

Working with Children in Crisis

Types of Situations That Can Cause a Crisis

Change can be hard for children and youth in foster care as well as for their families and caregivers leading to crisis situations. Due to a lack of available coping skills in the moment, a crisis happens when individuals are unable to cope during a stressful event, causing distress.

The Washington State Department of Social and Health Services outline five different types of situations that can lead to a crisis for children and youth in foster care.

- **Family situations.** Upheaval and instability in the home can lead to a crisis for a child or youth, such as a child abuse investigation, intimate partner violence or domestic violence or a family member with a chronic illness.
- **Economic situations.** A sudden loss of money or chronic money issues can increase the chances of a crisis, such as the loss of employment, an eviction or a lack of food.
- **Community situations.** The community where a child or youth lives can negatively impact their lives and plunge them into crisis, with situations such as neighborhood violence, bullying, improper housing or a lack of community resources.
- **Significant life events.** Many of these events, such as a marriage, the birth of a child or a job promotion, can be viewed as positive. But a child or youth may not be able to cope with the change. Other significant life changes include the death of a loved one, a child enrolling in school or a grown child leaving home.
- **Natural elements.** Children and youth can be negatively affected by natural elements, such as from disasters like floods, hurricanes, fires and earthquakes; prolonged periods of high heat and humidity; and gloomy or extreme cold weather.

How Children and Youth May React in a Crisis

Children and youth have varied reactions to crisis events. But most children will show some sort of distress. Their reactions can depend on their age, resiliency skills and available social supports. Children may act out, withdraw, have separation anxiety or become irritable (Mercy Corps).

Children may also have two types of stronger reactions to crisis that require more immediate action. A lethal reaction involves suicidal or homicidal ideation, gesture or plan. In one study, children and youth in foster care were almost three times more likely to have considered suicide and almost four times more likely to have attempted suicide than those who had never been in foster care.ⁱ A dangerous reaction involves substance use, aggressive acts or risky behavior (Rabu 2017).

What You Can Do

Child trauma researcher Dr. Bruce Perry notes that when someone is in a crisis, they're unable to orient to space and time. Helping a child in crisis to become calmer is the first step to assisting them in a crisis. Perry suggests using an intervention that involves the "6 R's." The interventions you use must be:

- **Relational.** Safe.
- **Relevant.** Developmentally matched to the individual.
- **Repetitive.** Patterned.
- **Rewarding.** Pleasurable.
- **Rhythmic.** Resonant with neural patterns.
- **Respectful.** Considers the child, family and culture.

Some examples of 6 Rs' activities include listening to soothing music, drumming, jumping rope and holding a pillow or stuffed animal. Other activities with music, movement and touch can also help.

After you're able to help the child become calm, you can use Roberts' Seven-Stage Crisis Intervention Model (2005) which can help you conduct a crisis assessment and action plan without further upset.

1. **Plan and conduct a crisis assessment.** This quick yet thorough assessment must determine if the child is in danger, including to themselves or others.
2. **Establish rapport and quickly establish a relationship.** Maintain good eye contact, stay positive and remain non-judgmental.
3. **Identify major problems.** Find out what's going on in the child's life that led to the crisis.
4. **Help the child explore their feelings and emotions.** Encourage the child to vent while actively listening and showing empathy and warmth.
5. **Generate and explore alternatives.** This can look like offering temporary psychiatric hospitalization, help with substance abuse or finding temporary housing.
6. **Create an action plan.** For children and youth, work them and their families. They will need support to follow through on the action plan as they may not be in the best psychological and cognitive states.
7. **Have a follow-up plan and agreement.** To ensure the crisis is resolved, follow up and re-assess the situation and provide referrals and supports.

Resources

6 Rs: The Amazing Behavioral Help for When Talking Doesn't Work. (2018). Retrieved from Lakeside website: <https://lakesidelink.com/blog/brain-states-2/6-rs-amazing-behavioral-help-talking-doesnt-work/>

After a Crisis: Helping Young Children Heal. Retrieved from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network website: <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/after-crisis-helping-young-children-heal>

Crisis Intervention in Child Abuse and Neglect – Child Welfare Information Gateway. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/crisis/>

Helping children through crisis: 10 tips for parents and caregivers. Retrieved from Mercy Corps website: <https://www.mercycorps.org/helping-children-through-crisis-10-tips-parents-and-caregivers>

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Sabu, R. (2017). *Principles of Crisis Intervention in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. Retrieved from https://www.ihs.gov/sites/telebehavioral/themes/responsive2017/display_objects/documents/slides/nationalchildandadolescent/crisisintervention0217.pdf

Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. Crisis Intervention. Retrieved from <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/book/export/html/490>

Foster Care Providers: Helping Youth at Risk for Suicide: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-suicide-prevention/increased-risk-groups>

ⁱ Youth Topics: Suicide Prevention: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-suicide-prevention/increased-risk-groups>