

# Answers to Your Questions About Getting Help For Children with Mental Health Concerns

## What are mental health concerns?

Mental health concerns can include both emotional problems and behavioural problems. Emotional problems may include concerns about mood (usually sadness) or concerns about anxiety. Behavioural problems can include concerns with anger and violence, as well as difficulties paying attention.

All children and youth may experience brief problems with some or all of these, but when the problem starts to interfere with school, family, or everyday living, it may be time to seek help.



## Where do I start if I think my child or youth is having difficulties?

A good place to begin is with your child or youth's doctor. Many physical illnesses can mimic the symptoms of mental illness. A physical exam can help to rule out certain illnesses. A diagnosis may come from your child's doctor or from an expert in child mental health problems, such as a child psychiatrist or child psychologist. Children's mental health disorders can be very difficult to diagnose. The symptoms of a disorder in children are often different from the symptoms experienced by adults. It is important that your child receive an accurate diagnosis, especially before considering medication.

You can help your child's or youth's doctor or specialist make the right diagnosis by writing down:

- Things your child or youth has difficulty with
- The times of the day that your child or youth is most affected
- Settings that are the most difficult
- Events or circumstances that led up to your child or youth experiencing difficulty
- Things you have done when your child or youth is having difficulty

## Where should parents look when searching for a mental health professional?

Mental health services are available in Ontario by contacting Children's Mental Health Ontario ([www.kidsmentalhealth.ca](http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca)) for a list of your local accredited<sup>1</sup> mental health service provider(s), or the local area office of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services ([www.gov.on.ca/mcys](http://www.gov.on.ca/mcys)). Telephone numbers are in the blue pages of the phonebook.

Your first contact call to a child and youth mental health centre will usually be answered by an intake worker. In some regions, your call will be answered by a central intake service. They will collect information about you and your child or youth's problem. They will then provide you with information and/or connect you with an appropriate service close to home. Anyone can make this call – young people themselves, parents, guardians or others directly involved in the child's life.

If your child or youth's situation becomes worse, you should share this information with your family doctor and any other places you are seeking help. Demand for help is often greater than the services available, and you may be placed on a waiting list. Changes in your situation may change how long you have to wait for services.

In addition to government-funded services, private psychologists can provide mental health services. Private services are paid out of your own pocket, but may be covered by your extended health plan. You can find a private psychologist through your provincial psychological association. The Ontario Psychological Association is at <http://www.psych.on.ca/> or (416) 961-5552. Other provincial associations are listed at: <http://www.cpa.ca/public/> or (613) 237-2144.

1. Accreditation is a process that requires agencies to meet challenging standards that define high-quality services. It involves an extensive internal and external review at set intervals. For more information on Children's Mental Health Ontario accreditation see: [http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/become\\_member/accreditation\\_faqs.php](http://www.kidsmentalhealth.ca/become_member/accreditation_faqs.php)

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## What can I do while I'm waiting to see a specialist?

Educate yourself. Search the library or Internet for information on child and youth mental health. You can find good information at <http://knowledge.offordcentre.com/> and extensive lists of relevant books at [www.communityed.ca/booklists.cfm](http://www.communityed.ca/booklists.cfm).

Some mental health service providers have brief programs such as parent education groups or drop-in clinics. Ask about what is available to support you while you wait, and how to get immediate help if there is a crisis or emergency.

## What are some things my child's school can do to help while I am sorting out testing, services, etc. for my child?

Connecting with your child or youth's school is a good idea if he/she is struggling with mental health, behaviour, or learning problems. You should discuss your concerns, as well as his or her teachers' concerns. You need to learn more about what is happening with your child or youth in the school environment.

Sometimes, certain changes can be made to expectations for the child or youth at school while you sort out other supports. These may include reduced homework or altered start and finish times for school. There may need to be arrangements made for an alternate person or place the child can go to if they experience problems. Ask your school about testing to rule out a learning disability. There are also private agencies that provide this testing. Check the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario web site at <http://www.ldao.ca/> for more information.

Contact your school's principal or your child or youth's teacher and ask to meet with them and the school counsellor or social worker. Not all schools have counsellors or social workers available to them. Ask if your school district has a mental health worker. Call the student services office in your school district to ask about these workers.

## What if my child requires more intensive help, residential treatment or needs to be hospitalized?

Home-based services for families as well as day-treatment programs, where children and young people attend services part or most of the day, are available in many communities. For children and youth that require it, community-based residential treatment programs are available. Regional hospitals offer various youth psychiatric services, and each province in Canada has at least one facility that offers provincial in-patient psychiatric care for children under 16 years. Your local child and youth mental health service provider can tell you more about the programs available in your community.

## What can I do if I don't seem to be getting anywhere?

Most importantly, talk to your mental health service provider about your concerns and available options. Often it helps to bring together key people who can help develop a care plan and ensure all the concerns are addressed. Many communities have a formal or informal process to bring these people together to meet with you and help you find solutions. Your child and youth mental health centre or school should be able to arrange such a meeting. Here are some of the people who can help.

- Social worker – can assist in coordinating other services like in-home support
- Mental health clinician/therapist
- Community team leader for mental health
- Child/youth care worker
- Student support services
- Community services manager
- Teachers
- Advocate

Make a list or have someone help you to identify what your needs are before requesting a meeting. You may also want to bring a friend or support person to that meeting.



[www.CYMHIN.ca](http://www.CYMHIN.ca)

This document has been developed based on a similar document from **The FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health**, a BC parent-led advocacy and support organization. We wish to thank them for their ideas and inspiration, however any errors are the responsibility of the Child and Youth Mental Health Information Network (CYMHIN). CYMHIN is a collaboration between mental health organizations dedicated to developing and sharing high quality information about child and youth mental health problems for children, youth and their families.

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