



Therapist Checklist

What kind of attributes do non-coercive parents look for in their child's therapists? What are some Red Flags to look for? What kinds of behavior can we request? This list is meant to help with vetting new therapists, and collaborating with current therapists. (This file is crowd-sourced including input from Autistic adults.)

- Therapist doesn't use rewards, like candy, or punishments, like withholding.
- Therapist doesn't withhold a desired object or activity in order to get compliance. "If you finish reading, you can swing for 5 minutes."
- Therapist is interested in what my child has to say and listens to their "special interest".
- Therapist allows the child to say "no" to any activity. Therapist doesn't cajole or say "1 more minute and we're done".
- Therapist can read reluctant body language.
- Therapist waits for my child to finish speaking or doing a task.
- Therapist gets consent for any physical contact or activity.
- Therapist allows parents to observe or be in the room.
- Therapist is willing to explain the science behind the therapy.
- Therapist does not speak disparagingly of family choices, like "your child really needs to be in school", "your child needs structure".
- Therapist does not get annoyed at the child's behavior.
- Therapist communicates the goals of the therapy clearly.
- Therapist centers the child and the child's interests and goals in therapy rather than some external age-related standard. For example, child may gravitate towards gross motor play and not be interested in fine-motor play, art, or writing. Therapist will stretch the interest rather than ignore it.
- It's the therapist's job to be flexible, NOT the client's.
- It's the client's time and space, NOT the therapist's.
- All behavior is communication so the therapist needs to stay attuned and curious.
- Therapist needs to create safety for caregivers so we can exchange feedback.
- Therapist centers child's goals not developmental evaluations. The child gets just enough help to improve quality of life as they see it but not pressured to do more.
- Child has control over beginning and ending therapy, reducing the amount of time, skipping a week when needed, etc. Therapist does not criticize, these choices or pressure for more time.
- Therapist listens to input but doesn't center parent's goals or teacher's goals.

- Therapist shows empathy to child and caregiver, supports emotional well-being, focuses on connection over goals, understands sensory needs,,allows sensory breaks, and explains methods and reasoning.
- Therapist acknowledges and listens to all methods of, communication—spoken words are not pushed for when the individual communicates through another means. Gestures, vocal sounds, eye gaze, AAC, etc are all accepted, respected and honored.
- Therapist is kind and respectful. Therapist pays attention to child’s needs and communication and takes their perspective. Therapist tries to understand reasons for thoughts, actions, and behaviors. Therapist does not get upset or interrupt. Checks in with child’s feelings. No positive or negative reinforcement. No clapping. No “yay you did it”. Approaches new tasks as ideas or something new to try and not forced. Therapist involves parents in every session.
- Therapist does not pass judgment on technology use.
- Therapist listens to parent’s experience and trusts them as someone who knows their individual child better than anyone else. Listens to parents when they tell them what works and what doesn’t work.

What about praise

Question from an SLP: “I do clap or say “Yay!” sometimes, mostly just out of natural enthusiasm when one of my EI clients does something we have been working on (e.g., uses a gesture or sign in a song (or an approximation), imitates an action, etc.) I think I understand the intent of no reward, but is it always wrong to cheer? Is it always perceived as coercion of rewards? Thank you.”

Parent 1: maybe it’s okay to clap if the kid is intrinsically feeling the achievement and you are matching that feeling. It isn’t okay, and is coercive (check out Alfie Kohn’s “Punished by Rewards”) if you are trying to get them to do something they are not motivated (by interest or personal goals) to do.

Parent 2: saying “yay!” or “wow!” seems relatively harmless but it’s good to think about why you would say it and whether you would say it to an adult as well. Is there something else you could say that is more accurate, like a fact that is reflective of their pov?

“You kept going even though it was not easy.”

“You reached your goal.”

“It was important to you to finish.”

“You seem to enjoy that.”

“Are you proud of yourself?”

“That was fun for you.”

“You are improving each time you try.”

“You enjoyed that last time but this time you are bored with it.”

What beliefs does the child internalize when others express pleasure or approval?

“When I do something well, I get approval. If I don’t do it well next time, I won’t get approval.”

“When I’m compliant, this person praises me. If I’m not compliant, this person won’t like me or this person will be disappointed.” (Even if the belief is false.)

“When I have trouble with something or don’t like something, it makes life/work harder for this person.” (I think this is very common in school and leads to masking.)

What beliefs do you want the child to internalize?

“It’s this person’s job to help me with my goals. They like their job.”

“This person sees things from my point of view. They like me the way I am.”

“I’m learning to do things I like and that I want to do.”

“I’m learning about myself.”

“It’s their job to teach me new ways to do things [fact] but it’s OK if I say no or I’m not ready.”

Does saying “yay, you did it?” promote the beliefs you aim to promote? Are you reaching your own goals and intentions?

Mentalization theory says that attachment through reflective function brings about a persistent sense of intentional self marked by a nuanced inner thought life, and development of self-agency. Giving words and meaning to the inner thought life is “matching”.