a parent or caregiver, it can be painful to see your child struggle with negative emotions like anxiety, sadness, anger, or fear. Other families may struggle to cope with behavioral issues like school refusal, impulsivity and hyperactivity, aggression, or avoidance of situations or objects. Of course, negative emotions are a part of life, and helping children learn healthy and effective ways to cope is a critical part of raising resilient kids. And some behaviors that may be disruptive or upsetting are part of normal child development. But if negative emotions or behaviors are making it difficult for your child to focus in school, enjoy activities, or maintain friendships, it may be helpful to seek out additional support. **Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)** is a highly effective approach to help children and adolescents learn skills to manage their emotions, learn appropriate behaviors, and improve their well-being.

## WHAT IS CBT?

Cognitive Behavior Therapy—or CBT—is an evidence-based approach that helps children and adolescents understand how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are connected. By learning to identify unhelpful thoughts, think critically about them, and develop helpful and adaptive responses, children can reduce distress, respond to challenges, and feel better.

CBT is used to address anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health concerns—as well as a wide range of medical conditions and quality of life issues. It can also be used to improve relationships, such as those with peers, caregivers, and teachers.

It provides kids with practical tools they can use in everyday life and helps them build confidence in handling difficulties. It can also teach parents and caregivers important skills to support their child and help them grow.



## CBT WITH KIDS: WHAT TO EXPECT

CBT therapists begin by helping children understand how their thoughts influence how they feel and act. Kids learn that feelings are normal and that they have the power to change how they respond in difficult situations. Some specific things that a CBT therapist might do with a young client include the following:

### BUILDING COPING SKILLS

CBT provides children with strategies to manage big feelings, including deep breathing, relaxation techniques, and grounding exercises. These skills help reduce anxiety, improve focus, and enhance self-control.

## EVALUATING THOUGHTS

Children are taught to recognize thoughts that are unhelpful or overly negative, such as “I’m terrible at everything” or “Everyone hates me.” Therapists use age-appropriate techniques to help kids explore whether these thoughts are accurate and respond to them with more balanced perspectives, such as “I didn’t do well this time, but I can try again.”

## EXPOSURE THERAPY FOR FEARS AND WORRIES

For children struggling with anxiety or phobias, CBT often includes exposure therapy. This technique involves gradually facing fears in a safe, supportive environment. By taking small steps toward feared situations or objects, kids learn that their fears are manageable, improve their self-confidence, and decrease the intensity of their fears over time.



## PROBLEM-SOLVING AND DECISION-MAKING

Therapists help children learn how to solve problems effectively and make thoughtful decisions. This helps them feel more in control of their lives and better equipped to handle challenges.

## BEHAVIORAL ACTIVATION

For children experiencing sadness or depression, CBT encourages engagement in enjoyable and meaningful activities. Even small activities, like playing outside or drawing, can improve mood and motivation.

## IMPULSE CONTROL

Therapists teach children strategies they can use to “stop and think,” pausing before acting impulsively and using decision-making to decide on the best course of action.

## CAREGIVER INVOLVEMENT IN CBT

Parents and caregivers play a key role in a child’s CBT journey. While therapy sessions provide a structured space for learning new skills, the real practice happens in everyday life.

Therapists often involve parents by teaching them how to reinforce CBT strategies at home. This may include modeling positive coping techniques, encouraging problem-solving discussions, and gently exploring the helpfulness of thoughts with their child. Parents can also help children apply exposure therapy principles by supporting them in gradually facing fears and celebrating their progress.

CBT therapists might work with parents on the following:

## **CONSISTENT AND CLEAR ROUTINES**

Helping children understand what's expected of them can reduce uncertainty that leads to behavioral challenges. Therapists help caregivers create regular routines, use visual schedules, and set clear rules and consequences.

## **BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION AND REINFORCEMENT**

Therapists teach parents how to reinforce desired behaviors by offering rewards or praise. Therapists may encourage the use of a token economy or chart system to reward focus and completion of tasks like homework and household chores.

## **IMPROVING COMMUNICATION**

Teaching both children and caregivers communication skills can help children feel understood and empowered—and help children improve their communication outside the home, with peers and teachers.

## **MODELING AND ROLE-PLAYING**

Caregivers learn how to model appropriate behaviors and responses to situations and use role-play to help children practice newly learned skills.

Consistency and encouragement from caregivers can make a significant difference. Children are more likely to benefit from CBT when their caregivers provide a supportive environment that encourages practice and growth.

By being an active participant in the process,

parents and caregivers can help their child build confidence, strengthen emotional resilience, and apply CBT skills in their daily lives.



## **TOOLS THAT LAST A LIFETIME**

CBT is an active therapy that empowers children with lifelong tools to manage emotions, behave responsibly, and navigate challenges. While difficult feelings and behaviors may not disappear entirely, children can learn to handle them in a way that allows them to live happy, fulfilling lives.

If your child is struggling with emotional or behavioral challenges, CBT can help them develop the skills they need to thrive. With the right support, they can build resilience, confidence, and emotional well-being.

# CBT RESOURCES

## BECK INSTITUTE

The nonprofit Beck Institute for Cognitive Behavior Therapy was established in 1994 by Dr. Aaron T. Beck and Dr. Judith S. Beck as a setting for state-of-the-art psychotherapy and professional training in CBT. Over the last three decades, Beck Institute has built exceptional in-person and online trainings in CBT, trained thousands of professionals from around the world, and created a global community of CBT practitioners.



## PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COACHING

At Beck Institute, we are committed to providing modern CBT that not only helps clients with a wide range of symptoms and challenges but emphasizes a broader vision of well-being and life satisfaction. Our therapists help clients align their lives with their values and aspirations, achieve their goals, and foster feelings of purpose, empowerment, and connection.

Our CBT-based wellness coaching program teaches practical skills that help clients build confidence, manage stress, and stay on track to achieve their goals—and maintain progress long term. To learn more about clinical services and wellness coaching at Beck Institute, call 610.664.3020 or visit [cares.beckinstitute.org](https://cares.beckinstitute.org).

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (US): 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Crisis Text Line: 741742

## ONLINE RESOURCES

- Visit [cares.beckinstitute.org](https://cares.beckinstitute.org) for information and resources about CBT.
- Sign up for the Beck Institute newsletter [beckinstitute.org/newsletter](https://beckinstitute.org/newsletter).
- Engage with Beck Institute on social media:



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