

Think Your Teen Needs Counseling?

Counseling teens can be tricky business. The call is invariably from an exasperated parent who no longer can tolerate the behavior of their son or daughter. The teen is presented as *out of control*. There may be concerns of drugs or alcohol; school performance; and/or the influence of the peer group. The teen may be described as depressed, anxious, angry or even suicidal.

The parent wants the counselor to meet with their son or daughter. The subtext is a parent wanting the counselor to *talk some sense into their child*. The hope is that the counselor can wag an even bigger finger in front of the teen for an effect more profound than that of the parent or miraculously get the teen to *open up*.

Wagging fingers doesn't work. If the teen isn't talking to their parents, then dragging them off to the counselor as an agent of the parent likely won't work either. If the teen does meet first with the counselor and does talk, what is often heard is a litany of complaints about the parents. The counselor is next in the middle between parents and teen playing "he said, she said". So what is a parent to do?

Parents are advised to meet with the counselor together, ahead of their son or daughter. This achieves several objectives:

1. Parents can provide a detailed description of their concern and the history of the problems. The counselor then has a broader perspective to understand the issues than what the teen would likely provide.
2. Some teens (like adults) view counseling as stigmatizing. The counselor may be able to avoid this by arriving at a clinical diagnosis of the problem. This means that on the basis of the parents' description, the counselor may come to an understanding of the problem and can direct the parents accordingly. If the counselor can offer meaningful direction without even seeing the teen, then the teen may be spared feeling stigmatized. If need be though, the counselor can still meet with the teen directly.
3. The parents will have had the opportunity to check out the counselor and determine if they are comfortable trusting their son or daughter's care to this person. Not all counselors are alike and the parents may prefer the approach or values of one counselor to another.

Lastly, parents must understand that the counselor doesn't live with the teen. The parents do. Even though the focus of what brought the teen into counseling may begin with their behavior and problems, at some point the counseling must take focus on a positive direction and look for solutions

with *parents as partners*. The solutions should include not only what not to do, but include clear direction for what to do. Dwelling on the problems will leave participants immersed in the negative, living in the past. Refocusing and developing positive strategies for improving relationships and behavior can redirect both parents and teen to positive ends.

So, if you are looking for counseling for your teen:

1. Meet with the counselor first.
2. Determine if your teen needs to be seen in discussion with the counselor at this meeting.
3. Remember, the counselor doesn't live with your teen. Counseling may be directed to help parents better guide, manage or influence their teen.
4. If your teen does attend counseling, your participation remains crucial.
5. After determining and addressing the problems, the focus must shift to positive working solutions that are future oriented and facilitate parent-teen relationships.
6. If ever you are uncertain, ask questions!

The goal: Relief from distress and well-adjusted teens.