



A WAY OF BEING WITH CHILDREN

How to Respond to a Mental Health Crisis

Tips for Parents and Caregivers

What is a Mental Health Crisis?

A mental health crisis in a child is a situation where their emotional state or mental health declines to the point of posing a danger to themselves, others, or making them unable to function or meet basic needs due to a mental health condition. Immediate intervention is necessary to prevent harm and stabilize the child, enabling appropriate treatment and support.

A crisis may involve suicidal thoughts, attempts, self-harm (e.g., cutting), or chronic dangerous behaviors like substance abuse, running away, or refusing to eat. It can also include severe aggression or violent actions threatening others. Additionally, symptoms like extreme mood swings, hallucinations, delusions, dissociation, or unresponsiveness may impair the child's ability to function safely at home, school, or in the community.

Why Parents/Caregivers Need to Take a Child's Mental Health Crisis Seriously

Ignoring a child's severe mental health symptoms can have serious, even fatal, consequences. These issues don't resolve without intervention and can harm a child's development, social, emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning. Untreated crises may also endanger the child or others.

Suicide is now the second leading cause of death for U.S. adolescents (10-19) and the leading cause for ages 14-15 (CDC). Suicide rates among children 10-14 rose 46% from 2010 to 2020. In 2021, 1 in 5 high schoolers reported serious suicidal thoughts, and 1 in 10 attempted suicide.



The Role of Resilience

A mental health crisis can overwhelm a child, making it difficult for them to cope with intense emotions, stress, or distressing thoughts. Teaching and modeling self-regulation, coping skills, and resilience is essential in helping children navigate challenges before they escalate into a crisis. However, these skills must be practiced daily when the child is calm, as trying to teach them in the middle of a crisis is not effective. Fortunately, teaching these skills is not difficult, as they can be modeled in everyday interactions. For example, parents can practice deep breathing together during stressful moments, saying, "Let's take a deep breath and count to five before we respond." Another simple way is narrating emotions and coping strategies, such as saying, "I'm feeling frustrated, so I'm going to take a short walk to clear my mind." When children regularly see and practice healthy coping strategies, they build resilience and the ability to manage stress effectively. Parents and caregivers play a key role in fostering these habits through consistent practice, open communication, and emotional validation, helping reduce the likelihood of crises. Resilience acts as a buffer against mental health crises by equipping children with the skills to adapt and recover from challenges. The stronger a child's resilience, the better they can handle stress, setbacks, and emotional distress without reaching a crisis point.

What to Do When Your Child Is in Crisis

- **Stay Calm and Reassure Them:**
 - Your response affects how your child reacts. Stay calm and speak in a slow, steady, and warm voice to reassure them that they are not alone and that help is available.
- **Ask Direct Questions:**
 - If you suspect your child is suicidal, ask directly:
 - "Are you thinking about hurting or killing yourself?"
 - "Do you have a plan?"
 - "Do you have anything you could use to hurt yourself?"
 - Asking does not put the idea in their head but helps assess the severity of the crisis.
- **Ensure Immediate Safety:**
 - If you can do so safely, remove or secure dangerous objects (firearms, knives, medications).
 - If your child is a danger to themselves or others, do not leave them alone—stay with them until help arrives or they calm down.
- **Use De-Escalation Strategies:**
 - If they are not in immediate danger, use de-escalation techniques to help them regain emotional control. For more guidance, see our De-Escalation Tip Sheet at [centerforchildcounseling.org](https://www.centerforchildcounseling.org).

Resources

If your child is in crisis and you believe they need immediate mental health evaluation or emergency services/treatment, here are the best actions to choose from:

1. Call 911 for emergency transport to a hospital or psychiatric facility.
2. If you can do so safely, take your child to a hospital emergency Room (ER) for evaluation.
3. Call 211 for immediate crisis services or contact the PBC Mobile Crisis Team at (561) 494-1000.
4. Palm Beach County Local Resources:
 - PBC Mental Health Department (561) 274-3100
 - PBC Behavioral Health Services (561) 837-5558
 - Children's Crisis Stabilization Unit (561) 383-7450
 - South County Mental Health Center (Delray Beach) (561) 637-2102
5. Other National Resources:
 - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Call or text 988 that connects you to trained professionals who can guide you through next steps.
 - Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741.
 - The Trevor Project: Call 1-866-488-7386 or text "START" to 678678 for LGBTQ youth in crisis.



After the Immediate Crisis

Once the crisis is addressed, your child will likely undergo a mental health evaluation, and a plan will be created for both immediate and long-term care. Depending on severity, they may require psychiatric hospitalization followed by outpatient care or be sent home with referrals for therapy and other services. Parents/caregivers should actively participate in care decisions and ensure follow-up treatment (e.g., therapy, substance abuse treatment, medication monitoring) to prevent future crises. You are not alone - support is available—effective treatments exist to help children recover and maintain their well-being.

Get more resources at: www.centerforchildcounseling.org/awayofbeing