

When a Child Needs Hospital Care

No parent wants to think about hospitalizing a child for psychiatric treatment.

We tell ourselves that our child isn't *that* ill, or that hospital treatment represents a failure. Or we are fearful, because our image of an inpatient psychiatric unit comes through the distorted lens of horror movies and TV dramas.

Sometimes, when a child is perilously unstable or every other intervention has failed, hospital treatment is needed. Hospitalization can be the best way to provide safety and stabilize a suffering child, to conduct medical tests, or to change medications under expert supervision. A good pediatric psychiatric unit is a lot like a good pediatric medical unit—therapeutic and designed to be safe and comforting for kids.

As parents, we need the guidance of a trusted clinician in this decision, but we also need to trust ourselves. If a crisis feels like an emergency, it probably *is* an emergency. No one would fault a parent for rushing a child with acute stomach pain to the emergency room. Severe depression or mania can be life-threatening, just like appendicitis.

The best time to plan for hospitalization is before a crisis. It is hard to make good decisions or explore options in a moment of extreme stress.

Here are some ways to prepare BEFORE an emergency:

- Make a plan. Talk with your child's psychiatrist or the physician monitoring his or her care about what to do in a crisis. Get an emergency phone number to reach your child's doctor, and keep it where you can find it quickly.
- Find out if your child's doctor has hospital admitting privileges. A physician with admitting privileges can call ahead to admit your child, allowing you to avoid a long wait in an emergency room. If your doctor has admitting privileges, he or she also may be able to treat your child during a hospitalization.
- Ask your doctor which hospitals he or she would recommend, and which to avoid. Call your health insurer to find out which hospitals are covered under your policy.
- Call prospective hospitals to find out the age range of children that they treat. Ask if they allow a parent to stay with their child throughout the admission evaluation, until the child is assigned to a room. When can parents visit? How many beds are on the pediatric unit, and how does staff monitor young patients? Does the hospital have instructors who can help your child keep up with schoolwork as he or she recovers?
- Plan where to emergency get help if you fear that your child, you or someone else could get hurt. Many communities offer crisis intervention services,

staffed by police and/or social workers specially trained to de-escalate a psychiatric emergency. Alert your police or crisis intervention service that a child with mental health needs lives at your address, so that in an emergency, responders will be aware that your child has special needs.

- Ask a friend or relative if they will shelter your other children in an emergency.

Hospitalization is a painful decision, but planning ahead can make it less scary and stressful for everyone.

We had no plan and were unable to reach our daughter's psychiatrist during a manic crisis when our daughter was 15. We feared that someone would get hurt, and so we took our very frightened and angry child to an emergency room. Several months later, she was very depressed and asked to be hospitalized. In-patient treatment was no longer a frightening unknown. It was a safe haven.