

A FREE GUIDE FROM THE TRUTHFUL THERAPIST

What Makes a Good Therapist

A parent's guide to choosing — and staying involved in — the right therapy for your child.

"Bad therapy is worse than no therapy. Trust your instincts."



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Licensed Clinical Social Worker · 25 Years of Experience

INSIDE

What good therapists have in common
Screening questions & red flags

BEFORE YOU START

It's easy to tell when the mechanic did a bad job. It's much harder to tell with a therapist.

Therapists come with different credentials, styles, and approaches — and none of that alone makes one good or bad. The only real test is the outcome, and outcomes take time to see. That makes it hard to know, in the moment, whether the person sitting across from your child is actually helping.

Liking a therapist isn't the same as being helped by one — and "nice" doesn't equal "good."

After 25 years in the field — including roughly a decade spent supervising other clinicians — I've watched the quality of child and teen therapy decline. Many training programs now spend more time on ideology than on clinical skill. That means the burden of screening has shifted onto parents.

This guide won't tell you which theoretical approach is correct, or which therapist is "right" for your family. What it will do is give you a set of patterns — the traits, questions, and warning signs I've learned to look for — so you can walk into that first conversation informed, and stay involved once treatment begins.

The short version: A good therapist works with you, not around you. They investigate before they conclude. They hold your child to a standard, not just a label. And they know their role is to support your family — not replace it.

25

Years in practice

~10

Years supervising clinicians

1000s

Of families guided since

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Common traits of good child & teen therapists

WORKS WITH YOUR FAMILY

- 01 Involves you, the parent — regularly, not just at intake.** A good therapist wants your input throughout treatment, not just at the start. Without it, they only ever hear one side of the story.
- 02 Does a real assessment before treating anything.** History, family context, health, prior trauma — a good therapist gathers the full picture before forming a plan, the way a good detective works a case.
- 03 Sets clear goals and checkpoints.** Therapy should move toward something. You should be able to name the goals and track progress against them — it isn't meant to run forever.

LOOKS PAST THE SURFACE

- 04 Explores the "why" before affirming a new label or identity.** A sudden new identity rarely comes out of nowhere. A good therapist asks what pain it might be covering before congratulating a child for "bravery."
- 05 Balances compassion with personal responsibility.** A diagnosis or a hard circumstance is never a life sentence, and it's never an excuse to stop trying. Good therapists hold both truths at once.
- 06 Sees the potential in every client — especially in hard moments.** Even when things look bleak, a good therapist keeps hope in the room and works to build capacity, not shrink the world to fit a diagnosis.

KEEPS HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

- 07 Doesn't try to become your child's friend.** Be cautious of a therapist who texts or emails casually outside of scheduling, gives gifts, or shares excessive personal details.
- 08 Respects that you are the parent.** A solid therapist knows their place in your child's life and doesn't wedge themselves between you and your child, or position themselves as a rescuer.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR, CONTINUED

- 09 Is honest about confidentiality — and its limits.** Your child deserves some privacy to build trust, but a good therapist explains up front that safety concerns are never kept secret from you.
- 10 Knows when a higher level of care is needed.** A good therapist refers out when outpatient sessions aren't enough — and never uses an empty suicide threat as pressure instead of a real safety plan.

RESPECTS YOUR FAMILY'S BELIEFS

- 11 Doesn't impose personal politics or ideology onto your child.** Their job is to help your child and family sort out their own beliefs — not to convince anyone of the therapist's.
- 12 Welcomes your family's faith and culture as a strength.** Religion and cultural identity should be treated as a resource in the room, not something to be quietly undermined.
- 13 Doesn't manufacture fear.** Your child's sessions should build resilience and a sense of groundedness — not add anxiety about the state of the world.
- 14 Expects your child to do real work.** A "safe space" doesn't mean zero challenge. Good therapy asks something of the client — it doesn't just affirm and validate on autopilot.
- 15 Welcomes your feedback — even when it's critical.** If a therapist gets defensive or dismissive when you raise a concern, that alone is reason enough to look elsewhere.

A good therapist is like a good detective — gathering the full picture before deciding what's actually going on.

BEFORE YOU START

Screening questions to ask a new therapist

Print this page and bring it to the first call.

☐ 1. What's your style of working with clients?

Listen for real techniques and frameworks — "affirmation" alone isn't a therapy technique.

☐ 2. How do you involve families in your work with youth?

You should be part of intake, assessment, and goal-setting — not informed after the fact.

☐ 3. How do you think social media shapes kids' thoughts and behavior?

A good therapist recognizes how much of what kids say is parroted from influencers online.

☐ 4. How do you incorporate religion or faith into your clinical work?

Faith should be treated as a strength to work with, not a topic to steer around.

☐ 5. What's your confidentiality policy with children and parents?

They should be able to explain this clearly, including when they're required to loop you in.

☐ 6. What do you think about "letting the child lead"?

Know where they stand on adult guidance versus child-led decision-making before you commit.

☐ 7. What's one part of mainstream mental health care you question?

You want a therapist who thinks for themselves — not one who simply follows the dogma.

A note on answers: you're not looking for a therapist who agrees with you on everything. You're listening for whether they can articulate a real, thought-out position — and whether they'll respect your family's values instead of quietly working against them.

Stay involved — and watch for red flags

☐ How do you conceptualize my child's behavior?

They should walk you through a real hypothesis — trauma, family stress, development, etc.

☐ Can I see the treatment plan?

Ask for a written plan with specific goals — and expect to help shape it.

☐ How is my child progressing, and what's in the way?

Ask monthly at minimum. A therapist who resists this check-in is a major red flag on its own.

Red Flags

- Resists communicating or updating parents
- Discusses a diagnosis with your child before you
- Can't clearly explain the treatment plan
- Jumps to a course of treatment without a real assessment
- Makes threats if you don't comply with their approach
- Texts or emails casually, like a friend would
- Talks about their own life more than your child's
- Leans on "systemic" explanations instead of your child's actual story
- Over-identifies with your child against you
- Only knows one method and can't flex to your child
- Adds fear or anxiety rather than easing it
- Seems to be trying to divide your family, not connect it
- Can't explain confidentiality laws in your state
- Uses an empty suicide threat as leverage, with no real safety plan
- Is either hopeless about your family, or never raises a concern at all
- Displays ideological symbols or language in marketing or the office

ONE LAST THING

Bad therapy is worse than no therapy.
Trust your instincts.

You are the expert on your own child and family. If something feels off, it's worth listening to — even when you're sitting across from a credentialed professional. Speak up, ask direct questions, and stay involved. Therapy works best as a partnership, not something done to your family.

KEEP READING

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pamthetruthfultherapist.substack.com

THE BOOK

A Practical Response to Gender Distress — a non-ideological framework for families.

[Available on Amazon →](#)

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thetruthfultherapist.org

Pamela Garfield-Jaeger, LCSW, is a licensed clinical social worker with 25 years of experience across schools, hospitals, and residential programs. This guide is educational content — not therapy, and not a substitute for professional care or an individualized treatment relationship.

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