

Calling 911 for Help in a Mental Health Emergency

A PPAL Juvenile Justice Tip Sheet

Plan Ahead

If you suspect that at some point you may need to call 911 for a mental health crisis, take a few steps ahead of time to help things go more smoothly.

- If you feel comfortable with it, take your child to visit your local police station when everything is going well. Introduce your child, explain any special needs they have, and share what does and does not work to help and calm them in a crisis. Ask if they have had CIT (crisis intervention training) - it may be helpful to speak to whoever leads this program.
- Create a list of your child's providers and how to contact them, any medication your child takes (including the dose), and any other information you might want to have or share during a crisis. Make a few copies so that you can easily hand this information to first responders.
- Learn more about what you can do ahead of time in PPAL's workshop, "[Pre-Planning for a Mental Health Crisis: The Road to Readiness](#)"; more info at <https://ppal.net/trainings/>

Should I call 911?

If you are considering calling 911 due to a mental health crisis, ask yourself a few questions first:

Is your child an immediate danger to themselves or others? Is someone about to get hurt **right now**?

Yes

Call Mobile Crisis
1 (877) 382-1609
<https://www.mass.gov/emergencycrisis-services>

No

Try to:

- Talk with your child, remaining calm and validating their emotions. Learn more about how to talk to someone considering suicide [here](#).
- Connect your child with their therapist or any other providers that might help: young adult peer specialist, therapeutic mentor, meds prescriber, family partner, etc.
- Use the Crisis Text Line: text HOME to 741741

Yes

Wait for Mobile Crisis.

No

Can you safely transport your child to the hospital yourself?

No

Do you feel that your child is now safe for the moment?

Yes

- Schedule follow-up appointments ASAP with your child's PCP, therapist, meds provider, therapeutic mentor, and/or family partner, or with Mobile Crisis.
- Keep communication with your child as open as possible.

Take your child to the Emergency Department yourself

Call 911 and state that you have a medical emergency

For free one-to-one family support and much more, contact PPAL at 866-815-8122 or [request support online](#) at ppal.net.

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If you decide to call 911, here are some tips:

Do

- Always tell the 911 dispatcher that you are calling about a medical emergency.
- Be clear and concise: "My child is autistic and is diagnosed with depression and anxiety. I am afraid they will hurt themselves."
- Stay calm and collected.
- Be clear about what outcome you hope for (the most common is transport for your child to the hospital).
- Write down the names of everyone you speak to.
- If any specific officers were helpful in the past, ask if they are available to come now.
- Ask if there is a crisis intervention team or social worker available to come with the police.
- When the police arrive, briefly tell the officers that you can provide information about your child's special needs, then step back and give them space.

Don't

- Don't give too much information: "This all started a month ago, on my daughter's birthday..."
- Don't allow your emotions to take over; they can get in the way of the main goal of the 911 call
- Don't say that your child has a behavioral problem or complain about their behavior.
- Don't say that your child is holding anything, unless the object is causing immediate danger and you need the police to know about it. Even a toy can be considered a weapon.
- Don't refuse to give your name and address - the police will find it anyway.
- Don't name officers that you *don't* want to come.
- Don't yell at the police or get too close to them
- Don't waive your right to have your interaction recorded by agreeing to an "offline" conversation.
- Don't be afraid to record your interactions with a cell phone or ring camera.

Other Things to Keep in Mind

- Try getting one of your providers (therapist, psychiatrist, family partner, etc.) on the phone and asking them to speak with the police or first responders.
- There is a limit to what the police and first responders can do in a mental health crisis. Sometimes they can talk to your child, calm them down, and get them to agree to go to the hospital voluntarily. They can also transport your child to the hospital involuntarily.
- Either way, your child will likely be placed in the Emergency Department. The ED can keep your child safe and give you a break - but that's about it. Your child may then be sent home, or may wait days or weeks in the ED for a bed at an inpatient facility.
- Be aware that the police can call DCF if they are concerned about the welfare of children in your house.
- Understand that when you speak with the police, they will report the conversation subjectively - the way they hear and understand it. To avoid this, make sure the conversation is recorded, either a recording device at the police station or your own cell phone/security camera.
- The Judge Baker Children's Center has an excellent guide to "[Helping Your Family Before, During, and After a Crisis](#)"; browse this and more of their resources at <https://www.bakercenter.org/resources>

Your child's safety comes before everything else. If your child is in danger, or is a danger to someone else, consider calling 911. However, in many cases alternative sources of support may better help defuse the crisis.