

Supporting Children, Youth, and Families in Crisis



AUDIENCE: Children, youth, families, caregivers, educators, crisis responders, care coordinators, and community partners.

PURPOSE: This tip sheet provides practical, easy to understand guidance to help prevent crises, respond effectively when a child or youth is in emotional distress, and support healing after a crisis. It emphasizes family centered approaches, early identification, and connection to appropriate crisis and recovery supports.



KEY INFORMATION

Children, youth, and families may experience crisis for many reasons, including emotional distress, mental health challenges, substance use concerns, trauma, medical complexity, family stress, or challenges at school or in the community.

Prevention and recovery are strongest when families and providers know:

- **A crisis is defined by the youth and their family**
- **When and where to seek help**
- **What warning signs to look for**
- **How to support healing and stability after a crisis**

This resource focuses on prevention, response, and recovery across the crisis continuum. Recovery is a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.



RECOGNIZING WARNING SIGNS EARLY

Recognizing changes early can help prevent a crisis from escalating. Warning signs may look different for each child or youth.

Possible warning signs include:

- Talking about wanting to die, disappear, or not be here
- Sudden changes in mood, behavior, sleep, or appetite
- Withdrawal from friends, family, or activities they usually enjoy
- Expressions of hopelessness, intense worry, or feeling like a burden
- Increased agitation, anger, or risky behavior
- Giving away belongings or saying goodbye in unusual ways

Caregivers, teachers, and trusted adults are often the first to notice these changes. If something feels concerning, it is okay to ask questions and seek help.



WHEN TO CALL 988 VS. 911

Knowing where to turn during a difficult moment can make a critical difference.

Service	When to Use	Examples
911	Immediate medical or safety emergency	Active self harm, serious injury, violence, loss of consciousness
988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline	Behavioral health or emotional crisis	Suicidal thoughts, panic, intense emotional distress, caregiver overwhelm

Call, text, or chat 988 to connect with trained crisis counselors who can help calm the situation, develop a safety plan, and connect families to local supports. Support is available 24/7 for youth, caregivers, and concerned adults.

WHAT CRISIS SUPPORT CAN LOOK LIKE

Crisis services are designed to meet families where they are and reduce distress.

- **Someone to talk to:** 988 call, text, or chat support
- **Someone to respond:** Mobile crisis teams that can respond in the community
- **A safe place for help:** Short term crisis stabilization programs that provide safety and support

These services aim to keep children and youth safe while avoiding unnecessary emergency room visits whenever possible.



PREVENTION: BUILDING PROTECTIVE SUPPORTS

Prevention focuses on strengthening protective factors that reduce risk and build resilience before a crisis occurs. Helpful prevention strategies include:

- Encouraging open, age appropriate conversations about feelings and stress
- Teaching coping and calming skills (breathing, grounding, asking for help)
- Supporting strong connections with trusted adults, peers, and mentors
- Creating predictable routines at home and school
- Reducing access to lethal means when a child or youth is at risk
- Connecting early to school, healthcare, and community supports

MRSS is a rapid response, home- and community-based crisis intervention model customized to meet the developmental needs of children, youth, young adults, and their families.

Families, schools, healthcare providers, and community organizations all play an important role in prevention and recovery.

SYSTEMS OF CARE BROAD DEFINITION TO CONNECT

A system of care is a comprehensive spectrum of effective services and supports for children, youth, and young adults with or at risk for mental health or other challenges and their families that is organized into a coordinated network of care, builds meaningful partnerships with families and youth, and is culturally and linguistically responsive in order to help them to thrive at home, in school, in the community, and throughout life. A system of care incorporates mental health promotion, prevention, early identification, and early intervention in addition to treatment to address the needs of all children, youth, and young adults.



SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES DURING A CRISIS

During a crisis, the priority is safety, emotional support, and connection to care.

Key considerations include:

- Stay calm and reassuring; let the child or youth know they are not alone
- Listen without judgment and validate their feelings
- Involve caregivers and family members whenever possible
- Use crisis services that prioritize de escalation and stabilization
- Coordinate with schools, healthcare providers, and community partners as appropriate



RECOVERY AND FOLLOW UP AFTER A CRISIS

Recovery is a critical part of crisis care and helps prevent future crises.

Recovery focused actions include:

- Scheduling timely follow up with mental health or primary care providers
- Creating or updating a personalized safety plan
- Re establishing routines and support at home, school, and in the community
- Monitoring for ongoing stressors or warning signs
- Supporting caregivers, siblings, and others impacted by the crisis

Recovery may take time, and continued connection and communication matter.



HELPFUL RESOURCES

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** 24/7 call, text, or chat support for youth and families
- **AACAP Facts for Families:** Plain language guidance on warning signs and safety at home
- **American Academy of Pediatrics – Blueprint for Youth Suicide Prevention:** Prevention strategies across healthcare and community settings
- **Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC):** Postvention and recovery planning tools
- **A Safe Place to Be (NASMHPD) (PDF):** Overview of crisis stabilization services for children and youth
- **TTAC webinars** (2/19 and 3/19 Children, Youth, and Families webinars)

FINAL NOTE

Prevention and recovery work best when families, schools, healthcare providers, and community partners work together. Early support, compassionate response, and consistent follow up help children and youth feel safe, supported, and connected before, during, and after a crisis.