



Supporting Children with Mental Health and Behavioral Needs in Special Education: Crisis Plans

Children and youth with mental health needs may struggle to manage their emotions and regulate their behavior when they are distressed. These experiences may escalate into a crisis if adults do not have the necessary knowledge and the skills to lessen the intensity of the situation.

What is a crisis for a child with mental health needs?

A crisis for a child with mental health needs may occur when they are unable to problem solve or cope with a situation and feel panic, hopelessness and confusion. Those feelings can then lead to a dramatic change in mood or behavior.

Not all children or youth with mental health needs respond to events the same way. One child might be deeply affected while another child might experience little to no ill effect. The reactions of the child or youth during that time can also impact their safety or the safety of others. For those reasons, crisis level behaviors should be individually determined by those who know the child well, including the parent or caregiver.

What is a crisis plan?

A crisis plan is a written document **created for use when a student is at risk of harming themselves or others or is having extreme behavior that is unsafe**. Some schools also call them safety plans. The plan should be developed by the Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, based on the most recent evaluation information including a Functional Behavioral Assessment and may be part of a Positive Behavior Intervention Plan (see links on page 2 for more information).

What should be included in a crisis plan?

How staff respond to crisis situations is important. A child or youth in crisis is relying on adults to make decisions and to support them. The crisis plan should be a guide for how to neutralize the stress, de-escalate the child, and help them feel safe. A crisis plan should include clear steps school staff will take to support the child during a crisis, including:

- Strategies to use during the crisis to de-escalate and positively support the child
- What to do or not do during a crisis
- Who staff should contact for assistance, and when
- Strategies for working with the child after the crisis is over
- When the parent(s) should be notified

In cases where the crisis behavior is viewed as a violation of the school's discipline policy, the IEP team should discuss if those behaviors may trigger a disciplinary action and how that should be handled. This information should also be included in the written crisis plan.

Who should be involved in writing a crisis plan?

Parents are an integral part of the IEP team and play an important role in creating an effective crisis plan. They have important information to share about what may trigger challenging behaviors, what their child looks like when their behavior is escalating, and specific strategies that have effectively calmed their child in the past.

The child or youth will also likely have insights for the IEP team to consider, including what causes them distress and situations that make it difficult to manage their behaviors. If they are not able to directly share this information, parents or a trusted staff member may bring the information to the IEP team.

The IEP team should also include someone who has expert knowledge about the child's behavior and its relationship to their mental health needs. Input from other mental health providers who work with the child or youth can also be helpful for IEP teams to consider.

For a crisis plan to be most effective, schools and families need to collaborate and ensure that it is implemented with consistency and reviewed regularly by the IEP team.

Additional PACER resources:

- “What is a Functional Behavioral Assessment?” [PACER.org/parent/php/php-c215a.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/parent/php/php-c215a.pdf)
- “Supporting Children with a Mental Health and Behavioral Needs in Special Education: Positive Behavior Intervention Plans” [PACER.org/parent/php/PHP-c291a.pdf](https://www.pacer.org/parent/php/PHP-c291a.pdf)