

HOW TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH POLICE WHEN YOUTH ARE IN MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS:



Tip Sheets for Families of Children and Youth with
Mental, Emotional, or Behavioral Health Problems



NATIONAL FEDERATION OF FAMILIES

For Children's Mental Health

Parents: Is 911 in YOUR Crisis Plan?

In communities where emergency mental health services are lacking, people are often forced to call 911 for assistance in the event a child or youth is exhibiting potentially dangerous or unlawful behavior. The National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health advises families raising a child with serious mental health needs to develop a crisis plan with their mental health providers.

Everyone should have a crisis plan: What to include

- Child or youth's name, age, diagnosis, current medications and dosage
- How to help the child control his or her behavior
- Who to call for help if the child is unable to control potentially dangerous or unlawful behavior
- Parent or guardian's name and contact information
- Health care providers' name(s) and contact information

Many children and youth are able to list what others can do to help them regain control when they are in crisis. Those who are able should help to develop their own crisis plans. And, should know what steps will be taken to keep them and others safe in the event they are not able to gain control.

Before a call 911 becomes necessary, call your local police department or sheriff's office to ask if they have officers trained to deal with children or youth in crisis and how to get them to respond when you need them. (NOTE: If they have not received training, contact your local Federation chapter and encourage them to reach out the department with information, resources and training.) Ask what to expect if you were to need assistance from your local enforcement officers.

If your child is taken to the police station, you should request that you or another adult family member be present while he or she is being questioned. Not all jurisdictions will honor this request, but you should ask.

If your child or youth is arrested, request an attorney to represent him or her. Cooperate with the lawyer. Attend all hearings. If an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is in place, insist that it be continued and updated as needed to include necessary assessments and reentry. Ask that appropriate plans be developed for when he or she is released and insist on being part of that planning.

Youth: Is 911 in YOUR Crisis Plan?

Sometimes when a young person in mental, emotional or behavioral crisis appears to be a potential threat to him or herself and/or to others or is engaged in unlawful behavior, law enforcement officers are called to help.

HOW CAN YOU PREVENT THIS FROM HAPPENING?

Help your family and friends know how to support you when you need to calm yourself and change your behavior. Create a list of ways they can help you and get that written into your crisis plan. If you are a student with an IEP, ask that this list be included in your IEP. And, ask that it be shared so all of your teachers, school resource officers, and other school personnel know how to help you.

IF YOU ARE APPROACHED BY POLICE:

- The officer needs to see that you are **following his or her directions**
- The officer needs to see that you are **not going to hurt him or her or anyone else**
- **Keep your hands visible** to the police officer
- Make **no sudden movements** or loud noises
- If the officer feels you are not able to control yourself, he or she may handcuff you
- You are not under arrest unless the officer says you are under arrest
- **Answer questions** with facts as clearly and calmly as possible
- Ask that the officer to **call your parents** to come to where you are

IF YOU ARE TAKEN TO THE POLICE DEPARTMENT:

- Try to be polite and cooperative as possible
- Try to remain as calm as possible
- Ask that your parents or other adult family member be called to come
- Ask that your parents or other adult family member be present when you are being questioned
- Do not admit guilt to anything without a lawyer's advise

IF YOU ARE ARRESTED:

- Ask that your parents be called to come to where you are
- You have the right to a lawyer and should ask for one to be appointed

- Do not answer any more questions without that lawyer being present

When you call for Police Assistance:

When Law Enforcement is needed to assist a Children or Youth
In Mental Health Crisis

1. **Remain as calm** as you possibly can.
2. **Provide only facts** as quickly and clearly as possible.

Example: I am calling from [address]. My 13 year old son is threatening to cut his sister. He has [diagnosis] and may be off of his medication and under the influence of alcohol. There are 4 of us in the house: my mother, my son and daughter and myself. None of us are able to calm him down. We need assistance.

3. **Identify weapons** in the vicinity or in your child's possession and alert the dispatcher.
4. **Be specific** about what type of police assistance you are asking for.

Example: We want to protect ourselves and get my son to the emergency room for a psychiatric evaluation, but cannot do that by ourselves. Please send help.

5. Answer any questions the dispatcher asks. **Do not take offense** when you are asked to repeat information. This is done to double check details and to help better assist you.
6. **Offer information** to the dispatcher about how the officer can help your child calm down.
7. Tell the dispatcher any additional information you can about what might cause your child's behavior to become more dangerous – **suggest actions the officer should avoid.**

Example: Please don't tell him to stand still. He cannot hold his body still until he calms. If you can get him to walk with you, he can listen and respond better. He is terrified of being handcuffed. Please tell him what he needs to do to avoid being handcuffed.

REMEMBER: Your primary role in this situation is to be a good communicator. Your ability to remain calm and provide factual details is critical to the outcome of this situation.



What to do when the Police Arrive

1. **Be in a neutral position**, if at all possible, when the officer arrives where you can identify yourself and **provide any additional information** before he encounters the youth who is out of control. For example, wait for the officer by the curb or in the front yard and state that you are the mother who placed the 911 call.
2. **Never rush toward or yell at the officer**. Remember the responding officer will still be trying to assess who is in danger, who has information, and who is the person making the threats.
3. **Have information available**. Some family members have prepared index cards with diagnosis, medications, and provider contacts to give officers. Tell the officer if you have such written information and but don't try to hand it to him until he tells you to do so.
4. **Let the officer take charge** and provide answers to his or her questions. Their mandate is to take charge. That is something you cannot change once police have been summoned.
5. **Continue to provide information** about what you know will help your child to de-escalate; what may cause him or her to become more agitated or threatening; and what resources may be immediately available (providers or emergency care facilities) as appropriate. In some cases, family members have arranged for an off-site person with intimate knowledge of their child's situation to stay on the line with the dispatcher in order to continue to provide the responding officers with guidance.

REMEMBER: Many officers are inexperienced in dealing with mental health crisis. Your ability to provide clear, concise and detailed information in a calm and effective manner can only help provide the officer with what he or she needs to do the best job they can when your child or youth is in crisis.



For more information on issues related to youth and law enforcement:

National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health
www.ffcmh.org or call 240-403-1901

The CMHS National Gains Center
www.gainscenter.samhsa.gov or call 1-800-311-GAIN (toll free)

National Conference of State Legislatures
www.ncsl.org or call 202-624-5400 (Washington, D.C.) or
303-364-7700 (Denver, CO)

The National Center on Mental Health and Juvenile Justice
www.ncmhjj.org or call 1-866-9NCMHJJ (toll free)