Mental health care in Norway

Psykisk helsehjelp/Mental health care (Barn)

A guide for parents to services available to children with mental health problems
What do I do when my child is not ok?
A guide to services for parents of children with mental health problems

Mental health problems affect many people

Good mental health is important for the well-being and development of children. The foundation for psychological health has already been laid during the child’s first year of life. Mental health problems can affect almost anyone, and approximately half of Norway’s population will suffer from some form of emotional problem at some point in their lives. Some people have a genetic predisposition and can become ill in the absence of any particular triggering event; at other times, crises such as death, an accident, or dissatisfaction with day-to-day life can result in illness.

What are mental health problems?

Psychological symptoms can vary from milder forms of depression and anxiety to severe psychoses where one loses touch with reality. Your child may feel sad, scared, restless, or angry. Perhaps he or she is unhappy at daycare, or has problems concentrating at school.

Children often express psychological distress through abdominal pain, poor appetite, and headaches.

The most common psychological disorders are anxiety and depression. Anxiety is a feeling of uncertainty and inner unrest that can be hard to overcome. Children with anxiety can be restless and jittery, reacting for instance to sudden noises and movements. Some become more impatient and irritable than they normally are, and some suffer from sleeping problems and nightmares. Anxiety can also manifest in physical ailments such as trembling, sweating, headaches, heart palpitations, pressure in the chest, nausea, stomachaches, lack of energy, and dizziness.

Depression in children can be triggered by difficult events or crises, such as the death of someone near to them. It can also occur in the absence of any single apparent cause.

Depressed children usually feel sad. They may also lose interest in and joy over life. Many children find that their weight goes up or down, some suffer from disturbed sleep patterns, are fidgety or passive, tired, and lack energy. Some also have difficulty in concentrating or may, in some cases, think about death.

Other kinds of psychological disorders include eating disorders, psychoses, and compulsive disorders.

You can find out more about psychological disorders on the website of the Norwegian Directorate for Health and Social Affairs (Sosial- og helsedirektoratet) - www.psykisk.no.
Help is available for your child

Just like adults, children need someone who understands and supports them. If the child receives help early on, the chances of successful treatment are significantly increased. It is therefore important that you contact someone who can help your child get well. This may be the child’s general practitioner (GP), a health centre, or the school nurse or doctor. In the pages that follow, you will find out more about who can help you and your child.

**Traumatic events and fear**

Many children who have undergone traumatic events and severe stress, experience sadness, fear and nightmares, feelings that can also surface many years after the event.

Children who experience a death can feel a sense of unreality, disbelief, anger, or an absence of strong feelings. When the initial shock settles, this is often followed by crying, sadness, protest, or anger. Children, switch however between sorrow and joy more quickly than adults. The fact that a child can appear unaffected and play shortly afterwards serves as an example of this. It is important to know that children do not grieve in a specific way; they grieve according to their developmental stage and demonstrate extremely varied reactions.

Children hear stories about what’s going on in the world both through television, radio, newspaper and their peers. Many children become frightened when they hear about tidal waves, bird-flu, war, or outbreaks of violence.

Scared children can often be attention-seeking, withdrawn, irritable, or inattentive; they may have problems sleeping, and physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach pain. Anxious children can also undergo behavioral changes and stop doing the things they tend to do. Such signs are very vague and serve to indicate only that the child may be afraid.

**Right to an interpreter**

If you have problems understanding what your doctor says, you have the right to an interpreter free of charge. Even if you and your child speak Norwegian, it isn’t always easy to understand technical information in a foreign language. If you do need an interpreter, it’s a good idea to mention this when you book the doctor’s appointment, so that the interpreter can be there when you come. The interpreter is bound by professional confidentiality. In other words, he or she cannot divulge what you have talked about during the child’s appointment.

When should you seek help?

If you suspect your child is psychologically unwell, or if you are unsure and need guidance from people with expertise in the field, it is important that you contact someone who can help as soon as possible.
The child's GP, local health centre, or school nurse or doctor can treat the child for mild and moderate psychological problems, or refer the child further for treatment. You will find more information about where to get help and how to proceed on page 7 of this booklet.

When your child breaks a bone or cuts himself, it is easy to see that s/he is unwell. But the situation is often different with mental health problems, which can be difficult to identify, both for the affected person and those around them.

Be aware of behavioral changes in a child – a calm child can suddenly start acting out and become difficult; a lively child can suddenly become withdrawn and very quiet.

Here are some warning signals to look out for:

- The child gives the impression that there is something he or she either doesn't dare, want to, or can talk about.
- The child complains of stomach and head pain.
- The child may be distant and stare into space at times.
- The child appears despairing, anxious, and depressed.
- The child is overly sensitive to the behavior of adults.
- The child expends so much energy adapting that there's no room for creativity.
- The child often comes across as precocious, a “super-kid”, always kind and good.
- The child withdraws, becomes passive and “invisible”.
- The child acts out and is restless.
- The child likes to take on the role of scapegoat or clown.

In critical or life-threatening situations, you should immediately call the Emergency switchboard (113) for help. Explain what has happened, the address where you need help and the telephone number from which you are calling.

If the situation is not urgent, that is where there is no risk to life or health, you can contact your child's GP or nearest casualty or health centre.

The doctor will talk with you and examine the child in order to find out more about the child's psychological problems. Then he or she will discuss with you what to do from there. The doctor can help the child both through conversational therapy and/or medication.

The doctor can choose to refer your child on to the division of Children and Adolescents’ Psychiatric Polyclinic Services (BUP) near you. Here the child will receive treatment in cooperation with their family, and a psychologist, child psychiatrist, family therapist, clinical pedagogue, or social worker.
Who can help?

Healthcare in Norway is divided into community and specialist health services. The community health service includes GPs and casualty clinics. Additionally, the municipality in which you live has a number of resources available for people suffering from mental illness, including public health nurses, Educational and Psychological Counseling Services (PP-service, or PPT), activity centers, and accommodation. If you would like to know more about these services, you can contact the health service or psychological healthcare service in your municipality.

Specialist health services include the division of Children and Adolescents’ Psychiatric Polyclinic Services (BUP), who help children and young people with problems and mental health issues. On the following pages, you can read more about the various elements of the health service that can help children with psychological problems.

Regional Health Authority

The psychological health service in Norway is based on four regional health authorities. The Norwegian names are Helse Nord, Helse Midt-Norge, Helse Vest and Helse Sør-Øst. The authority under whose jurisdiction you and your child belong depends on where in Norway you live.

The regional health authorities are responsible for the provision of specialist health services for the population in their area. The health authorities also own the public hospitals, ambulance service, emergency call service, laboratories, and hospital pharmacies within the region.

General Practitioners (GP) or health centres

If you are concerned about your child’s developmental or health status, you should contact your child’s GP or the health centre in the municipality in which you live.

When you phone your GP, you will speak to the secretary or a nurse, who will ask for your name and date of birth, and what your call is about. Children often complain of symptoms such as stomach pain, poor appetite, and headaches in connection with psychological problems. Consequently, the doctor first investigates the child’s physical symptoms. If the child is not physically ill, the doctor will discuss with the parents whether the child has been exposed to any particular stress at daycare, school or home, and what action should be taken. The GP can offer treatment for mild and moderate symptoms both through conversational therapy and/or medication. Where necessary, the GP can make referrals to specialist health services.

All municipalities have a health centre. In practice, all children are to be followed up at their local health centre for regular health checks and vaccinations.
Who is my child’s GP?
All people in Norway are allocated a general practitioner, or GP. You can choose to have a male or female GP. Your child will generally have the same GP as its father or mother. If you’d like your child to have a different GP than your own, you must request this.

If you are unsure who your GP is, you can call the GP Helpline (Fastlegetelefonen) on 810 59 500 or contact the National Insurance Office in the county in which you live. For more information, see [www.nav.no](http://www.nav.no).

The Casualty Clinic
If you need help but are unable to contact your GP, you can contact the casualty clinic. The casualty clinic is especially geared to deal with acute injuries, illnesses, and problems. The Norwegian name for the casualty clinic is Legevakten or Kommunal legevakt in your municipality. The number can be found in the phonebook.

Children and Adolescents’ Psychiatric Polyclinic Services (BUP)
Your GP can refer you and your child to a division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Polyclinic Services (BUP). The referral process requires that the doctor writes a referral to the treating institution.

BUP provides treatment to children and adolescents under the age of 18, as well as their families. BUP can also guide and cooperate with the GP, health centre, or school.

Your child’s visits to BUP can be during the daytime, though one might occasionally stay overnight. BUP attempts to find out what is troubling your child, and provides treatment through conversational therapy, medication, or games, role-play, drawing, and various other activities.

BUP cooperates with the child’s family in order to understand and treat various psychological difficulties. These may be behavioral problems, anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and eating disorders. The child may also have been exposed to mistreatment, sexual abuse, substance abuse, or serious family problems that it needs help with.

At BUP, you could meet with a psychologist, child psychiatrist, nurse, family therapist, clinical pedagogue, or clinical social worker. They will first and foremost talk with you and the child about what is difficult. Thereafter you will agree on which areas are important to work on further, and how to best collaborate.

BUP can also give advice to parents who need help in dealing with difficult issues or family concerns. If you wish, this can also occur anonymously.

PPT
If your child has concentration problems at school or doesn’t enjoy daycare, parents can seek advice from the Educational and Psychological Counseling Service (PP-tjenesten or PPT) by way of guidance or assessment. PPT provides advice and assistance in connection with problems related to learning.
difficulties, delayed development, speech difficulties, and behavioral and attitudinal problems.

The Child Welfare Service
Daycares and all other public bodies have a duty to report to the Child Welfare Service if the child has serious behavioral difficulties or where there is reason to believe that a serious breach in care is taking place.

The Child Welfare Service will cooperate with the parents with a view to solving the problems at home. They can provide advice and guidance, financial assistance, a support person and temporary home placements and will, as far as possible, attempt to solve the problems in cooperation with the parents.

Family welfare
At the family welfare center, there are psychologists and social workers who can advise children and their parents who find themselves in a difficult situation. The family welfare center also offers family therapy and various relationship courses in connection with divorce. There are family welfare centers in all districts and the service is free of charge.

In some municipalities, health services are housed in one family center, where help can be provided for a number of issues in one location.

Waiting period
There is a waiting period for non-acute admissions and consultations. The length of the wait varies from place to place and between treating institutions. If your child’s condition worsens during the waiting period, you have the right to have your application reappraised. In such an instance, contact the child’s GP.
What does it cost?
Children under the age of 12 are exempt from paying the deductible for health services. For treatment with a psychologist, children and adolescents under the age of 18 are exempt from paying the deductible.

Read more at [www.nav.no](http://www.nav.no) under Helsetjenester og Egenandeler.
Where to seek help

Emergency – call 113
Doctor/Casualty
Support phone: 810 30 030

Useful information

www.psykisk.no
www.psykiskhelse.no
www.mentalhelse.no
www.psykopp.no
www.nyinorge.no
www.nakmi.no

Brochures on mental health

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Brochures can be downloaded at www.psykisk.no under Information Material.

This brochure can be found in ‘bokmål’ and ‘nynorsk’, the two official languages of Norway, English, Arabic, Farsi, French, Kurdish/Sorani, Polish, Punjabi, Russian, Lappish, Serbian/Croatian, Somali, Spanish, Turkish, Urdu, and Vietnamese.