

# 1 Navigating the Children's Mental Healthcare System

The children's mental healthcare system can be complex and confusing. Navigating through it can be difficult, time consuming, and stressful. But this guide can help.

The guide's sections are arranged to follow the steps a parent would take to get help for his or her child—from the first moment you notice something is “not quite right,” to the options for paying for mental healthcare, and every step in between.

Of course, every parent, child, and situation is different and will enter the mental healthcare system at a different point. Because of this, the guide has cross-references

(sections refer you to other sections for more information or next steps). So no matter where you start in the process, you will be able to find the information you need.

**This guide uses the term “parent” to describe any person who nurtures and raises a child. A parent could be a biological parent, an adoptive parent, a foster parent, a grandparent, an uncle or aunt, a sister or brother, or any other caregiver or guardian.**

**The guide also uses the terms “child” or “children” to describe a child or children, birth to age 21. However, in certain sections, the guide uses more specific terms to describe when something might occur in a child's life.**

**These terms include:**

- **Infants:** birth to age 1
- **Toddlers (or toddlerhood):** ages 1 to 3
- **Younger children (or early childhood):** birth to age 5
- **Older children:** ages 6 to 12
- **Adolescents (or adolescence):** ages 13 to 21

# Getting Help for Your Child



This guide is also available online at [www.childrensmentalhealthguideri.org](http://www.childrensmentalhealthguideri.org)

Follow along with the flowchart on pages 4 and 5 to see how the mental healthcare system works. If you think your child may have a mental health issue, the first question you should ask is whether or not he or she is in crisis. If your child is in crisis, it means he or she is at high risk of causing harm to self or others or is completely not able to function. If you believe your child is in crisis, then you need to seek help immediately. Turn to **CRISIS SITUATIONS (p213)** at the end of the guide.

If your child is not in crisis, but you still think that he or she may have a mental health issue, then start to keep track of your child's signs and symptoms and make an appointment with your child's pediatrician. At this point, it may also be helpful to contact your child's school and let them know that you are concerned about your child's mental health. It is important to begin communicating with your child's school in order to ensure your child is receiving the best care possible.

If your child's pediatrician determines that your child's signs and symptoms *are not* a part of normal child development, then he or she will suggest getting your child evaluated. In some cases, a pediatrician can do an initial screening. However, in most cases, a pediatrician will refer your child to a mental health specialist.

If your child's pediatrician determines that your child's signs and symptoms *are* a part of normal child development, but you are still concerned about your child's mental health, then you should talk to your child's pediatrician about your options. Consider getting your child evaluated by a mental health specialist. Also, consider seeking a second opinion. Getting a second opinion means that you make an appointment with a different pediatrician or mental health specialist to evaluate your child's mental health. If this change in behavior does turn out to be a part of normal child development, you can still seek additional support and build your parenting knowledge to help your child through this stage.

After your child receives an evaluation, it is possible that your child may be diagnosed with a mental illness. A diagnosis will usually lead to suggested treatment. Learn all you can about your child's diagnosis and treatment plan. At this point, a number of different mental health providers are likely to be introduced into your child's life. You will have to become your child's advocate. Treatment can

include working with mental health specialists, hospitals and health centers, early childhood programs, the school system, state agencies, community and non-profit organizations, health insurance care managers, or a combination of the all of these. You will also need to figure out ways to pay for your child's care.

Hopefully, once your child begins treatment, you will see improvement in him or her. If you *do* see an improvement, continue with the treatment plan. If you *do not* see an improvement in your child, then talk to your child's mental healthcare providers. You may need a revised treatment plan to help manage any symptoms that continue. Remember, it can take time before you see a change. Be patient. If this revised plan still does not improve your child's signs and symptoms, then you should talk to your child's mental healthcare providers or seek a second opinion to re-evaluate your child's situation.

These are the basics of how to navigate the mental healthcare system. The rest of the guide will describe each of the steps mentioned above. Use the flowchart on the following pages, as well as the Table of Contents and color-coded tabs, to find your way around the guide.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (p165)**, **ACRONYMS (p205)**, and **TOPIC INDEX (p209)**, can also be very helpful. And last, but certainly not least, there are advocacy organizations (p104) ready to help you navigate the system and find the information that you are looking for.

## Defining mental health

**MENTAL HEALTH** is a sign of a child's overall emotional well-being. Mental health can be difficult to understand, because it can be related to medical, social, or behavioral issues that a child may have. In general, mental health refers to a child's ability to:

- Adapt well to his or her environment in ways that are healthy; and
- Cope well with day-to-day stresses, problems, and challenges.

When children are not comfortable with how they are feeling, do not have good coping skills, and cannot get along with others, it is possible that they could have a mental health issue.

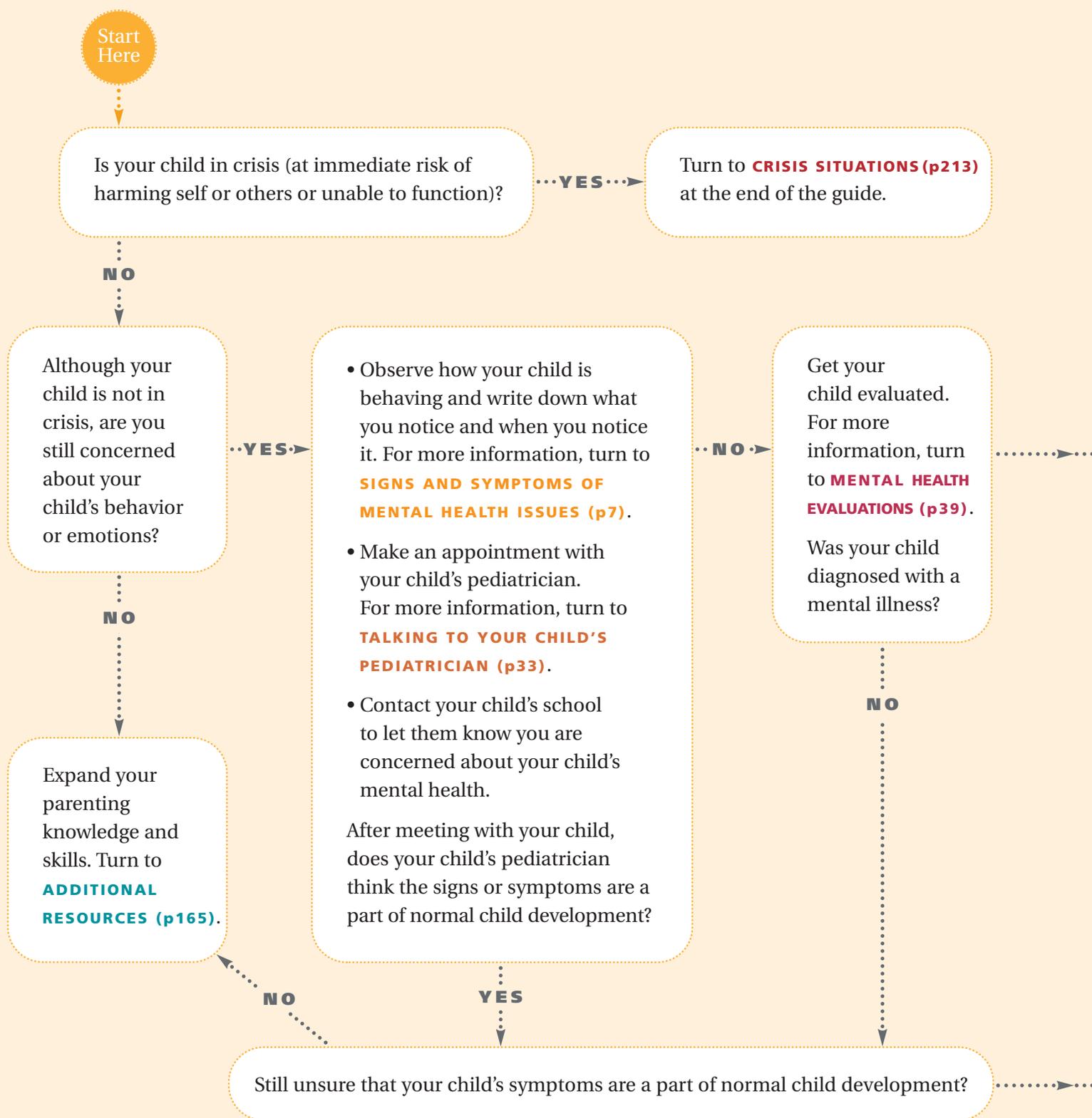
**A MENTAL HEALTH ISSUE** impacts a child's emotional well-being. An issue could develop from dealing with a bully at school or the loss of a loved one. It could be a short-term problem or long-term mental illness.

**MENTAL ILLNESSES** are medical conditions that can disrupt a child's mood, thinking, feelings, and ability to interact with and relate to others in his or her life. These disruptions can be emotional changes, behavioral changes, or both. For the majority of children, a change in mood, feelings, and behavior is a natural part of child development. However, when these changes begin to impact a child's ability to function on a daily basis, a mental illness may be the cause of these changes. If this is the case, the child may need mental healthcare.

**THE CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTHCARE SYSTEM** is made up of all the providers, hospitals and health centers, early childhood programs, the school system, state agencies, community and non-profit organizations, and health insurance companies available to address mental health issues. A mental healthcare provider is the person in charge of providing mental healthcare for your child.

**A MENTAL HEALTHCARE PROVIDER** can be a pediatrician, a mental health specialist, or a school professional. Each child's situation is different.

# How to Use This Guide



- Learn about your child’s diagnosis. Turn to **COMMON MENTAL HEALTH DIAGNOSES (p47)**.
- Get the support you and your child need. This may involve working with mental health specialists, hospitals or health centers, early childhood programs or your child’s school, state agencies, community and non-profit organizations, health insurance care managers, or all or some of the above. Turn to **MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT (p101)**.
- Follow through with the suggested treatment. Turn to **MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT (p147)**.
- Work with your insurance provider and other state programs to pay for your child’s care. Turn to **PAYING FOR MENTAL HEALTHCARE (p159)**.

With treatment, do you see an improvement in your child?

...YES..>

... YES ...>

Continue treatment and follow the recommendations of your child’s mental healthcare providers.

YES

Remember, it can take time before you see a change. Be patient. Talk to your child’s mental healthcare providers about your concerns and any symptoms that continue. Collaborate with them on a revised treatment plan.

With a revised treatment plan, do you see an improvement in your child?

... NO ...>

NO

Keep talking to your child’s mental healthcare providers. Take a look at other treatment options. Also, consider a second opinion.

...YES..>

Talk with your child’s pediatrician about your options. Consider an evaluation by a mental health specialist or consider a second opinion.

