



EMDR Therapy Guide for Parents and Caregivers

What is EMDR Therapy?

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy is a treatment method aimed at resolving emotional difficulties caused by disturbing, difficult, or frightening life experiences. In 1989, psychologist Dr. Francine Shapiro began to research the ability of EMDR therapy to reduce the intensity of disruptive negative thoughts in treating adult victims of trauma. Since then, EMDR therapy has evolved through contributions of therapists and researchers all over the world. We now know that when an upsetting, scary, or painful experience happens, the memory of the experience sometimes gets “stuck” in the brain. This experience may return in distressing and intrusive ways (such as nightmares) or a child may cope by using avoidance behaviors (such as fear of trying new things). Most experts agree that one way to get “unstuck” and free from these symptoms is through exposure, meaning to face the memories or troubling events until they are no longer disturbing. By combining elements of well-established therapy models (e.g., psychodynamic, cognitive, behavioral, client-centered) together with Bilateral Stimulation (BLS), EMDR can effectively dissipate the feeling of upset associated with a negative experience. Bilateral Stimulation (BLS) refers to the use of alternating visual, auditory, or tactile stimulus which may include either back and forth eye movement tracking, musical tones through headphones, or alternating hands taps. EMDR therapy helps children process troubling thoughts, feelings, or memories and as a result strengthens their confidence and calmness, allowing them to focus their energy back on the normal developmental tasks of childhood.

How is EMDR Therapy Used with Children?

For many years, EMDR therapy has been used to help children overcome traumatic events and other childhood problems and symptoms. When children are traumatized – even to a mild or moderate degree - they lose a sense of control over their lives. This can result in symptoms of anxiety, depression, irritability, anger, guilt, and/or behavioral problems. Even common upsetting childhood events such as divorce, school problems, peer difficulties, failures, and disrupted family dynamics can deeply affect a child's sense of security and self-esteem. EMDR therapy is part of an integrated treatment approach, often used in conjunction with other modalities such as play therapy, talk therapy, behavior therapy, and family therapy. EMDR will be explained and used only when agreed upon by the family and child. Children and parents/caregivers are always in control of the process.

A typical EMDR session begins in a positive way by having children use their imagination to strengthen their sense of confidence and well-being. For example, children may be asked to imagine a safe or protected place where they feel relaxed and comfortable, or to remember a time when they felt strong and confident. These positive images, thoughts, and feelings are then combined with Bilateral Stimulation (BLS) to reinforce their impact on a child's mind. These initial EMDR exercises typically give children increased positive feelings right away, while also helping to demystify the process so that children know what to expect. When agreed upon between the parent/caregiver, child, and therapist, the child is asked to bring up an upsetting memory or event that is related to the central problem. BLS is used again while the child focuses on the disturbing experience. When an

upsetting memory or event is “desensitized” that means the child can face the past experiences and no longer feel disturbed, frightened, or avoidant of the thoughts and feelings attached to the memory. The result of “reprocessing” simply means that the child has a more healthy perspective on the upsetting event. The meaning attached to the event is no longer distorted nor interferes with the child’s functioning or development. When the memory is reprocessed, children can more effectively trust positive beliefs that “It’s over” and “I’m safe now” and “I did the best I could” and “I have other choices now.”

How does EMDR Therapy Work?

While it is not 100% clear how EMDR therapy works, there are ongoing studies into the possible mechanisms by which EMDR facilitates a reprocessing of human experiences. One theory is that EMDR functions similarly to the natural process of dreaming or REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep, where information can sometimes be integrated on a deeper neurological level. Researchers also believe that bilateral stimulation may help both hemispheres of the brain communicate to each other, therefore allowing the brain to more easily access its natural healing mechanisms.

What are Children’s Reactions to EMDR Therapy?

Parents and professionals agree that EMDR therapy is an effective way for children to get over troubling thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The EMDR experience is different for each person because the healing process is guided from within. Some children report that EMDR therapy is relaxing and that they had an immediate positive response. Other children may feel tired at the end of an EMDR session, and the benefit from treatment comes in the days to follow. After some children have experienced EMDR therapy, they will specifically request it again in future sessions. And then there may be times when a child tries EMDR but will ask to stop the process because they are not ready or feel too overwhelmed by the experience. In such cases, EMDR is discontinued and other forms of therapy are used.

Sources

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EMDRIA (EMDR International Association): www.emdria.org