



What is a Psychiatric Emergency?

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Most families know when to call an ambulance or bring their child to the emergency room when they seem physically ill. Families may have a hard time identifying a psychiatric or mental health emergency. A psychiatric emergency is a dangerous or life-threatening situation in which a child needs immediate attention.

If you are reading this because your child has overdosed on medication or drugs, swallowed something dangerous, or attempted suicide, this is an emergency. Immediately call 911 or your local emergency number.

Reasons to bring your child for an emergency mental health evaluation include:

Risk of harm to self, such as:

- Saying in person or online that they want to kill themselves
- Searching online about how to kill themselves
- Taking steps to kill themselves like stockpiling pills, making a noose, or getting a gun or other weapons
- Writing a suicide note
- Giving away favorite belongings or making a will
- Cutting or hurting themselves in order to die or not talking about why

Risk of harm to others, such as:

- Saying in person or online that they plan to kill a person or large groups of people
- Becoming more violent towards others
- Starting fires, destroying property, or harming animals
- Threatening a person with a weapon

Changes in behavior or thinking, such as:

- Acting strangely or not making sense
- Losing touch with reality
- Seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Becoming paranoid

In these cases, an emergency evaluation may be required. Contact your child's doctor or mental health provider to find out the best way to get help. If your child is in immediate danger, call 911 or your local emergency number, or head straight to the nearest emergency room. If you're not sure you can transport your child safely, call an ambulance.

If available, bring the following to the emergency room, but only if it does not delay getting there:

- A suicide note or social media post that your child has written
- Medication bottles if your child may have taken an overdose
- Current medications prescribed to your child
- Contact information for the pediatrician and mental health providers

Some issues are concerning but are not psychiatric emergencies and can be handled by a pediatrician or mental health provider during regular business hours. These include:

- Routine medication changes or non-urgent medication refills
- Non-emergent full diagnostic evaluations
- Chronic or longstanding problems that are not dangerous or life threatening, such as anxiety, trouble sleeping, defiant behaviors, or tantrums.

Psychiatric emergencies are life-threatening events that require immediate attention. They can be frightening, but medical staff can help keep your child safe and make sure they get the help they need.

For more information, please visit [AACAP's Suicide Resource Center](#).

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You may also mail in your contribution. Please make checks payable to the AACAP and send to *Campaign for America's Kids*, P.O. Box 96106, Washington, DC 20090.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) represents over 9,400 child and adolescent psychiatrists who are physicians with at least five years of additional training beyond medical school in general (adult) and child and adolescent psychiatry.

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If you need immediate assistance, please dial 911.

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