# Hope on the Horizon

*A helpful how-to for parents and caregivers to protect and improve kids' mental health*

Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department
Healthy People in Healthy Communities

# Call or text for help

**National Suicide Lifeline**
Call 988.

**Pierce County Crisis Line**
Call (800) 576-7764.

**Crisis Text Line**
Text HEAL to 741741.

**National Alliance on Mental Health Helpline**
Text HELPLINE to 62640 or email helpline@nami.org.

**Teen Link**
Call (866) 833-6546.

**Trevor Project—LGBTQIA+ focus**
Call (212) 695-8650.

**Trans Lifeline—transgender focus**
Call (877) 565-8860.

**Call Blackline—BIPOC focus**
Call (800) 604-5841.

**Native and Strong Lifeline—Indigenous focus**
Call 988 and press 4.

# Many youth struggle with their mental health.

It can feel isolating when your child experiences trauma or mental health challenges, but you're not alone or helpless. In fact, you can be your child's best protection from poor mental health!

According to the 2023 Healthy Youth Survey, Washington 6th-graders who reported having no adult to turn to when depressed were nearly 5 times more likely to report having attempted suicide (23.3%) than those who reported having a trusted adult (5.1%).

### In this guide, you'll learn:

- Signs of emotional distress.
- How to talk with your child about mental health and suicide.
- Practices your family can use at home to regulate emotions and support mental wellness.
- Where to find resources that offer care and can support your child's health.

# Mental Health 101

## Mental health is health.

Behavioral health is key to your overall health. It includes how you think, feel, and act.

Your physical and mental health are affected by your environments, actions, and access to resources. Everyone struggles sometimes with physical and mental health. Some people develop conditions or illnesses that should be cared for by a medical professional.

## Pre-adolescent development

You probably know about the physical changes that come with puberty, but the way kids think and interact with the world also changes. When children become pre-teens, their brains grow to allow them to understand other people have thoughts, feelings, and opinions. They become very sensitive to how they are perceived.

There is also a shift in social order and awareness of gender roles and expectations. Pre-teens begin developing a self-identity and comparing themselves to others. They become more aware of their family members' feelings and opinions and may notice changes in your stress and emotional state that they did not before.

# Social media and mental health

Social media activity can lower self-esteem and increase anxiety around appearance and perception. It's also one of the primary ways young people connect with and support each other. When children begin using social media, help them make time to connect with peers and activities in person. Talk openly about what they hear and see.

When you decide your kids are ready for social media, encourage them to use it to create opportunities for social support, online companionship, and emotional intimacy that promote healthy socialization. During pre-adolescence, you should monitor their activity. That means ongoing review, discussion, and coaching around social media content. You may choose to increase their autonomy gradually as they get older and learn more about digital spaces. Balance monitoring with youth's appropriate needs for privacy.

Learn more at:

- **apa.org/monitor/2023/09/protecting-teens-on-social-media**
- **mhanational.org/youth-tech/online-behavior**
- **mhanational.org/back-to-school/social-media-and-youth-mental-health**

Find helpful resources about kids and social media at **tpchd.org/youthmentalhealth**

# Trauma, resilience, and you

A positive, supportive relationship with you will provide powerful protection against mental health concerns throughout your child's life. Growing that relationship early is important. This can be especially important with children who have adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs are any traumatic events that happen before a child turns 18, like:

- Experiencing or witnessing violence, abuse, or neglect (emotional, physical, or sexual).
- Death or suicide in the immediate family.
- Growing up in a household with:
  - Substance misuse.
  - Mental health concerns.
  - Loss of parent due to divorce, separation, or imprisonment.
  - Unstable access to housing or food.

### About generational trauma

Some people are also affected by generational trauma. It's passed down from your family and can affect the way you think and feel, how you interact with people, and even your genetics.

Generational trauma can lead to an increased risk of mental and physical health conditions. Thoughtful and empathetic parenting is an important step in breaking the cycle.

# ACEs

About 64% of adults in the United States experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE) as a child. Marginalized groups tend to have them more often because of historical, social, and environmental influences.

If your child experiences ACEs, it can be hard for the whole family. Positive childhood experiences (PCEs) are supportive events that benefit your child's long-term health. They can counteract ACEs' emotional and physical health effects as children grow.

**PCEs include:**

- Teachers or trusted adults who care.
- Opportunities to have fun.
- A predictable home routine.
- Feeling comfortable with yourself.
- A caregiver with whom you feel safe.
- Beliefs that provide comfort.
- Good friends and neighbors.
- Community traditions.
- A sense of belonging in school.
- Caring relationships with non-parent adults.

Create space for these experiences in your home and your relationship with your child! It can set them up for healthy, successful lives and improve their future parenting skills.

# What can I do?
# Prevent.
# Watch. Act.

# Prevent problems before they become serious.

You have the power to promote positive mental health for your child and prevent a crisis before it happens. You model mental healthcare yourself and encourage them to do the same when you:

- Learn new coping skills.
- Talk openly about your emotions.
- Practice self-care.
- Communicate in a healthy way.
- Ask for help when you need it.
- Practice gratitude.

It can be helpful to have frequent conversations about mental health. Include your own struggles when you have them. Show an active, non-judgmental interest in your child's emotional life. Ask questions like:

- How are you feeling?
- What are you struggling with?
- What do you think about the media you're consuming?
- How are your friendships impacting you?
- How does social media make you feel?

Encourage safe and stable relationships with supportive adults and friends.

# Grow and learn as a family.

Your family can work together to improve everyone's mental health! Websites like **actionsforhealthykids.org** and **mentalhealthcenterkids.com** offer great ideas for activities that connect your family and improve your child's well-being.

### Activities might include:

- Self-reflection.
- Gratitude.
- Family check-in.
- Family self-care plan.
- Journaling.
- Affirmations.
- Mindful breathing.
- Family book club.
- Making a safety plan together.

A predictable home life is important! Provide consistent meal and bedtimes and frequent family time. Make sure your kids do their chores and homework. Allow them to have input in family decisions when it makes sense.

Find resources that best fit your unique needs at **tpchd.org/youthmentalhealth**

Remember, you play a big role in all aspects of your child's health. Schedule regular checkups with their healthcare provider and bring up any health concerns you have—including mental health. You can also:

- Be attentive to how your child spends time online.
- Learn how to access crisis services in case you need them.
- Foster positive experiences as a family or neighborhood.
- Attend community events.
- Volunteer.
- Play games.
- Exercise together.
- Read or watch videos about mental health and discuss your reactions.
- Learn about and look for warning signs of distress and seek help if you see them.

## Watch as they develop.

Building a great relationship with your child gives you a front-row seat to see how they're doing.

**It's time to talk to your kids about their mental health when →**

- You've noticed something doesn't seem right but aren't sure why.
- Their behaviors seem different than others in their peer group.
- They begin to have problems at home, at school, or with friends.
- For more than 2 weeks, you notice they:
  - Feel sad, angry, worried, or numb most of the time.
  - Can't carry out daily activities or handle problems and stress.
  - Show extreme mood changes, including uncontrollable highs.
  - Avoid friends and social activities.
  - Have aches and pains without an apparent cause. Includes headaches, stomachaches, or painfully tight muscles.
  - Lose interest in favorite activities.
  - Sleep much more or much less than they did before.
  - Have frequent nightmares or wet the bed.
  - Have changes in school performance or attendance.
  - Go on extreme diets, perhaps including counting calories or weighing food.
  - Seem dazed, out of it, or like they're spacing out.
  - Seem to believe they are a failure or can't do anything right.
  - Cut, burn, or otherwise injure themself.
  - Struggle with bathing and grooming.
  - Use drugs or alcohol.
  - Have panic or anxiety attacks.

# Recognize panic attacks.

Panic or anxiety attacks are sudden episodes of anxiety that become physical. These scary attacks can happen to anyone, but they don't cause any lasting harm. Symptoms include:

- Feeling out of control.
- Fear of death or sense of impending doom.
- Pounding or racing heart.
- Sweating.
- Chills or trembling.
- Difficulty catching breath.
- Fast and shallow breathing.
- Weakness or dizziness.
- Tingly or numb hands.
- Chest pain—they may worry they're having a heart attack.
- Stomach pain or nausea.

If you see someone having a panic attack, find a safe place for them to sit. Remind them they're not in danger and the panic attack will end.

You can also model deep breaths and ask them to join you. It can be helpful to do a grounding exercise, like ask them to name something they can taste, smell, hear, feel, and see.

# Act quickly and empathetically.

When mental health concerns arise, you can help! Remind your child their feelings are real and common, mental health concerns are treatable, and they won't always feel like this.

Then, actively listen. Create a safe space for them to talk about their feelings. It's OK to ask questions, but make sure they know you're here to support and help them. Listen to their challenges with an open mind.

There's a good chance you'll need to seek help. You child's school offers mental health services and their healthcare provider may be able to assist. You can also seek help through services like Kids Mental Health Piece County or navigators like WISe Pierce County.

You can advocate for accommodations at school. Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction requires every public school in the state to offer alternate learning experiences (ALEs). That means some or all instruction is offered outside the regular classroom schedule.

This might be a good time to get familiar with your child's health insurance policies for mental health services. Washington State Healthcare Authority can help you find insurance if you don't have it. You can also visit **tpchd.org/youthmentalhealth** for tips on creating a crisis safety plan.

# Suicide warning signs

Four out of five teens who attempt suicide give clear warnings. A child or adolescent who is suicidal might:

- Talk, write, or draw about death or suicide—including making jokes.
- Drop verbal hints like “I won’t be around much longer” or “It’s hopeless.”
- Show an overwhelming sense of guilt, shame, or rejection.
- Put their affairs in order. For example, giving or throwing away favorite possessions.
- Show sudden cheerfulness after a period of depression.
- Engage in risky behaviors or show a lack of concern for their health, safety, or life.

# What to do if you think your child is suicidal.

If you think your child is suicidal, try not to panic. Let them know you care and want to help. Trust your instincts. If you think the situation may be serious, seek immediate help. If you have to, break a confidence to save a life.

Ask directly if they feel depressed or think about suicide or death. Speaking openly and honestly allows the child to confide in you and gives you a chance to express your concern. Listen to their thoughts and feelings in a caring and respectful manner.

Those resources this booklet mentions? Now is the time to use them. An appointment at a mental health clinic or with your school's mental health services can be a great step, but a crisis hotline can offer immediate help.

Whatever direction you choose, it's essential to seek expert advice from a mental health professional who has experience helping depressed children and teens.

Other key adults in your child's life need to know what's going on. That might include family, friends, and teachers. If you're not the child's parent or caregiver, inform them and recommend they seek professional help immediately.

You should also make sure to minimize access to means of self-harm. Lock away things like medications, firearms, alcohol, and knives and other sharp objects.

# Choose the right help for your child's crisis.

Once you determine if your child is an immediate danger to themself or others, make sure you or another adult supervises them at all times. Then, start with the right kind of help:

- **Warmline:** Confidential non-emergency line that provides a safe space to talk about feelings, get support, and find resources.
- **Hotline:** Offers immediate crisis intervention to prevent suicide or violence.
- **Mobile crisis team:** Can travel to help people who are in crisis.
- **Emergence room:** If you can't find immediate help elsewhere, you can always visit the emergency room for fast help during a mental health crisis.

From there, you'll find many kinds of services and treatments. They may be for a specific number of sessions or ongoing treatment.

Your counselor can offer different kinds of help, like:

- Talk therapy.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).
- Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT).
- Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR).
- Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT).
- Play therapy.
- Internal family systems therapy (IFS).

You can learn more about those therapies and more at:

psychologytoday.com/us/types-of-therapy

The setting for your child's therapy can vary. The therapist might suggest your child attend alone, in a group, or with you or your family.

Your therapist's approach can also vary. A psychologist can provide therapy but usually can't prescribe medication. A psychiatrist or psychiatric nurse practitioner (ARNP) can offer therapy and prescribe medication to treat mental health conditions.

Different medications can help with symptoms of most mental health conditions. Your child might need to try several different medications to find the right one.

While talk therapy and medication can be effective, some people benefit from holistic, cultural, and complementary options like:

- Art therapy.
- Music therapy.
- Animal-assisted therapy.
- Movement or dance therapy.
- Ancestral/cultural medicine.
- Outdoor or nature-based therapy.
- Spiritual/faith-based support.

# Crisis care

If your child experiences a mental health crisis that needs a higher level of support, mental health professionals have a few options. Often, this starts with the Pierce County Crisis Line team or an emergency room. They may refer you to services and supports or, if your child needs a higher level of care, a hospital.

**Inpatient programs:** This usually involves 3–7 days in a hospital with other youth and a 24/7 care team. The goal is to stabilize the young person enough that it's safe to go home and continue with other treatments.

**Intensive outpatient programs:** This is a day treatment program. The youth lives at home but receives 3–5 full treatment days a week. The goal is to prepare youth to return to their regular schedule with the skills to prevent another hospitalization.

**Residential treatment:** If your child needs inpatient-level care for a longer period, they might attend residential treatment. In these programs, youth live at a facility for weeks or months while working on stabilization and coping skills.

# My child needs help. Where should I start?

## In a medical emergency, call 911.

For quick help, try the crisis text line at **741741** or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **(800) 273-8255**. You can find many options specifically tailored to your family and needs. Visit **tpchd.org/youthmentalhealth** for a comprehensive list of local and national resources.

Kids from marginalized communities sometimes find general resources don't reflect their needs. They might find it helpful to seek help that's more relevant to their experience.

## BIPOC

Racism and other forms of oppression are a type of chronic traumatic stress. They can contribute to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health conditions.

The American medical system, including the mental health field, has a history of discrimination and colonization. Mistrust in this system may make you hesitant to seek care.

You can take advantage of improved emphasis on cultural competency, an increase in BIPOC mental health providers, and resources created specifically for these communities.

**Find the resources that best fit your unique needs at tpchd.org/youthmentalhealth**

# Sexuality and gender

LGBTQIA+ youth have higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide. This is not due to their sexuality or gender identity, but rather the way they are treated by their family, peers, and community. Negative news about the LGBTQIA+ community, disapproval at home, bullying, and a hostile political climate can create stress that leads to poor mental health. You can support your child:

- Affirm their identity.
- Use their chosen name and pronouns.
- Provide opportunities for them to engage with peers.
- Consume age-appropriate media with positive representations of LGBTQIA+ people.
- Seek care from a competent pediatrician.
- Advocate for their rights, needs, and happiness outside the home.
- Gender identity formation happens over several developmental stages, including the toddler, tween, and teen years. Talking about gender does not mean a child will develop a mental illness. Support your child: Affirm your love and care for them.
- Advocate for their needs and well-being in environments like school or church.

A good way to stay healthy is seeking healthcare and resources for your child whenever they are stressed, especially when the topics of gender dysphoria are present.

**Find the resources that best fit your unique needs at tpchd.org/youthmentalhealth**

# Disability

Living with a disability—whether developmental, learning, cognitive, physical, or mental—increases the chances you'll experience symptoms of mental illness. This can be due to the way you're treated, the stress of navigating the disability, or a physical cause.

If your child lives with a disability, their care includes mental wellness. A supportive care team and access to peers who share their experiences is important.

**Find the resources that best fit your unique needs at tpchd.org/youthmentalhealth**

# Local services

**Kids Mental Health Pierce County** *kidsmentalhealthpiercecounty.org*

**Washington Mental Health Referral Service for Children and Teens** *(833) 303-5437* | *Monday to Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. or complete an online request.*

**Comprehensive Life Resources** *comprehensiveliferesources.org*

**SeaMar** *(855) 289-4503* | *seamar.org/services-bh*

**Consejo Counseling** *(253) 414-7461* | *consejocounseling.org*

**Valley Cities** *Military* | *(206) 461-3222* | *valleycities.org/crisis-contact*

**HopeSparks** *(253) 565-4484* | *hopesparks.org*

**Pride Counseling NW** *LGBTQIA+, sliding scale* | *(253) 201-0203* | *pridecounselingnw.com*

**Greater Lakes Mental Health** *(253) 581-7020* | *glmhc.org*

**Catholic Community Services Family Behavioral Health** *(253) 759-9544* | *ccsww.org/services/family-behavioral-health*

**Behavior Bridges** *(253) 262-3409* | *behaviorbridges.com*

**Bridges Center for Grieving Children Support Groups (Mary Bridge)** *(253) 403-1966* | *marybridge.org/patients-visitors/patient-family-support-services/bridges-center-for-grieving-children*

**Eating Recovery Center** *Bellevue/Virtual* | *(425) 454-1010* | *eatingrecoverycenter.com/recovery-centers/bellevue*

**Charlie Health** *Virtual* | *(877) 604-7924* | *charliehealth.com*

**Child Advocacy Center's Child Sexual Abuse Non-Offending Caregiver Support Group** *(253) 403-1478* | *piercecac.org/resources/#support*

**A Common Voice Caregiver Support Services** *(253) 537-2145* | *acommonvoice.org/support-services*

**Washington Healthcare Authority Family Initiated Treatment** *(833) 303-5437* | *hca.wa.gov/free-or-low-cost-health-care/i-need-behavioral-health-support/family-initiated-treatment-fit*

**Life Transitions** *(253) 363-8853* | *lifetransitions2020.com*

**MultiCare Behavioral Health** *(253) 697-8400 | multicare.org/services/behavioral-health*

**Kwawachee Behavioral Health and Wellness** *Puyallup Tribal Health | (253) 593-0247 | puyalluptribalhealthauthority.com/services/behavioral-health*

**Catholic Community Services** *(206) 328-5696 | ccsww.org/services/family-behavioral-health*

**Project Access Northwest** *(206) 788-4204 | projectaccessnw.org/programs/pro-bono-counseling*

**Kids and Family Counseling** *(425) 505-1320 | kidsandfamilycounseling.com*

**Horses Guiding Humans** *(360) 339-6084 | horsesguidinghumans.com*

**Ted Brown Music Therapy Groups** *tbmoutreach.org/musictherapy*

**Game Time Tacoma** *thegametimeway.com*

**Innovative Change Makers** *innovativechangemakers.org*

**Communities in Schools Washington** *Lakewood, Tacoma, Puyallup, and Peninsula | (253) 248-1991 | ciswa.org*

**Office of Behavioral Health Advocacy** *(800) 366-3103 | obhadvocacy.org/*

**Family Youth System Partner Round Table** *hca.wa.gov/about-hca/programs-and-initiatives/behavioral-health-and-recovery/family-youth-system-partner-round-table-fysprt*

**Rebuilding Hope Sexual Assault Center Therapy Services** *(253) 597-6424 | rebuildinghope.org/*

**National Alliance on Mental Health Pierce County** *(253) 677- 6629 | namipierce.org | Peer support and education for friends and family of people with mental health diagnoses.*

**Triple P** *(253) 649-1500 | tpchd.org/triplep*

**Psychology Today** *psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/wa/pierce-county*

**Teenlink** *(866) 833-6546 | teenlink.org*

## School-based services

Some schools offer access to mental health counseling and other resources to their students. You can ask your school's counseling office about these options and other resources they provide.

## National Resources

**Mental Health America** *screening.mhanational.org/screening-tool | Articles and guides on a wide variety of mental health topics and mental health tests—including youth mental health tests for parents and youth that can help you identify struggles that should be discussed with your pediatrician or a mental health professional.*

**Child Mind Institute Guides** *childmind.org/guides | Guides for parents on any mental health diagnosis or behavioral concern and other child mental health topics, as well as a Symptom Checker for parents to identify struggles that should be discussed with your pediatrician or a mental health professional.*

**American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry** *aacap.org | Brief fact sheets on a wide variety of mental and behavioral health topics.*

**Youthline** *theyouthline.org/get-help | Peer-to-peer youth help, support, and crisis line that provides crisis support and referrals via call, text, and chat. The Youthline is answered by teen volunteers and young adult interns daily from 4–10 p.m. Pacific Time, and by adults at all other times.*

**Psychology Today** *psychologytoday.com/us/therapists/wa/pierce-county*

**Social Emotional Learning Parent Resources** *sites.google.com/mytusd.org/tusdselparentresources/home*

**SafeSpace Coping Tools** *safespace.vibrant.org/en/seeking-help*

**Have feedback about this guide?**

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