Your child is a wonderful, unique individual who is going through a period of great change and development. This can be a complex, challenging time for your child as well as for the rest of your family. At times, you may feel that your child needs more help than you can provide. You may feel that your child is showing signs of depression or unusual sadness. Your child may seem out-of-control with impulsive, anti-social, or self-destructive behavior. Your child may have trouble functioning at home, school, or with their friends. He or she may be experimenting with drugs, alcohol, or other substances which may be dangerous. When you are concerned about your child, the best thing to do is get help. This is not a sign that you have failed as a parent or that your child is a “bad kid” or that he is “crazy”. Taking this step shows a positive approach to improving a negative situation.

The first step for most people is to talk to your child’s physician. They can frequently give you help finding help for your child. You may also want to have your child examined by the pediatrician or family doctor to see if there is a medical reason for the difficulties your child is having. Get information about your child’s behavior at school and in other situations to share with the doctor. You may also get information from your child’s school counselor, your clergy person or spiritual advisor, your friends and family about available therapists. Parents should be cautious about using the telephone book and picking a therapist at random without more information from an informed source. Other sources of information include:

- Employee Assistance Program through your employer
- Local medical society, local psychiatric society
- Local mental health association
- County mental health department
- Local hospitals or medical centers with psychiatric services for children
- Department of Psychiatry in nearby medical school
- National Advocacy Organizations (National Alliance of the Mentally Ill, Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health, National Mental Health Association)

The next decision may be to determine what type of therapist your child needs. There are various different types of mental health professionals and it is confusing and complicated for many people.

A Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist is a licensed medical doctor who has specialized training in child and adolescent psychiatry. They provide a medical/psychiatric evaluation and a full range of treatment interventions for emotional, behavioral, and psychiatric problems. As physicians, child and adolescent psychiatrists can prescribe and monitor medications.

A Psychologist has a doctoral degree (PhD) in psychology. Usually they are licensed by the state. Psychologists can also provide psychological evaluation and treatment for emotional and behavioral problems as well as psychological testing and assessments.

A Licensed Professional Counselor is usually a person who has a master’s degree in Psychology or Clinical Social Work and is licensed by the state as a therapist. They provide several different types of psychotherapy. In many communities, these therapists may be much more available for urgent evaluations and therapy than a child psychiatrist. If the therapist feels a medication may be needed (for example for severe depression), they may have some contacts in the child psychiatry field and may be able to get your child an appointment quickly.

All mental health professionals are not alike, even with the same type of degree or license. After looking for someone with the correct qualifications, the main thing is that you feel comfortable with the therapist and feel that they are helping. Therapists are human beings and it is entirely possible for there to be personality conflicts. When you meet a new therapist, spend a few visits getting to know them and letting them get to know your child. If you don’t feel comfortable or you are not getting along with the therapist, find someone else. It doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with you or with the therapist; you may just not be a good match.
There are many approaches to therapy with children. It may involve talking or having the child draw or play with toys to help the therapist understand what is going on. The therapist may ask the child about any traumatic events to get the child’s understanding of them as well as how the child is handling the situation at home, school and with their friends. There may be an assessment of the child’s strengths as well as his problems. A therapist will take into account your child’s age and emotional maturity. There may be recommendations for interventions with the school and family. The goal is to help the child understand their feelings and identify constructive thoughts and ideas which can help the child return to his normal activities and development.

Finding a good, effective therapist is a major first step to helping your child with the troubles he may be having. Please don’t hesitate to call your child’s doctor if you have concerns. If you are ever concerned that your child may hurt himself, hurt others, or even kill himself, immediately call a suicide hotline such as National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)