

EMDR for Children: How Safe and Effective Is It?

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As a therapist, I've used **Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)** therapy to treat many adults with mental health issues resulting from trauma. This method of therapy is also safe and effective for children and adolescents, provided that the therapist is skilled and trained in working with this population and in this modality.



What Is EMDR?

When a painful or upsetting experience happens, the memory of the experience sometimes stays “stuck” in the body and mind. Over time, the occurrence may manifest anew in disturbing and invasive ways.

Dr. Ricky Greenwald, a pioneer in developing EMDR therapy for children and teens, describes EMDR as “a non-drug, non-hypnosis psychotherapy procedure. The therapist guides the client in concentrating on a troubling memory or emotion while moving the eyes rapidly back and forth (by following the therapist’s fingers). This rapid eye movement, which occurs naturally during dreaming, seems to speed the client’s movement through the healing process.”

After experiencing trauma, a child may have recurring nightmares or cope by avoiding things associated with the disturbing experience. For example, a child who experienced a car accident may exhibit defiant behavior when in a vehicle, or protest having to travel in the first place.

Essentially, EMDR can help the brain “digest” the memory of the traumatic event.

How Does EMDR Help Children?

EMDR is effective and well supported by research evidence for treating children with symptoms accompanying posttraumatic stress (PTSD), attachment issues, dissociation, and self-regulation. It has also been effective in treating symptoms related to guilt, anger, depression, and anxiety, and can be used to boost emotional resources such as confidence and self-esteem.

During the past five years, the World Health Organization and the California Evidence Based-Clearinghouse for Child Welfare recommended two psychotherapies for children, adolescents, and adults with PTSD: trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy and EMDR. Of the two modalities, some of the research describes EMDR as “significantly more efficient.” My experience as a therapist echoes these recommendations.

One Therapist’s Experience with EMDR

I have personally witnessed children and teens improve in their overall functioning after being treated with EMDR, sometimes after only a few sessions. These children experienced PTSD symptoms as a result of bullying, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and invasive medical

procedures. Some of these traumas occurred at the hands of someone with malicious intent; others were formed from the child's perceived intent.

Since our emotional states are a result of how we perceive the world, a child may have stress related to a memory that, to anyone else, would not seem to be a "big deal." In an effort to help their children "get over it," parents often tell them things such as, "It's not that bad," or, "He wasn't that mean to you." But if the experience was traumatic to the child, it was traumatic period.

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Trauma can result from one event, multiple events, or a series of them. These events can cause children to see the world as dangerous and can alter their ability to function. A child may experience anxiety, fear of death, panic, powerlessness, anger, and deep sadness. When the trauma is a result of violence perpetrated by a caregiver they trust, it becomes overwhelming and can cause a child to be in a constant state of worry. This, of course, interferes with the child's ability to trust or to sustain and maintain relationships.

Therapy can be a scary prospect to a child. When I explain to a child that our brains are amazing things that have the ability to heal themselves, and that I will help their brains do just that, they usually react with curiosity and intrigue and the process becomes much less scary.

What to Look for in an EMDR Therapist

The safety of any treatment modality depends on the practitioner's aptitude to administer it. A licensed therapist who is fully trained in EMDR is well equipped to help a child or teen. The therapist should have training in how to apply the method to the child's specific developmental needs and an ability to explain the process to the child in a way he or she will understand. A full history should be obtained from the parents, who should be considered partners in tracking changes in the child as the treatment progresses.

EMDR is often used in combination with other therapeutic modalities, such as art therapy, sand tray therapy, play therapy, yoga therapy, and even animal-assisted therapy. A therapist who offers a multifaceted approach, based on the child's unique needs and interests, is ideal.

If interested in seeking the help of an EMDR-trained therapist, search GoodTherapy.org's directory for a therapist near you.

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