



# SUPPORT AND CONNECT

**A FAMILY GUIDE TO SUPPORTING  
CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH**



- Being an Effective Advocate for Your Child
- Does My Child Need Help?
- Where do I start?
- Understanding School Based Supports
- Getting the Right Help for My Child
- How Do I Know if the Treatment is Right?
- Being Prepared. What to Expect If Your Child Needs Inpatient Treatment
- Advocating During an Inpatient Stay
- Keeping the Home Environment Safe
- Managing the Stress
- Keeping Track of Changes
- Preparing for School Re-entry



# BEING AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CHILD



No one can prepare you for everything that comes your way as a parent or caregiver. When we are concerned about our children's behavior it is important to remember that we are in the process of learning. It is hard to not have all the answers!

This is a list of seven things to keep in mind as you advocate for and with your child. You are in this process of learning together.

## **Talk with your child**

Talking to your child about hard topics can be uncomfortable. It is important to create a safe place to have those conversations early, but it's never too late to start.

## **Pay attention to changes**

During times of stress or big life changes, including hormones, you may notice behaviors that worry you.

Learning how to support your child as they deal with big emotions can help you to know when to seek professional help.

## **Talk to trusted adults in your child's life**

Share your concerns with the teacher or other school staff. Reach out to other adults in your child's life. Keep in mind that children behave differently in different situations.

## **Early Intervention**

Families benefit from early intervention. Screening and evaluation is available for both mental and educational well being. You can ask your pediatrician, school psychologist, or school counselor for resources in your area.



### **Develop a plan for your child with your school**

Working as a team can help with coordination and open communication. The caregiver and school counselor can also work together to determine if further assessments or evaluations are needed.

### **Take care of yourself**

Caregivers have a lot to deal with and you need care and support too. Showing self-care is also a good way to model positive mental health for your child. It is important to remember that you can't pour from an empty cup!

### **Learn all you can**

If your child needs professional help it can feel overwhelming. There are supports available to help you learn more about what to expect and how to advocate for your child.

- [Oklahoma Systems of Care and Wraparound Services](#)
- Accessing care [Parents Guide to Getting Good Care](#)
- Learn the basics: [Mental Health Education-NAMI Basics](#)
- Ask for more support if needed: [Oklahoma Family Network, NAMI](#)
- [Understanding an IEP or 504 plan](#)

# Does My Child Need Help?

WHEN OUR CHILDREN ARE STRUGGLING, OR THEIR BEHAVIOR WORRIES US, IT CAN BE HARD TO KNOW WHEN TO REACH OUT FOR HELP FROM PROFESSIONALS. REMEMBER, ASKING FOR HELP IS A SIGN OF STRENGTH. THERE ARE RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT YOU AS A PARENT AS YOU WORK TO ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CHILD.



## National Parent Helpline

It's normal to worry about your kids. Are they healthy? Are they developing and growing? Are they happy? Are they okay? It's hard to see our children sad or upset, but sometimes we worry because a child's behavior causes issues that negatively affect them, and maybe the whole family. It can be difficult to know when those worries and concerns need action.

Here are some things mental health professionals recommend when deciding if a child needs professional help:

### **What are the behaviors that worry you?**

Take a week and write down concerning behaviors you see. Try to avoid saying things like "They act up all the time!" or "They are uncooperative." Think about specific behaviors, like "The teacher complains that they can't wait for their turn to speak," or "They get upset when asked to stop one activity and start another," or "They cry for a long time when their mother leaves the room."

### **How often does it happen?**

If your child seems sad or is not playing with you/others, is it happening once a week or most of the time? If they are having tantrums, when do they happen? How long do they last? Children can experience normal emotions and behaviors like fear, anger, defiance, anxiety, and being impulsive. It is important to write down how long and how intense these emotions are as they may indicate a need for professional help.

---

### Are these behaviors “typical” for their age?

Children and teenagers show a wide range of behaviors, so it can be hard to tell what is typical or a serious concern. It can help to share your observations with a professional who sees a lot of children—a teacher, school counselor, or pediatrician. That can give you perspective on whether your child’s behavior falls outside of the typical range for their age group.

### How long has it been going on?

Concerning behavior that’s been happening for a few days or even a few weeks is often a response to an event. Part of knowing if a child needs professional help is noticing behaviors that are short-term responses, and probably don’t require intervention, and those things that persist over time. Uncontrollable crying before a big test is probably not something that needs professional attention, but crying over daily activities for several weeks possibly does.

### How much is it getting in the way of life?

Perhaps the biggest factor for whether your child needs help is whether the symptoms and behaviors are getting in the way of them doing age-appropriate things. Below are some things to consider.

#### IS IT:

- DISRUPTING THE FAMILY AND CAUSING CONFLICT AT HOME?
- CAUSING DIFFICULTY AT SCHOOL OR WITH FRIENDS?
- CAUSING THE CHILD TO BE UNABLE TO DO THINGS THEY WANT TO DO?
- KEEPING THE CHILD FROM ENJOYING MANY THINGS THEIR PEERS ENJOY?
- MAKING IT HARDER TO GET ALONG WITH TEACHERS, FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS?

IF SO, THEY MAY NEED HELP.

# Where Do I Start?

If you feel that your child's behaviors, thoughts, or emotions might need attention the next step is to consult a professional.

But where should you go?

For many parents, talking to your family doctor is the first step, but medical doctors are not required to have a lot of training in mental health. They may refer you to a specialist. The advantage of going to the pediatrician is that they already know your child and family. They can also do medical testing to rule out possible non-psychiatric causes of symptoms.

**BEST PRACTICES IN DIAGNOSING CHILDREN INCLUDE GETTING MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES INCLUDING; THE CHILD, PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, TEACHERS, AND OTHER ADULTS. ASK FOR A REFERRAL IF YOU ARE NOT COMFORTABLE WITH WHAT YOUR DOCTOR OFFERS OR WOULD LIKE A SECOND OPINION.**

There are several types of professionals that offer different specialties, it is important to understand what type of care you want and need for your child.

- **School Counselors** work with students and families to maximize student well-being and academic success. Students with mental health and/or learning issues may be referred to a school counselor by school staff, parents, or the counselor may observe these issues during interactions with students. Counselors are often the central point of contact for school staff involved in an individual case, and they are able to make referrals.
- **School Psychologists** specialize in analyzing complex student and school problems and selecting and implementing appropriate evidence-based interventions to improve outcomes at home and school. School psychologists are part of a school's crisis and mental health team and provide consultation to parents and teachers regarding intervention recommendations. Additionally, they are responsible for conducting special education evaluations to determine if a student qualifies for IEP services due to a mental health disability.

- **Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrician** is a pediatrician who has completed additional training in evaluating and treating developmental and behavioral problems. Their expertise may make them a good choice for children with complicated medical or developmental problems.
- **Licensed Mental Health Professional** is often one of the first people a child will see if they are having difficulty in school or are referred to a mental health facility. Licensed mental health professionals are trained to assess the needs of a child and their family needs, diagnose mental health conditions, and develop a treatment plan with the family. Licensed Mental Health Professionals are skilled in finding ways to address issues and to explore why they are happening.
- **Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist** is a medical doctor with specialized training both in adult psychiatry and psychiatric diagnosis and treatment in young people. They are equipped to diagnose the full range of psychiatric disorders recognized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM).
- **Clinical Child Psychologist** has a PhD or a PsyD as well as supervised clinical experience evaluating and treating kids with mental health conditions. Psychologists are trained to diagnose the whole range of disorders, and can coordinate other necessary evaluations.
- **Neuropsychologists** specialize in the functioning of the brain and how it relates to behavior and cognitive ability. Your child might be referred to a neuropsychologist for an assessment if your concerns include issues of focus, attention, problem-solving, or learning. Neuropsychologists can determine the likely cause of these problems—whether they are psychiatric symptoms, or symptoms of a learning or developmental disorder—in much the same way other specialists can rule out medical causes.
- **Neurologists** are medical doctors who specialize in the nervous system; a referral for neurological assessment aims to determine whether symptoms are the result of nervous system disorders, such as seizures.



# Understanding School Based Supports

Not all children who struggle with mental health and behavioral issues will need additional support in the classroom, but it's important to be aware of the resources available. Schools can use assessment results from an outside mental health/medical provider or can conduct an educational evaluation to determine if a child is eligible for accommodations in school or special education services.

Navigating through the special education process can be overwhelming and complex, yet nearly 17 percent of students enrolled in Oklahoma's school are utilizing Special Education services. You don't have to go it alone!

- The Oklahoma Parents Center is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to educate and support parents, families, and professionals in building partnerships that meet the needs of children and youth with the full range of disabilities ages birth through twenty-six.
- The Oklahoma Parents Center staff is available to work with service providers and schools, as well as advocate for your student or yourself. Our goal is to give you the knowledge, skills, support, and tools you need to be the best advocate you can be!
- For more information please visit: <https://oklahomaparentscenter.org>

In this section you will find a brief description of a Section 504 plan and an Individualized Education Program (IEP) along with lots of resources where you can access additional information.

# Section 504

A Section 504 plan is a federally protected general education plan for eligible students.

Section 504 is part of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, a civil rights law that prevents discrimination against any person with a disability at an institution that receives federal funding, including schools and colleges.

- Two things must be present to meet criteria for eligibility under a Section 504 plan. \*
  - The student possesses a physical or mental impairment.
  - The disability substantially limits the student in one or more “major life activity” e.g. learning, speaking, hearing, concentrating, walking, etc.

\*If your child’s condition meets the above criteria, please connect with the school’s Section 504 coordinator to ask for review for eligibility.

- A Section 504 plan provides “reasonable accommodations” to remove obstacles to success. Reasonable accommodations might include support such as: special seating, a quiet place for testing, extra breaks, technology access, different text books, different testing formats, etc.
- If you believe your child might be eligible for a Section 504 plan, please contact the school site Section 504 coordinator in writing. Request consideration for eligibility and submit any relevant medical data to the school site as soon as possible.
- 504 Planning Meeting, which you should attend, as well as any subsequent periodic reviews. Learn more about 504 plans from the National Center for Learning Disabilities.



● **Learn more about  
IDEA, Section 504 at  
OSDE Education  
Resources**

# Individual Education Plan - IEP

Students can get an Individual Education Program (IEP) if they qualify under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law that promises a “free and appropriate education” to children classified with various specific legal disabilities. Categories of disability under IDEA include:

- Autism
- Deaf-Blindness
- Developmental delay
- Emotional disturbance, including psychiatric disorders
- Hearing Impairment, deafness
- Intellectual disability
- Orthopedic impairment
- Other Health Impairment
- Specific Learning Disability
- Speech or Language Impairment
- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Vision Impairment, including blindness
- Multiple Disabilities (complex medical conditions)

Every public school has a legal responsibility to identify children who need specialized services and to provide appropriate educational services to those children through an IEP. Children deemed eligible for an IEP will receive assistance through their local public school district, including those who attend private or parochial schools.

If you believe your child could benefit from extra help:

- Contact your child’s school to request consideration for an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Do so in writing.
- Provide all relevant medical data to the school and state the reason for submitting is to be considered for an IEP..
- The team will convene to consider eligibility for an IEP.
- If the child is determined eligible for an IEP, the team will create a plan along with changes made to assist the child in achieving goals.
- The plan will be reviewed annually but guardians may request reviews more frequently e.g. as needed. .

**Learn more: IEP  
OSDE Education  
Resources**





# Getting the Right Help for My Child

Throughout the evaluation process, parents should be involved and ask many questions. It's important to make sure you understand the results of the evaluation, your child's diagnosis, and the full range of treatment options.

1. If you are not sure about the diagnosis or treatment plan, ask for a second opinion.
2. If the child and/or family is having difficulties understanding a diagnosis or treatment plan due to a language/cultural barrier, seeking a second opinion from a culturally competent and culturally sensitive clinician is recommended.
3. If you do not feel that the clinician is the “right fit”, share that with the provider and ask for a referral.

## What questions should I ask?

Before a child begins treatment, parents may want to ask the following:

- What are the recommended treatment options for my child?
- How will I be involved with my child's treatment?
- How will we know if the treatment is working?
- How long should it take before I see improvement?
- Does my child need medication?
- What should I do if the problems get worse?
- What are the arrangements if I need to reach you after-hours or in an emergency?

From the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry  
Advocating for your Child





# How Do I Know If the Treatment Is Right?

Treatments can vary, and no two children's needs are exactly the same. There are some general best practice standards and questions to ask your doctor to make sure the care your child is getting follows those standards, whether the treatment involves behavioral therapy, medication, or both. From [The Parent Guide to Getting Good Care](#)

- Treatment should have a goal. How will your child's mood or behavior respond to the treatment, and how will those changes be measured?
- Treatment should be evidence-based. Your provider should tell you what research supports the use of this treatment, and how effective it is for the symptoms.
- Your practitioner should have expertise in using this treatment. The best treatments are delivered by professionals who understand the evidence and have clinical experience to inform their knowledge.
- Children vary widely in their responses to medication. Only careful changes in doses and timing will establish the most effective dose, as well as whether or not the medication works for your child, and how well it works.
- A child taking medication should be closely monitored as they change and grow. As children develop, their response to medication can be expected to change. Guidelines vary, but a rule of thumb is that 6 month check-ins are best practice, with more (and sometimes much more) frequent visits when a new medication is started, an old one is discontinued, or a dosage is changed.
- Your child should feel comfortable with the clinician. The child needs to be able to share their thoughts and feelings, and if they are engaged in behavior therapy, trusting the clinician is essential for them to make progress.
- You should have good communication with your child's clinician. To get good care for your child, you need to feel comfortable sharing your observations and concerns with your clinician, and know that they are being taken seriously.
- You should be involved in behavioral treatment. Evidence shows that the most effective behavior treatments give parents a role in helping children get better. Your clinician should be enlisting your help to continue treatment outside sessions.
- Those involved in your child's treatment should work together. Children do best when the specialists involved in their care are in touch with each other, sharing information, and agreeing on goals and the steps to achieve them.

# Being Prepared

## What to Expect If Your Child Needs Inpatient Treatment / Emergency Hospitalization

Crises can occur even when treatment plans have been followed and mental health professionals are actively involved. It is important to be prepared because warning signs of a crisis are not always present.

### Navigating a Mental Health Crisis

### Parents Guide to Emergency Hospitalization

#### WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU ARRIVE

- A mental health assessment will occur upon arrival. This is when you will share the concerns that led up to seeking hospitalization. You will be asked about your family history of mental illness. Genetics frequently play a role in mental health, and your family's experience may influence any medications that may be deemed appropriate for your child.
- Ask for the number of the nursing station and put it into your phone immediately, so you don't lose it. You can call the nurse's station whenever you want to find out how your child is doing, ask questions or ask to have the assigned therapist call you back to offer feedback.
- If you have missed a meal in transit, ask for food. Most intake departments will have sandwiches or something on hand. The process can create substantial anxiety, so even if you or your child is not particularly hungry, a bit of a snack can help soothe the tension.

*A mental health crisis is any situation in which a person's behavior puts them at risk of hurting themselves or others and/or prevents them from caring for themselves or functioning effectively in the community.*



# What to Expect When Admitting Your Child

## Maintaining Safety

- Someone will sort through your child's belongings and decide what can and can't stay on the unit. The following are not allowed:

Anything metal, sharp, or made of glass

Belts, drawstrings and shoelaces

Phones and wallets are usually not allowed

- Most hospitals do a body check or "search" so that the hospital has a record of the patient's wounds and scars prior to entry.

## What to expect when visiting

- The psychiatric unit will likely be locked with a two-stage door system.
- **You will need show ID to enter for visits.** Phones with cameras are usually not allowed.
- A nurse on the unit will ask you whose names should be placed on the visitor/call list. In most cases, it is best to limit these contacts to family members who are supportive and mature enough to manage any distress the child may experience.
- You will also be asked to formulate a "code" to verify identity and maintain confidentiality. If you add other family members, you will need to provide their contact number. You will also need to provide the family member with the derived "code"...without the code, they will not be allowed contact.

You don't need to come every day, but visitation is typically encouraged. Many providers will ask you to wait 24-48 hours before visiting to allow your child to settle into a rhythm and to allow any anxieties to subside. If you wish to bring food (which your child will likely ask you to do), ask a nurse or staff in advance about what's allowed so you don't promise something you can't deliver.

Ask what circumstances the hospital will reach out to you. Usually there are only three situations that trigger a phone call:

### **MEDICATION CHANGE**

They want to add to or change your child's medication and need your permission to do so. They will only contact you for new meds, not for subsequent increases or decreases in dosage. Most hospitals will not call you to discontinue a medication, only to add a new one. If you receive a call regarding a new medication, it will likely be from a nurse on the unit, and they will be willing to provide information on rationale for the medication as well as any typical side-effects.

### **TO SET UP A "FAMILY MEETING"**

Depending on the typical length of stay, this might happen several days or even a week before the actual discharge\*, because it takes a while to put plans in place. Most therapists assigned to care for your child will also reach out to provide feedback on growth or struggles being faced. "Family" in this case means the parent or caregiver, the child, and a therapist. Take notes at the meeting, or bring someone (spouse or relative) to take notes for you.

### **YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN AN "INCIDENT"**

This may be a physical accident (rare), injury caused by another patient (rare) or notification that your child was taken to a seclusion room because they became violent. If you get a call like this, ask for details. Write the account down in a notebook, record the date of the call and the name of the person calling. It will likely be helpful to call later and speak to your child to get their version of the story; however, in most cases, the team will be working to de-escalate your child and will ask you to delay contact until they are in a safer space to talk.

\*If you did not already have an outpatient therapist, the inpatient discharge planner will coordinate scheduling future therapy. Most inpatient care facilities prefer to have an outpatient appointment within the first week following discharge. If you don't have one currently, explore your options so you can make an informed choice. The discharge planner should refer you to [Wraparound with Systems of Care](#). You may want to check with your child's school to see if they might have an appropriate mental health therapist who could work with your child once your child returns to school.



# What To Expect Once Your Child Is 'In'

The key thing to understand is that the sole purpose of an inpatient stay is to stabilize your child enough to be discharged to outpatient care. In other words, it is not the goal to “fix” everything.

Once the doctors have visited with your child (you won't be there when this happens), they will come up with a working diagnosis. Try to avoid the urge to become overly focused on this diagnosis. With children, many times a diagnosis of depression does not mean they will face chronic depression for the remainder of their life. This is an opportunity to have some feedback and guidance.



Your child's day will be structured with a schedule that may include:

- a daily (brief) check-in by medical staff
- school (usually only an hour or two)
- individual counseling and various group therapies. These may include classes or groups on coping skills, information on mental health and family therapy.
- Some hospitals also use therapies that incorporate animals, music, art, or horticulture.

**REMEMBER, THE GOAL ISN'T TO COMPLETELY RESOLVE ALL ISSUES, THE GOAL IS TO GET YOUR CHILD STABLE ENOUGH TO MOVE TO OUTPATIENT TREATMENT, WHERE THE LONG-TERM WORK TAKES PLACE.**

What they do is provide structure, medication and monitoring. It is also an opportunity for your child to build their own awareness of their mental health, to identify specific traumas experienced, and to formulate a plan for safety in the future.

## Rules and Privileges

There will be many guidelines and rules about unit actions. Many of them will likely be the topic of your conversation with your child. Most psychiatric hospitals use some kind of system in which the children earn privileges if they comply with expectations. Your child might gripe about them, too. Your job is to support your child learning a different way of doing things. If unsure about a treatment protocol, just ask.

## Medication

If your child already has a psychiatrist, there may be communication between them, but the psychiatrist in a hospital must agree with the medications, as they are the treating physician at the time.

Typically at discharge, you will be asked to sign a Release of Confidential Information to facilitate communication with the outpatient provider.

## Things to ask about medications (and take notes about)

WHY IS THE DOCTOR CHOOSING THIS MEDICATION? WHAT ALTERNATIVES ARE THERE?

IF YOU HAVE FAMILY MEMBERS WITH SIMILAR PROBLEMS, TELL THE DOCTOR WHICH MEDICATIONS HAVE BEEN EFFECTIVE AND WHICH HAVEN'T.

KEEP GOOD RECORDS OF WHAT MEDICATIONS YOUR CHILD IS ON, WHEN DOSAGES CHANGE, AND ANY NOTABLE CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR.


ASK THE DOCTOR FOR HELP IDENTIFYING MEDICATIONS TO REMOVE OR SECURE IN THE HOME, ESPECIALLY IF YOUR CHILD HAD BEEN SUICIDAL OR HAD THOUGHTS OF SELF-HARM.

HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE BEFORE THE MEDICATION KICKS IN? A FEW PSYCHIATRIC MEDICATIONS ARE EFFECTIVE THE SAME DAY. MANY TAKE A WHILE TO TAKE EFFECT. YOU MAY ALSO WANT TO ASK WHAT HAPPENS IF THE DOCTORS DON'T SEE THAT EFFECT. CHANGES MIGHT NOT BE VISIBLE UNTIL AFTER YOUR CHILD LEAVES THE HOSPITAL- MAKE SURE YOUR CHILD'S OUTPATIENT PSYCHIATRIST IS GIVEN THE DISCHARGE SUMMARY.

WHAT ARE THE COMMON SIDE EFFECTS? HOW LONG DO THEY TEND TO LAST? YOU SHOULD ALSO BE TOLD ABOUT ANY DANGEROUS BUT RARE SIDE EFFECTS, WHEN THESE ARE LIKELY TO SHOW UP AND WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE.



# What to Do While Your Child Is Inpatient



YOU ARE LIKELY TO HAVE MANY INTENSE FEELINGS ABOUT HAVING A CHILD IN A PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL –INCLUDING SHAME, GUILT, FEAR, ANGER, SADNESS AND YES, RELIEF. YOU WILL BE BETTER ABLE TO HELP YOUR CHILD IF YOU ALLOW YOURSELF TO FEEL AND PROCESS THESE EMOTIONS. YOUR FAMILY'S MIX OF FEELINGS WILL LIKELY BE DIFFERENT THAN YOURS. YOU'RE ALL ALLOWED TO FEEL WHAT YOU FEEL.

## What to do if they complain

There is an extremely valuable life lesson that your child might learn...if you have the strength to let them. In life, there are always rules and privileges, and in many cases we don't agree with them all. Many children struggle to learn to tolerate their own distress... this may be what led to hospitalization.

- It is perfectly okay to empathize and validate frustrations (“I’m sorry, that does kind of stink. Can you talk to anyone about it?”). It is also helpful to encourage them to use coping skills, and to recognize they may have to accept that they can’t change it. Learning this could be a strategy that will help in the future with the many issues they will face in their lives.
- No matter what you are feeling, remind yourself that you want your child to be safe now and in the future.
- Be sure to take care of yourself and be ready for phone calls or contact. If they sense that you are worried about them, you will likely increase their anxiety rather than calm it. It is okay to be concerned and to speak up, but remember you are asking your child to make healthy, safe decisions...lead by example.



# Phone calls- Be prepared

Children often feel ashamed, confused and scared about being in a mental health facility. Because they are kids, they are likely to take their feelings out on the person they love the most, the person who is safest: **you**.

You will not be the first parent to be called the worst mother or father in the world, nor the last to be on the receiving end of a blistering “How could you do this to me?” Try not to take it personally, even when it’s addressed to you. Regardless of your fear that they’ll hate you for the rest of their life, they probably won’t. So when you receive a phone call, or hear yet another heart-wrenching plea to get them out of there, breathe, and remember that you can take the heat now.

You can try to reason with your child, but don’t expect to get far. Remember to trust the process.

**LOGIC IS RARELY EFFECTIVE AT SOOTHING EMOTION.**  
You’ll probably make the most progress by acknowledging and empathizing with their underlying feelings.

**TRY PHRASES LIKE:**  
“IT SOUNDS LIKE YOU’RE REALLY SCARED.”  
“YOU MUST BE REALLY ANGRY THAT YOU HAVE TO BE THERE.”  
“I’M SO SORRY IT’S SO ROUGH. I LOVE YOU ENOUGH TO LET THIS WORK”

Phone calls are scheduled at certain parts of the day and can be limited in the amount of time that can be spent on the phone. Knowing that phone calls are limited, parents can prepare themselves to receive those calls.



# Advocating for Your Child During an Inpatient Stay

If you've had experience with other types of hospitals, you know that it's possible to encounter some sort of aggravating glitch in care. You may have to advocate for your child.

As a parent, your own emotions are also running on overdrive. You will need to use caution to avoid overreacting or jumping to conclusions. If your child relates an event that has distressed them or seems to have been handled badly, take notes on their version of what happened.

Remind yourself that your child is in a new environment, and the perception of what occurred may not be accurate. This will help you approach staff with an open mind.

- Ask Questions like “My child seems upset about what they say took place with \_\_\_\_\_. Can you tell me about that?” You will get more information this way than if you start with accusations.
- Pay attention if your child is triggered by a particular staff member that reminds them of someone from their past. This becomes a therapeutic nugget of gold, because it allows a current circumstance to teach them about the past.
- Be pleasant, form alliances with as many staff as possible, get to know people by name.
- Take lots of notes. If you have a concern and you've spoken up about it several times and still aren't getting a response, put it in writing.
- Be direct with staff that are present and respond to you, but if you run into a roadblock, ask for a shift supervisor or if you can follow up with an administrator.

As with any other type of hospital visit, it is easier to find out what is going on if you take good notes and keep the communication going.

# Getting Ready to Go Home

## Discharge planning starts at admission

- Depending on the length of treatment, the discharge discussion takes place several days or even a week before the actual discharge. The treatment team will use many factors in determining when it is time for discharge, and ethics require that all individuals are treated in the “least restrictive environment”.
- There will be many issues that are not fully resolved, but the goal of hospitalization is stabilization and a rapid return to the community. This is “Best Practice” since being away from family is typically difficult for children.
- Ask about being referred to [Wraparound Services with Systems of Care](#)

## Do not take a “wait and see” approach with recommendations.

- The recommendations have been made by professionals in the mental health field and are an important component to ongoing care and support for your child. Also, many pediatric specialists are booked out for months, so scheduling appropriate appointments as soon as possible is crucial for successful discharge planning.
- Ask for a copy of the discharge paperwork at the time of discharge to ensure that you have the records needed for scheduling discharge follow-up care in the event that the facility-to-facility fax isn’t sent/received.

## Family Approach

- It is important that the whole family is open to the therapeutic process. Try to address the stance of “I don’t need therapy, They are the one with the problem”. A child will be far more successful in implementing new skills and coping techniques if the family is all working together rather than pointing fingers. Learn more about [Wraparound Services](#).
- There are wonderful resources for families to help with this transition and ongoing support.

[NAMI Family Support Group](#) and [Oklahoma Family Network](#)

## Fears and concerns

If your initial reaction to the idea of discharge is a screaming “Nooooo!” you will want to pause and examine what’s going on in your head.

On the one hand, you may be remembering how bad things were before the hospitalization, and you may feel insecure about what life will be like in the next phase. Then again, your reaction may be spot-on intuition that your child truly isn’t ready.

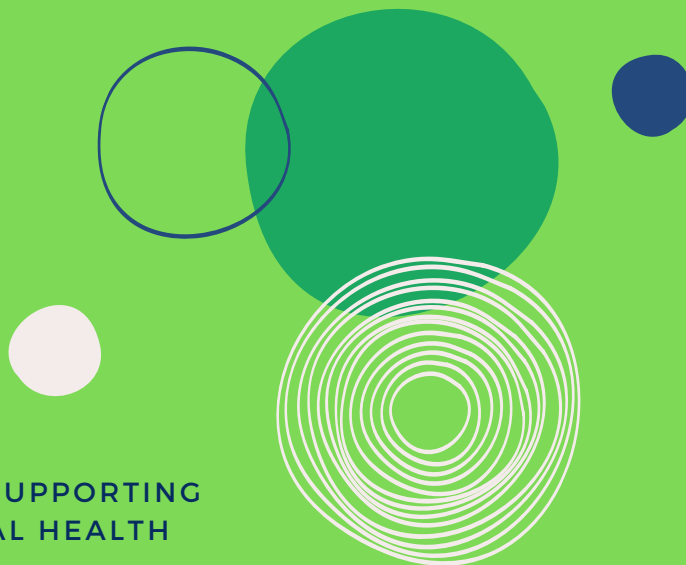
- Make sure you articulate any specific concerns to the doctor or therapist
- Alert the doctor if in your private conversations with your child they have indicated that they still want to kill themselves
- Talk to the staff if you suspect your child is lying in order to get out

Some parents become upset because the hospital wants a longer stay than feels strictly necessary. Ask why they want this.

Common reasons are:

- A follow-up plan of care isn’t in place yet
- The doctors feel it isn’t safe to discharge your child until they have met certain conditions.

You will want to ask about how well your child is participating and how they are acting on the unit each day.



# Re-entry might be hard

You will need a lot of patience for the next week or two. Remember that your child is not cured, and no matter how much you want this ordeal to be over, you can't expect them to behave as if they are all better, or even mostly better. The hospital has only stabilized them enough to allow them to move to outpatient care.

**YOU WILL NEED TO REMIND YOURSELF (REPEATEDLY)  
THAT A MOMENT OR DAY IS NOT A LIFETIME.**

**THIS IS HARD. FOR ALL OF YOU.**

The first time your child acts the way they did before hospitalization you may leap to the conclusion that you are right back where you were before.

**This is not true. Breathe deep. Try not to freak out. Stay patient.  
Ask for help from friends and loved ones.**

It is often helpful to

- develop a collaborative plan\* for the next week. Include what to do when things become overwhelming, ways to ask for help, warning signs that things are going down hill again, and some positive, focused steps to try to achieve.
- schedule a time to review the plan, say after the first week, and to discuss what worked, what didn't, and other ideas of what might work.

\*Involving your child in the plan is critical. Involvement leads to buy in and helps empower your child to take some control in their life. This helps your child avoid feeling hopeless, powerless, and desperate.





# Keeping the Home Environment Safe

The hospital hopefully gave you guidance on how much supervision your child will need upon returning home.

## THINGS YOU WILL WANT TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR WHOLE FAMILY AND YOUR CHILD'S TREATMENT TEAM:

- HOW LONG CAN YOUR CHILD BE LEFT ALONE?
- HOW QUICKLY CAN THEY RESUME NORMAL ACTIVITIES?
- ARE VISITS TO FRIENDS' HOUSES OKAY? (IT MAY BE BETTER TO ARRANGE ALL VISITS AT YOUR HOUSE FOR A WHILE.)
- HOW DO WE TRANSITION BACK TO PREVIOUS LEVELS OF INDEPENDENCE?

You may feel the strain of the level of supervision required. Work with trusted friends or family to provide some respite. If you need support, reach out for help.

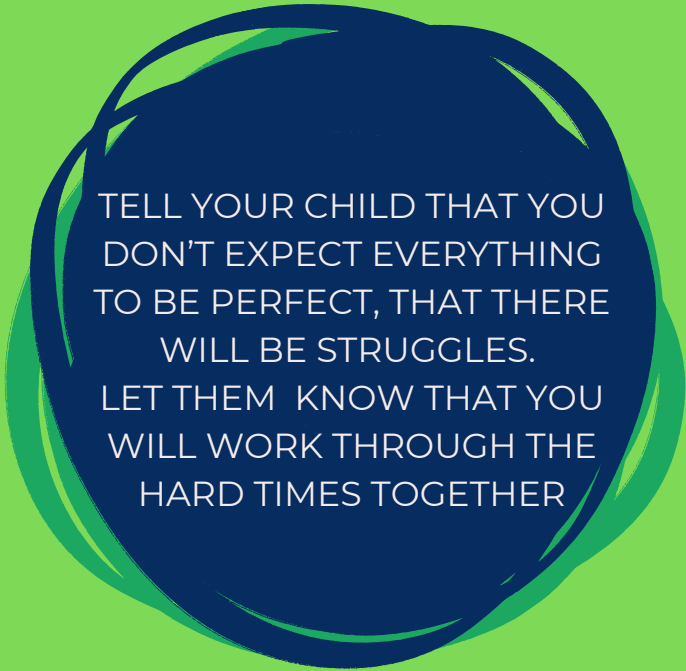
[Oklahoma Family Network](#)

The fact that reentry feels endless doesn't make it endless. You can get through this. Figure out how to process your own feelings and reach out to your child's treatment team for help.

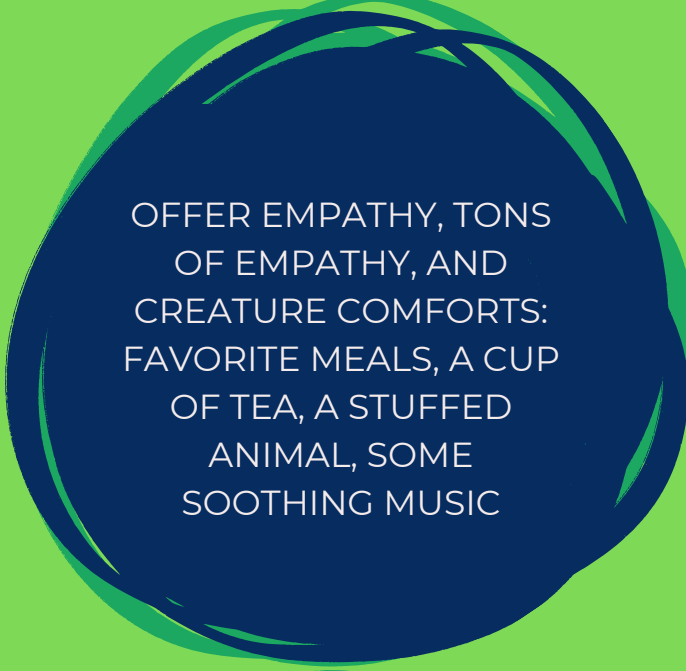
# Managing the Stress

Your child is going to be just as scared about failing as you are, if not more. Although neither of you may have thought of it this way, life in the hospital was actually much simpler than life at home. So arriving home — while definitely a good thing — is also stressful. There is less structure and far more temptations. Home is a place of old habits and parental expectations. The stress level for your child will be higher.


## 4 Tips to help you lower the stress level:




TELL YOUR CHILD THAT YOU  
DON'T EXPECT EVERYTHING  
TO BE PERFECT, THAT THERE  
WILL BE STRUGGLES.  
LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU  
WILL WORK THROUGH THE  
HARD TIMES TOGETHER



OFFER EMPATHY, TONS  
OF EMPATHY, AND  
CREATURE COMFORTS:  
FAVORITE MEALS, A CUP  
OF TEA, A STUFFED  
ANIMAL, SOME  
SOOTHING MUSIC



STEP BACK FROM YOUR  
OWN EXPECTATIONS AND  
EMOTIONS, AND STAY AS  
COOL AS YOU CAN.  
THIS WILL HELP A LOT MORE  
THAN SCREAMING AT YOUR  
KID IN FRUSTRATION



IF YOU HAVE TO VENT-  
DO IT IN PRIVATE TO  
SOMEONE WHO CAN  
REMIND YOU THAT THIS IS A  
BUMP IN THE ROAD.  
FIND WAYS TO HAND OFF  
CARE IF YOU ARE WEARY,  
ANXIOUS, OR LOSING  
PATIENCE



# What to Watch For

---

If your child had a suicide plan or attempt, the greatest likelihood of a repeat attempt is within the first three months. Your task will be to figure out how to monitor your child's mental state without being overbearing- and without dissolving into your own puddle of worry.

## Here are three suggestions to help:

1. Manage your own anxiety. If you need to talk to your own therapist do so. Find ways to take care of your mental health.
2. Keep lines of communication with your child open. Refresh your memory of good techniques for talking with your teen.
3. Ask for guidance on what to do if your child tells you they still have thoughts of self-harm. Talk to your child's therapist for tips. Knowing the difference between passive and active suicidal ideation can help you stay calm and practical.

The outpatient team will probably ask to set up additional therapy and psychiatry appointments for a period of time.

## Keeping Track of Changes

One thing that will help both you and the doctors is to start a journal or log.. A log creates an objective measure of what you're seeing and how often you're seeing it, which helps when you are dealing with a lot of emotions. Plus, when your gut is telling you something is wrong, or that your child is getting worse instead of better, it's much easier for a doctor to understand your concerns when you provide actual observations.

Write it down:

WHAT MEDICATIONS ARE BEING TAKEN AND WHEN DOSAGES CHANGE. IT IS HELPFUL WHEN DISCUSSING SIDE EFFECTS, ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY DON'T HAPPEN FOR SEVERAL DAYS OR WEEKS

CHANGES IN ROUTINE AND OUTSIDE STRESSORS. NOTE ANY BIG CHANGES: SCHOOL SCHEDULE, FAMILY STRUCTURE, AS WELL AS ARGUMENTS WITH FRIENDS OR EVEN THE DATES OF YOUR CHILD'S MENSTRUAL CYCLE

WHAT SYMPTOMS YOU ARE SEEING, AND HOW OFTEN. IF YOUR CHILD HAS MELTDOWNS, RECORD HOW MANY, HOW LONG THEY LAST, AND HOW SEVERE THEY WERE. IS THERE A PATTERN?

THINGS YOUR CHILD SAYS OR DOES THAT WORRY YOU. CREATE A "DAY IN THE LIFE" ACCOUNT FOR THE DOCTOR. WRITE DOWN EVENTS AND ACTUAL QUOTES TO SHARE WITH YOUR CHILD'S THERAPIST.

Visit the Oklahoma Family Network Training  
page to learn more about creating a  
[Care Notebook](#)



# Preparing for School Reentry

Another stressful point in returning home may be reentry into school. During their time in the hospital your child would have attended school for only a couple hours per day in a small group setting. Regular school may be difficult for your child and it is important to take steps to make the transition as smooth as possible.

## Steps to help the process:

- Contact the school and ask for a transition coordinator to facilitate the process on the school's end. This person can talk with the hospital and coordinate for the school. This role is usually done by the School Counselor or School Psychologist. If your child has an IEP, their Special Education Teacher or Coordinator may fulfil this role.
- Ensure all needed paperwork is signed to share information. The hospital, the outpatient therapists, and school are not able to speak to each other without your written permission. Ensure that releases are signed prior to or at discharge.
- Request a meeting with the school prior to reentry to review the discharge recommendations and update the school personnel on the treatment goals. As a team, you will need to continue working to help your child meet their treatment goals.

- 
- Work with the school to develop a crisis plan, including specific signs that your child may be experiencing another crisis.
  - Set a plan for addressing long-term absence and missed work, and allow for adjustments in classwork/homework upon return
  - Ask the school to assign a trusted adult who is able to check-in with your child as needed. This will likely include daily check-ins initially.
  - If not already in place, discuss with the school if there is a need to evaluate your child for a 504 plan or IEP. Make sure to re-evaluate any existing plans.
  - Develop a home-school communication protocol with clear expectations regarding how you and the school will communicate progress.

#### Resources:

[Transitioning from Psychiatric Hospitalization to Schools \(UCLA\)](#)

[Working with Students Returning from a Mental Health Crisis \(OSDE\)](#)

# INFO & TRACKING FORM

HOSPITAL CONTACT:

SCHOOL CONTACT:

OUTPATIENT/FOLLOW UP CONTACT

FAMILY SUPPORT

OTHER SUPPORT


MEDICATION (INCLUDING START  
DATES AND DOSAGES):

SIDE EFFECTS, OBSERVATIONS AND  
QUESTIONS:

COMFORT/SUPPORTS:

THINGS TO TALK TO THE SCHOOL ABOUT

THINGS TO BRING UP WITH THE THERAPIST



The Children's Behavioral Health Partnership of Tulsa provides leadership and ongoing collaboration to support an accessible system of care for children, youth, and families, ensuring emotional, behavioral and social wellness by promoting family-driven integrated comprehensive services.

THANK YOU TO ALL OF THE  
COMMUNITY PARTNERS THAT ASSISTED  
IN CREATING THIS GUIDE.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**  
**[MHAOK.ORG/CHILDREN-AND-YOUTH-RESOURCES](https://mhaok.org/children-and-youth-resources)**