

First steps for getting help

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Overview

If you have read through the information in Chapter 1, and if you are reasonably certain that you need some outside help for your child, the next question is: How can I find that help? Maybe your child's pediatrician can answer some important questions for you. Or perhaps the teachers, administrators, or health care professionals at your child's school will be helpful. Friends and/or members of your community—youth leaders, advisors in your church or other faith-based organization, caregivers at your local health services clinic—may also be valuable resources for you. Each one can offer helpful observations and information, and some can offer services as well.

However, each of these options opens up a different path for you and your child to follow. This means you may find yourself wondering: Where do I start? What questions should I ask? If the health services my child needs are available from both the school and our community health center, which one should I turn to? Will the school and the health center work together to help my child?

The goal of this chapter is to help you with those questions as you begin evaluating your options—and this is step two of the two-step process described in Chapter 1.

Advocacy Tip

If your child has a mental health problem, he or she may not be able to control his or her behavior. This lack of control may be your first sign that something is wrong.

Remember that it is important to make some observations of your own about your child's behavior. Your observations will be useful to any service provider who wants to help your child. See the chart on the next page for people and/or organizations that can help. Before contacting someone for help, try to answer the following questions as best you can:

- Is your child's troubling behavior similar to the behavior of other children in his or her age group? (For example, it may be typical for a three- or four-year-old child to throw a temper tantrum because you have said "No ice cream before dinner!" But it is not typical for an eleven-year-old child to throw a tantrum over the same issue.)
- How often does your child behave in a way that troubles you? (For example, does your child throw a tantrum once a week—or twice a day?)
- How severe or extreme does your child's behavior seem to you? (For example, if your child stamps his or her feet during a tantrum, this is less severe behavior than if he or she destroys something in your home during a tantrum.)
- How long does each episode of troubling behavior last? (For example, does the temper tantrum last for 10 minutes—or for an hour?)
- Where does your child's troubling behavior occur? (For example, has your child had discipline problems in school, in an after-school program, or with the coach of a sports team? Have any of your child's friends or the parents of those friends ever complained about your child's behavior?)



By answering these questions, you will be able to assist the health service providers as they try to understand your child's behavior. If your child needs treatment, the treatment plan will be designed to address his or her specific needs—and since you are the one who knows your child best, your input will be invaluable. Some parents may find it difficult to speak up, but it is important to be an active participant whenever someone is creating a treatment plan for your child.

Who can help

1. A family member or trusted friend

When and/or why you should turn to a family member or friend

Many of us know somebody whose child has needed help because he or she was behaving in a troubling way. When this person is a family member or friend, you may feel more comfortable discussing the problem with him or her—and it will probably be helpful to sit down and learn about what happened in that person's situation. You will probably feel better and less alone once you talk about the problem with someone who has had to deal with something similar. It is reassuring to know that other parents have also had to figure out problems like this—and it might be a relief for you to share your concerns with someone who is sympathetic.

How the family member or friend might help

If the family member or friend has gone through something similar to the problem you are facing, he or she will probably have some good advice for you. That person may also know your child (and you) well enough to make some

Advocacy Tip

If you don't know any other parents whose situations are like yours, consider joining an online parent discussion group (see our Resource list for more information).

helpful observations about your child's behavior. You might also be able to get some good ideas about where to look for help and what to expect during the process. If your family member or friend has found a health care provider that he or she likes, you might want to consider seeking help from the same provider. In almost every case, your family member or friend will also be a strong source of support for you as you begin trying to help your child.

What questions to ask

Consider whether it might be helpful for you to ask your family member or friend one or more of the following questions:

- What made you decide that your child might need help?
- Where did you go first? (Your child's school? The doctor?)
- How did you choose a doctor or therapist for your child?
- What kind of treatment has your child had, and has it worked?
- Where can I go to talk about my own feelings and concerns?

2. Your child's pediatrician

When and/or why you should turn to a pediatrician

Your child's pediatrician is someone you can turn to with any questions about your child's health or behavior. Because the pediatrician is the person who knows the most about your child's health history, he or she has the knowledge and resources to help you try and determine whether your child's behavior is

the result of a medical condition or a mental health illness. Even more importantly, you may feel comfortable discussing your child’s behavior with the family pediatrician—even if you don’t feel comfortable discussing the problem with anyone else. the result of a medical condition or a mental health illness. Even more importantly, you may feel comfortable discussing your child’s behavior with the family pediatrician—even if you don’t feel comfortable discussing the problem with anyone else.

How the pediatrician might help

The pediatrician will listen to your concerns, and write notes about the problem in your child’s medical record (this is called “taking a history”).

He or she also has access to several different screening tools that can help identify developmental, mental health, and substance abuse issues. The screening process is quick, simple, and also voluntary—you can choose whether or not to have your child screened. If the screening shows that your child has some problematic issues, the pediatrician may refer your child to a mental health professional for further evaluation.

In general, if the pediatrician believes that your child might benefit from mental health services, he or she will probably give you a list of health care professionals and health care service centers. Most pediatricians will recommend that you call several different providers on this list. You are more

Advocacy Tip

When speaking with your child’s pediatrician or any other medical professional, be sure that you don’t minimize your concerns and/or downplay your child’s symptoms.

likely to get the services your child needs if you make several phone calls instead of just one. The pediatrician may also recommend that you speak with someone at your child's school. (The services provided by schools and health care centers are discussed in later sections of this chapter.)

In some cases, the pediatrician may want to consult directly with a child psychiatrist, particularly if the pediatrician believes your child may be in crisis. The state has recently established a resource for pediatricians—the Massachusetts Child Psychiatry Access Project (MCPAP)—which enables pediatricians to get a very quick telephone response from a child psychiatrist (usually within 30 minutes) and recommendations for treatment.

If the pediatrician believes your child is a danger to himself or herself, or to other people, then the situation is considered an emergency and the pediatrician will probably try to get immediate help for your child. The pediatrician may send you and your child to the emergency room of a local hospital or may locate an emergency services team that will evaluate your child at the pediatrician's office. In either case, your child's mental health will probably be evaluated by a social worker.

After evaluating your child and speaking with you about your child's behavior, the social worker will make recommendations for your child's treatment. These recommendations may include intensive mental health services and/or hospitalization. Keep in

Advocacy Tip

Pediatricians have access to mental health experts who can help address your child's symptoms. Ask your child's pediatrician to arrange a consultation or call MCPAP if possible.

mind that the emergency room doctor—if he or she believes that your child is a danger to self or others—has the power to hospitalize your child without your consent.

What questions to ask

Consider whether it might be helpful for you to ask your child’s pediatrician one or more of the following questions:

- Can you give me a list of mental health service providers in my area?
- What do you recommend I do for my child at this point?
- Have you been trained to diagnose or treat mental health problems?
- Should I get a second opinion?
- What have you recommended for other parents in my situation?
- How do I keep you involved in my child’s treatment?

3. Your child’s school teachers, administrators, or health care staff

When and/or why you should turn to your child’s school

Advocacy Tip

It is important to pay attention to your child’s troubling behavior at home, even if he or she has no problems at school. Troubling behavior usually shows up at home first.

Your child’s school can be a very good source of information and support. If you have noticed something in your child’s behavior that is troubling, it is a good idea to contact the school to find out how your child is behaving at school. You may also want to find out if your child’s schoolwork is suffering. Because your child spends much of his or her time at school, the information you can get from people at the school might be very important and sometimes even reassuring.

Even if you have not noticed a problem with your child at home, the school may contact you because someone has noticed a problem at school. If this happens, it is important to take the school's observations seriously. Your child may behave differently at school than at home. Also, you may have grown so accustomed to your child's behaviors that you may be overlooking a serious problem. Try not to feel panicked or insulted if the school calls you, because this is an opportunity to work with the school on your child's behalf.

How your child's school might help

Advocacy Tip

You may need to be persistent with your child's school. In general, schools resist providing mental health services and—unfortunately—may try to downplay a child's emotional problems.

The teachers, administrators, and health care staff at your child's school can provide you with valuable information about how your child behaves at school and about his or her academic performance. With this information, you will be able to develop a more complete understanding of your child's behavior.

Your child's school can also put together an informal team of teachers and specialists who will observe your child's behavior in the classroom. This team can then work with your child's teachers to make changes in the classroom that will help your child improve his or her behavior. Some strategies that help your child in the classroom may also help your child at home.

The school's mental health specialist—usually a social worker, therapist, or psychologist who works part-time or full-time with the school—can provide your child with short-term individual counseling. The mental health specialist may also want to meet with you to discuss your child's situation.

Special education services are available at your child's school for children with mental health problems and/or learning disabilities. If you request a formal evaluation from the school (or if a teacher, administrator, or health care professional requests one), the school is required to conduct a complete assessment to see if your child is eligible for special education services. This evaluation will become part of your child's school record. Getting special education services for your child can often be a complex process. Please see Chapter 5 of this Guide for more information about services that are provided in schools.

What questions to ask

Consider whether it might be helpful for you to ask your child's teacher, school administrator, or school health care specialist one or more of the following questions:

- Who works with the school to provide mental health services to the students?
- How do we develop an education plan for my child?
- How have you worked with other children who behave like my child?
- How can I stay involved in my child's education plan?
- How often will you update me on my child's progress?

4. A psychiatrist, psychologist, or other mental health professional

When and/or why you should turn to a mental health professional

Many parents are reluctant to contact a mental health professional such as a psychiatrist or a psychologist. Some parents worry about what other people will think about them or their child. Other parents worry that they will have difficulty

understanding the mental health professional's recommendations. Many also worry that they will lose control over their child's treatment and/or that the treatment will be very expensive.

However, a mental health professional is the person who is most qualified to help you if your child has a mental health problem. For example, your child's pediatrician may recommend that your child visit with a mental health professional. You may also get recommendations from family members or close friends. It is important to know that you can contact a mental health professional directly when seeking help for your child.

If your child has undergone a screening process at his or her daycare center, school, or pediatrician's office, the screening may suggest that he or she should meet with a mental health professional. You may receive a referral to a specific specialist.

If you have medical insurance, the mental health services that are available to your child will depend on what is covered by the insurance and/or what services you can afford to pay for on your own. Please see Chapter 3 of this guide for more information about paying for your child's care.

It is helpful to know that psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and therapists also work through schools and other agencies to help children get the care they need. You may find that your child is eligible to receive services from a mental health professional at school.

Advocacy Tip

If you are unable to get services for your child on your first try, don't give up! Keep knocking on doors!

How a mental health professional might help

Mental health professionals are the experts on mental health, and they are trained to provide many different kinds of care. If your child is brought to an emergency room at the hospital because of an emotional problem, he or she will be evaluated by a mental health professional. Mental health professionals also provide services in many non-emergency situations.

For example, mental health professionals usually provide “talk therapy,” which means they talk with your child one-on-one about his or her problems and try to help your child improve his or her behavior and/or mood. Sometimes, talk therapy also works for groups of children. Mental health professionals also provide other services for children, such as behavioral therapy and play therapy.

Therapy for children has become more common in recent years, and most families are willing to give it a try. However, many parents find it hard to accept the idea that their child might need more intensive treatment, such as medication or hospitalization. Keep in mind that your child’s best interests need to come first. Mental health professionals provide a wide range of services, and you will want to consider as many options as possible, even if some of them make you feel uncomfortable.

If your child’s emotional condition can be improved by medication, a mental health professional such as a psychiatrist or clinical nurse specialist can prescribe the medication. Sometimes, you will find that medication is suggested for your child early on dur-

Advocacy Tip

Medication raises many issues. Make sure you understand everything about your child’s medication—and make sure your child continues to take the proper dose.

ing treatment. It is always a good idea to ask your child's mental health professional about other treatment options that might be helpful.

If your child's emotional condition is only moderately severe, a mental health professional will work with your child while he or she continues living at home. This is called "outpatient treatment." In this case, you may find it fairly easy to stay involved with decisions about your child's treatment.

Please note that if your child is covered by MassHealth, he or she is eligible for screening and (if warranted) an evaluation paid for by Medicaid. If he or she is determined to have a "serious emotional disturbance" (SED), the state must put together a treatment team and develop a treatment plan for your child. The treatment plan will emphasize in-home and community-based services as much as possible.

However, in some cases, he or she may need to live for a while in a hospital or a residence for children or adolescents with mental health disorders. This is called "inpatient treatment" or "residential care." In this case, it may be more difficult for you to stay involved with decisions about your child's treatment. However, the mental health professionals providing treatment for your child should be in contact with you on a regular basis. You will have a better chance of staying involved with your child's treatment if you actively seek information and answers from these professionals.

Advocacy Tip

Before signing any consent forms for your child's treatment, be sure to ask questions, get the facts, and know the pros and cons. Be particularly careful when medication is involved.

What questions to ask

Consider whether it might be helpful for you to ask the mental health professional one or more of the following questions:

- What is your specific background and training in child mental health?
- Have you treated children with problems similar to my child's problem?
- What are my child's treatment options?
- Which option do you recommend, and why?
- How long will it take for my child's mood or behavior to improve?
- How can I stay involved with my child's treatment?

You may also want to ask yourself the following questions:

- Has this mental health professional explained everything to me in a way that helps me understand my child's situation?
- Am I comfortable with this mental health professional?
- Does this mental health professional seem genuinely concerned and interested?

Remember that there are many different kinds of mental health professionals, and some of them are able to provide services that others cannot provide. For example, if your child needs medication, he or she will need to get treatment from a mental health professional who is able to prescribe the medication.

Depending on what kind of care your child needs, it is important to try and figure out if the mental health professional is a good match with your child.

5. A community health center, youth agency, or social services agency

When and/or why you should turn to a community agency

In most cases, parents turn to a community agency because someone has referred them to that agency. If your community has a health center, it may offer services that can help your child. Your child's pediatrician or school may also suggest that you explore other local agencies to see what services are available there.

Often, a parent finds a community agency helpful because it offers programs and services that are designed to meet the particular needs of the community and the community's children. The programs and services for children may be woven into the community in a way that helps build connections between the families in that community. Also, community agencies are sometimes able to offer specialized services that address your child's specific emotional needs. Many community agencies provide services like these by working together with hospitals and public agencies such as the Department of Mental Health and the Department of Children and Families.

Different kinds of community agencies provide different kinds of services and programs. An "activity agency" like the YMCA or a Boys and Girls Club usually organizes after-school programs for children and teenagers in the community.

Advocacy Tip

Some churches, synagogues, and other faith-based organizations have special needs classes which may provide support for children with behavioral or emotional issues.

If you are concerned about your child’s behavior and you feel that he or she needs to be more active, you might send your child to such an agency. Organized physical activities can often help children develop friendships and can contribute to your child’s physical and emotional health.

Your local faith-based organizations may also provide after-school programs and/or other services for children in the community. Again, programs like these can improve your child’s general health and well-being.

However, if your child has a more serious mental health condition, an activity agency or faith-based organization is probably not equipped to deal with it. In this case, you may want to find out whether your community has a local mental health and/or social services provider—such as the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (MSPCC)—that is better equipped to address a more troubling mental health problem. However, if your child has a more serious mental health condition, an activity agency or faith-based organization is probably not equipped to deal with it. In this case, you may want to find out whether your community has a local mental health and/or social services provider—such as the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (MSPCC)—that is better equipped to address a more troubling mental health problem.

How a community agency might help

Most community agencies provide the same range of services your child might receive from a private mental health professional, but at a lower cost. Many community agencies (including faith-based organizations) also organize sup-

port services for the families in the community. For example, the MSPCC has daycare and after-school programs, programs to educate and support parents, and programs to protect against child abuse or neglect, as well as mental health counseling. Some agencies provide individual and group therapy, medication therapy, and mental health testing services. Unlike mental health professionals who work in private practice, community agencies are often willing to provide services in a family's home.

What questions to ask

Consider whether it might be helpful for you to ask the community agency staff member one or more of the following questions:

- What kind of services can your agency provide for my child?
- Does my family need to meet certain eligibility requirements to qualify for services?
- Who provides mental health services through this agency, and what kind of training does he or she have?
- Does my child need services beyond the services that you can provide?

6. A hospital emergency department

When and/or why you should turn to an emergency department

If you are very worried about your child's emotional condition, and if you don't have easy access to a therapist's services, you may want to bring your child to a hospital emergency department for immediate evaluation. Some parents feel that they should wait until their child behaves in a seriously desperate way

Advocacy Tip

As a parent, you have the right to stay with your child in the emergency room—and it's always best if you stay.

before bringing him or her to an emergency department. However, you know your child well enough to know if he or she is behaving in a disturbing way, and you may need to trust your instincts.

If it is very clear that your child is having a severe emotional crisis, do not hesitate to bring him or her to the emergency department. Some children who are having a severe emotional crisis may behave violently and seem to be out of control, while others may seem completely paralyzed by serious depression. It is particularly important to bring your child to a hospital if he or she is threatening to harm other people, harm himself or herself, and/or commit suicide.

You can drive your child to the hospital yourself, call for a taxi that will take you there, have a friend or family member take you there or go along with you, or even call 911 if you believe your child needs to be transported in an ambulance with professional medical assistance. Try and choose the transportation option that makes the most sense in terms of your child's safety and your own safety.

Your community may have a local emergency services team (such as the Boston Emergency Services Team—or BEST Team—in Boston) that you can call. These teams are generally trained to provide emergency services including transportation to a hospital emergency department if necessary.

How an emergency department might help

When you first arrive at the hospital, your child will be given a medical exam and a health care professional (such as an emergency department nurse) will ask you for information about your child's condition and situation. Your child will also be examined by a mental health specialist. In most cases, this specialist will

talk with you and your child separately, then bring the family together to discuss recommendations for treatment.

If your child is in a crisis and/or may cause harm to himself or herself or others, the specialist may tell you that your child needs to be admitted to the hospital as an inpatient. If your child is not in a severe crisis, the mental health specialist may recommend that your child see a therapist. Other treatment recommendations include outpatient mental health services and/or intensive home-based services.

In each of these situations, you should expect the mental health specialist to explain everything to you clearly and help you understand your child's options. The emergency department staff should also help you plan the next steps for your child's treatment. In fact, this may be the most important part of an emergency visit. Be sure to work with the mental health specialist to plan what will happen when your child is released from the emergency department.

What questions to ask

Consider whether it might be helpful for you to ask the emergency department staff member or mental health specialist one or more of the following questions:

- Is my child stabilized?
- What specific treatment plan would you recommend for my child?
- Why are you recommending this particular treatment plan?
How will it help my child?
- What other treatments did you consider?

- If my child needs to be hospitalized, how long will he or she stay in the hospital?
- Can I bring things for my child, like games or clothes or snacks?
- Can you help me figure out whether the services you recommend are covered by my insurance plan?

A special note about consent forms

In an emergency department setting, parents are often asked to sign forms consenting to treatment or the release of information. Although it is important to maintain an open line of communication between the hospital and your child's school, you will need to be very aware of what information is flowing back and forth. In order to maintain your child's privacy as much as possible, you will want to try and control the information exchange by only consenting to the release of certain information. Take care not to sign any "blanket" consent forms that place no limitations on the release of information.

7. The police and the juvenile (criminal) justice system

When and/or why the police may get involved

If your child is charged with committing a crime, he or she will be taken into custody by the police. In very rare cases, the police may be called in by a parent or family member who has been harmed or has reason to believe that he or she is in danger of being harmed by the child.

Advocacy Tip

More and more police departments are teaching their officers about child mental illness. Try and find out how prepared your local department is—but only call the police if you have no other options.

If your child is prosecuted for a crime, he or she will go through proceedings in the juvenile justice system. Only children who are involved with this system can receive services from the Department of Youth Services (DYS), which provides some limited mental health services. DYS can get involved if your child is being held on bail and is waiting for a trial or if he or she has been committed to DYS by the court. The court can only commit a child to DYS if he or she has been charged with having committed a crime while between the ages of seven and 16, and he or she pleads guilty to the criminal charge, is found guilty after a trial, or violates the terms and conditions of probation.

If your child is in trouble with the law and if you believe this has happened because he or she has a mental health disorder, you may want to advocate for mental health treatment while your child is being detained and/or instead of imprisonment.

However, the juvenile justice system and DYS are primarily focused on dealing with children who have been charged with or convicted of crimes—not children who have mental health conditions. If you are aware that your child might get into trouble with the law, it is important to try and get services for your child that might help keep him or her out of police custody. The juvenile justice system and DYS are absolutely the “last resort” in terms of mental health services and should be avoided if possible.

How the police or DYS might help

If a judge has placed your child in temporary DYS custody (detention), your child will be seen by a social worker or other mental health professional. If

DYS is familiar with your child and knows that he or she has a severe mental health problem, a higher-level mental health professional may be called in to help. DYS offers additional mental health services for children who have been committed to DYS—but DYS commitment is generally not something that you would want for your child.

It is possible that DYS will make an effort to get other agencies—such as the Department of Mental Health or the Department of Children and Families (DCF; formerly known as Department of Social Services or DSS)—involved with your child’s case if those agencies provide services that may help your child. Unfortunately, other agencies sometimes try to avoid working with children who have been detained by DYS because they think DYS cases are too complicated.

The DYS has two residential facilities for children with mental health problems, one for boys and one for girls. These facilities are small and only accept children who have been committed to DYS custody and are in crisis.

Generally, if your child is in DYS custody, you will have little or no day-to-day control over what happens or what services your child receives. However, if you make an effort to stay involved, you should be able to have some input in the process. For example, parents continue to have certain medical decision-making powers, and you may participate in monthly treatment meetings and/or other team meetings.

Advocacy Tip

Very few children get appropriate mental health treatment while in DYS custody. The Resource list in this Guide has some legal and clinical advocates who might be able to help.

Advocacy Tip

If your child has a serious mental illness, he or she may receive services from several different agencies. Always ask an agency about finding someone to help coordinate your child's care.

A special note about CHINS

If someone—your child's teacher, for example, or a police officer—suggests that you might want to file a CHINS (Child in Need of Services) petition to get services from DCF for your child, you should be extremely cautious. This is a time to think hard about the situation before acting. If you file a CHINS petition, you will be taking your child to court and getting him or her involved with the court system, which could have a very negative effect on the relationship you have with your child. It could also result in your losing the right to make decisions about what happens and/or losing legal custody of your child. In addition, it is difficult to predict what kind of services the court or DCF will decide are best for your child.

Be sure to get as much information as you can from an attorney or advocate if you are considering filing a CHINS petition, and try to avoid filing a CHINS petition unless it is the last and only option for your child. (For additional information about CHINS petitions, please see Chapter 6 of this Guide.)

What questions to ask

Consider whether it might be helpful for you to ask the DYS staff member—particularly your child's caseworker or the head of the unit—one or more of the following questions:

- Why is my child being detained by DYS?
- What services will you provide my child in detention?
- (If you believe your child may be in crisis and/or suicidal:) How can I have my child transferred to a hospital?

**Summary
and things
to remember**

You have now been introduced to a number of different ways to seek mental health services for your child (*please see the chart on page 51*). Next, you will need to think about how to pay for these services. Schools provide some services for free, but mental health services in general can be expensive, especially if you have little or no health insurance. Chapter 3 will help you begin to learn more about health insurance and payment options, and how they may determine what kind of services are most easily available to you and your child.

As you go forward, it is important to remember that if your child has a mental health illness, you can expect that a variety of people will work together as a team to help your child. For example, you might first make contact with your child's pediatrician instead of your child's school, because you feel more comfortable with that approach. Even so, it is likely that the pediatrician and the school will end up working together to help your child.

This team approach allows the people working with you and your child to collect and discuss the widest possible variety of important information. This approach is also a way of providing your child with as many services as possible—within an agency, in his or her school, and/or at home. It is important that you work hard to keep people interested in and involved with your child's situation.

Seeking help

| Your child's situation | When to get help | Where to get help |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Mild to moderate change in behavior■ You are worried but not alarmed | Soon (a routine assessment) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Pediatrician■ Mental health professional■ School■ Family/Friend■ Community agency |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Major change in behavior■ Child seems unable to function without help■ You feel unable to cope or help | 48–72 hours (urgent) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Pediatrician■ Mental health professional■ School |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Severe, out-of-control behavior■ Child may be a threat to self or others■ You are frightened | Immediately (emergency) | <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Hospital emergency department■ Police |

