



Children's
Advocacy
Center

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Children's
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Services & Support Guide



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Welcome

While you and your child are engaging in services at the Children’s Advocacy Center of Portage County, each and every team member will do our best to promote and foster safety, healing and justice. Throughout this handbook, the abbreviation of CAC will be used for the Children’s Advocacy Center of Portage County. The CAC is accredited by the National Children’s Alliance requiring that all CAC services are free, and all services are evidence-based or best practices. "Evidence-based" is a fancy way of saying it has been proven to work through a lot of scientific research. Best practices are the smartest, most effective ways to do something that has been proven to work.

The CAC hopes to be a place where you and your child feel safe and comfortable while navigating possible trauma. Trauma is a frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to safety or wellbeing. Your child will get the opportunity to tell their story to a trained interviewer who knows the right questions to ask in a way that does not re-traumatize and is not leading.

To re-traumatize means to accidentally cause them to re-experience the feelings and emotional pain of a past trauma. Like a cut on your arm that is finally starting to heal, and then someone accidentally scrapes that same spot. It reopens the wound, and you feel the pain all over again—often setting back healing.

For additional feedback, to report a problem or to report discrimination please contact the CAC Executive Director by email at CAC@UHHospitals.org or by phone at 330-297-8838.

Take Care,
Cindy Brew

Executive Director

Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT)

The Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) is a fierce team of experts working on behalf of children and families. The MDT includes every professional needed to ensure your child's safety and well-being:

- Medical Professionals
- Law Enforcement
- Mental Health Experts
- Prosecution
- Child Protective Services
- Victim Advocacy

The MDT is a new standard of care improved from the previous confusing system of multiple agencies working alone. Instead, the MDT uses the information gathered during the forensic interview and medical exam to create a coordinated approach.

This means you get information, resources, and services all at once—without requiring multiple visits to multiple, different locations. The MDT strives to reduce the trauma and the logistical burden on your family.

Your CAC Advocate is your dedicated ally and the most important connection to the entire MDT. The advocates don't just attend the monthly case review meetings; they act as your voice.

Your CAC Advocate will bring all of your thoughts and concerns directly to the MDT, and report back information and updates from the MDT to you, keeping you fully informed. The MDT works together so your family can focus on healing.

CAC Services

Forensic Interview & Medical Services

At the heart of the CAC model is a commitment to creating a safe space for your child to tell their story once, in a safe setting. The forensic interview is the vital, central component of the child's visit to the CAC, and it is a unique opportunity for your child to be able to tell their truth. The CAC Nurse is specially trained in the forensic interviewing of children. Every forensic interview is carefully tailored to your child's developmental stage and ability. The goal is to provide a neutral, non-leading, and comforting environment where your child can speak freely about their experiences and concerns.

The information from the interview is a key component of the overall medical evaluation, assisting the nurse in assessing your child's health and safety concerns related to the report of abuse. Following the interview, the CAC Nurse provides expert medical care tailored to the child's needs. This may include a non-invasive physical examination focused on concerns regarding the child's well-being and health. Additional medical services can include laboratory testing or a referral to further specialized medical care if needed. All records of your CAC visit are considered protected health information (HIPAA protected) and are treated with the utmost confidentiality.

Records may be shared with the agencies involved in the investigation (Law Enforcement, Child Protective Services, Prosecution) or to the court in criminal cases following a legal subpoena. Records may be released to parents with proper medical release procedures.

Please contact the CAC for more detailed information if you need to obtain records. The CAC Nurse is an expert witness and provides factual testimony in court when subpoenaed in both criminal and civil cases. Testimony by the CAC Nurse in civil cases requires the appropriate subpoena procedure with a fee schedule. The CAC can provide detailed information on these specific requirements if needed.

The CAC website contains further information regarding medical services, as well as a helpful list of general pediatric services available in Portage County.

Advocacy

During the initial appointment with the CAC, the goal is to provide expert support and clarity so you and your family can begin the healing process. The CAC Advocates will focus on listening, assessing needs and risks, and providing immediate resources.

The initial advocacy services help tailor support and connect you to the resources you need right now through several evidence-based risk assessments. These assessments are vital because they help identify potential challenges and connect your family with specific, targeted interventions and resources immediately.

Risk assessment information is used only to help build a strong, customized safety net around your family. Some of the risk assessments offered at the CAC are:

- **Family Needs Assessment:** This crucial assessment identifies practical needs such as counseling referrals, food assistance, transportation assistance, or financial assistance. The CAC wants to remove any barriers for your family.

- **Human Trafficking Risk Assessment:** This screening is used for children aged 12 to 17 to identify possible risk factors that could make a child vulnerable to situations like sex trafficking.
- **Online Safety Risk Assessment:** For children aged 10-17 and parents/caregivers, a brief assessment to identify potential online risks or digital vulnerabilities your child may face is administered. In today's world, understanding digital safety is a crucial step in keeping kids safe!

Safety planning is the single most important tool you will leave the CAC with. Your advocate will safety plan with you and give you a hard-copy safety plan to take home. Safety planning creates a clear, personalized guide helping to identify safety risks for your child and how to reduce those risks. Safety planning helps you and your child feel prepared and empowered to respond to risks in the future.

Your CAC Advocate is dedicated to helping you understand the process, promote your voice, and reduce barriers for the best possible outcomes for your child and family.

Following the initial appointment at the CAC, your advocate will use the information provided through the risk assessments and safety planning to offer ongoing individual programming, support, and resources for your child and family. Your CAC Advocate will also provide updates and information regarding MDT services and can answer any questions you may have. Your CAC Advocate is here to support you for as long as you need.

MDT Partner Services

Mental Health Services

The main focus of the CAC is ongoing safety and healing for your child, family, and yourself. Evidence-based therapy has been proven to reduce ongoing long-term negative effects for children and families that have experienced trauma. Evidence-based therapy also reduces the risk of future abuse. The CAC partners with therapy services in Portage County for your child, your family, and yourself that have a proven track record of helping people heal. Evidence shows that caregiver or family support is often the key to a child's recovery and ongoing safety. Therapy services can not only help your child but also help you provide the support your child needs. Therapy services include information, support and coping strategies for caregivers and children about abuse, dealing with issues of self-blame and grief, family dynamics, parenting education, and the impact of abuse and trauma histories.

During the initial appointment at the CAC, the advocate working with your family will discuss therapy options with you and provide you with a handout of area therapy referrals. It is ok and normal to have been unsure about therapy at the time of the initial appointment and change your mind days, weeks, and even years after the initial appointment at the CAC. The CAC is still here to help you find the therapy resources you or your family may benefit from.

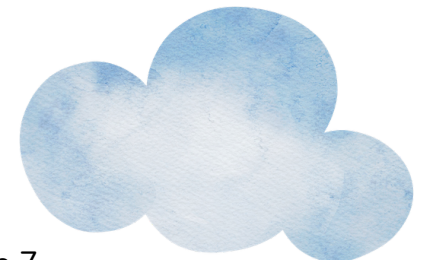
Please find area therapy referrals on the CAC website <https://childadvocacyportage.org/resources/family-resources/> or by calling or emailing the CAC at 330-297-8838 or CAC@UHHospitals.org.

Portage County Job and Family Services (PCJFS) - Child Protective Services (CPS)

PCJFS plays an absolutely critical role in keeping our community safe and helping families thrive. PCJFS mission is: "To provide children, adults and families an effective support system to assist in obtaining self-sufficiency and a safe, stable, healthy living environment." This commitment drives the work PCJFS does in partnership with the CAC.

PCJFS Child Protective Services (CPS) may be a part of the MDT investigation of allegations of child abuse or neglect that brings your family to the CAC. The goal of a CPS investigation is to prioritize the safety and well-being of the child while making a reasonable effort to preserve the family unit. The general steps to a CPS investigation are:

- 1. Report/Intake:** The process begins with a report of suspected child abuse, or neglect made to the child abuse hotline. Mandated reporters and community members call in concerns 24/7. All team members at the CAC are mandated reporters.
- 2. Screening and Assessment:** A screener reviews the report within 24 hours to determine if the criteria for abuse/neglect are met and the immediacy of the response needed. If screened "in," an investigation or family assessment is initiated.
- 3. Investigation/Family Assessment:** A caseworker will conduct face-to-face interviews with the child(ren) and all adults in the home, gather information, and assess the level of safety and risk.



4. **Case Disposition:** The investigation results in a finding (Substantiated, Indicated, or Unsubstantiated). If the child is found to be unsafe or at high risk, a safety plan is developed. It is important to remember that the finding made by CPS does not necessarily determine that abuse did not happen; often a child does not disclose even if abuse has occurred.
5. **Intervention & Case Plan:** If court action is necessary, the agency may take emergency custody, and the court will order the agency to develop a case plan. This plan outlines specific steps parents must take (e.g., counseling, treatment, housing stability) to safely address the issues so the family can be reunited.
6. **Permanency:** The ultimate goal is reunification when safe. If the family cannot achieve stability, the agency works to secure a permanent placement for the child, such as kinship care or adoption.

Law Enforcement

Law enforcement is a crucial partner on the Multi-disciplinary Team (MDT) working for your family. Law enforcement's main role is to ensure the safety of your child and your family, and to pursue justice. Law enforcement will gather facts and evidence about allegations including the forensic interview at the CAC. Law enforcement officers use this information to determine the next investigative steps.

Law enforcement will work closely with the prosecutor's office to determine if criminal charges are appropriate, if there is enough evidence, or if more evidence is needed. The completed forensic interview and forensic medical report from the CAC visit is shared with law enforcement. This ensures they have full documentation of the appointment, which is essential for their investigation and any potential court proceedings.

Prosecution

The legal process can feel like a lot but remember, every step is taken by trained professionals seeking justice for your child. Your CAC Advocate supports your family every step of the way as your dedicated ally. CAC Advocates can provide education regarding the legal process, attend court with you, and answer any questions you may have.

The Portage County Prosecutor's Office is a key partner in our Multidisciplinary Team (MDT). Their vital role is to review the evidence and, when appropriate, file and prosecute criminal charges against the alleged perpetrator. They work tirelessly to hold offenders accountable.

Here is a simplified look at how a case moves from the CAC to the courtroom:

1. Law Enforcement conducts a thorough investigation. Depending on the evidence, the alleged perpetrator may be arrested at any point during this phase.
2. Case Forwarded to Prosecutor: Once the investigation is complete, law enforcement delivers the full case file to the Portage County Prosecutor's Office.
3. The Prosecutor's Office reviews all the evidence. They make the careful decision to accept the case and move forward with criminal charges, request that law enforcement completes further investigation, or there is not enough evidence to move forward. It is crucial to remember that the Prosecutor's decision is based on the legal standard of "proof beyond a reasonable doubt." If they choose not to proceed, it absolutely does not mean that the crime did not happen or that your child was not telling the truth. It simply means the available evidence did not meet that specific legal standard for a successful criminal prosecution.

4. The Grand Jury: If accepted, the case typically goes to the Grand Jury. This is a panel of Portage County citizens who confidentially review the evidence presented by the Prosecutor.
5. True Bill Issued: If the Grand Jury agrees that there is enough evidence to move forward with charges, they issue a "True Bill." This officially begins the formal court process.
6. The case then moves through the criminal justice system, starting with Arraignment in which the alleged perpetrator is formally informed of the charges.
7. Pre-Trials are meetings and hearings that occur before the trial to prepare the case. It is often common to have several pre-trial meetings or hearings. Remember your CAC Advocate can attend these with you or answer any questions you may have.
8. The alleged perpetrator may be offered a plea and may choose to accept a plea agreement.
9. If no plea is offered or accepted, the case proceeds to a full trial.
10. Sentencing may occur following a plea agreement or a guilty verdict at trial; sentencing is the final step where the court determines the appropriate punishment.



How to Best Support Your Child

It is important that caregivers look for a pattern of changes in their child's behavior or emotions. Have they suddenly become withdrawn or irritable with friends and family? Do they seem a lot more nervous or jumpy? Are they having nightmares or suddenly intrusive memories about scary things that have happened? Have they started wetting the bed again after growing out of those issues?

Some children will have no changes in behavior and seem fine. Others may have difficulty with the traumatic event weeks, months or even years later. Other times children might experience responses that can include:

- Re-enacting the experience with peers, dolls or stuffed animals
- Demonstrating sexual knowledge and sexual behaviors that are not typical for the age of the child
- Anxiety (such as difficulty separating from parents)
- Anger, aggression, argumentativeness, and defiance
- Symptoms of prolonged sadness, depression, or abrupt mood changes
- Confusion about relationships with peers
- Difficulty making and keeping friends
- Avoiding anything that reminds them of the event

Factors that influence a child's response to experiencing trauma include:

- The response and support by the parents and other caregivers following the incident(s)
- The type and closeness of the relationship with the abuser
- How many times the trauma happened

- The length of time in which the sexual behaviors take place (sexual behaviors that occur over a longer period are more harmful)
- How scary the situation was for the child. Fear and worry may be related to age/size difference of the children, and the use of threats, coercion, aggression, or force
- The type of sexual behavior, such as whether genital contact and penetration was involved
- The child's recent functioning (for example, children who were already struggling with depression, anxiety, or other concerns will have a more negative impact than children who were happy, had friends, and were otherwise doing well)
- The response and support of professionals who may become involved after the incident is discovered. Professionals may be from child protective services, law enforcement, school personnel, and mental health specialists. (Whether or not the assessment, investigation, safety planning, and treatment was provided in a child friendly, calm, and supportive manner can impact a child's response.)

Research indicates that caregiver response plays a key role in a child's response and ongoing recovery after experiencing trauma. Specifically, remaining calm and nurturing makes a difference for children. Clearly communicating belief along with developing and implementing a safety plan are key elements in a response that will be supportive to your child. Empowering yourself and your child with skills to support ongoing safety can be very comforting and beneficial for ongoing health and happiness. Your CAC Advocate will help you develop a safety plan, provide resources, and training on online safety, healthy relationship building, and other life skills. Therapy resources and education will also be provided, as detailed in this guide. Remember, you are not alone, and your CAC Advocate can help you to best support your child.

The Best Way to Support Your Child is to Take Care of Yourself

When a child experiences trauma, the world shifts for everyone who loves them. We often talk about the child's healing, but parents/caregivers' well-being is the foundation that healing is built upon. Research consistently shows that the single most important factor in a child's recovery from trauma is the presence of a stable, supportive, and healthy caregiver. Taking care of yourself isn't a luxury or a distraction—it is a vital part of your child's healing.

While navigating trauma, the "Oxygen Mask" Principle is crucial: Just as flight attendants tell you to put on your own oxygen mask first, you must be emotionally able to help your child breathe through their distress. Children look to their caregivers to gauge safety. If you are overwhelmed, anxious, or depleted, your child may struggle to feel safe. When you practice self-care, you model healthy coping and provide the calm your child needs to work through their own emotions.

Trauma affects the entire families, including siblings and caregivers/parents. It is a common misconception that if you weren't the "direct victim," you shouldn't be struggling. However, trauma has a ripple effect. Bearing witness to your child's pain is a trauma in itself.

You may experience feeling "numb," irritable, or having "compassion fatigue" (feeling like you have nothing left to give), difficulty sleeping, unexplained headaches, constant fatigue, intrusive thoughts about the child's experience or "hyper-vigilance" (feeling like you are always waiting for the next bad thing to happen), withdrawing from friends or feeling that others "just don't understand."

Self-care in the wake of trauma is about ongoing routines, not just occasional treats.

Start with maintaining basic needs by prioritizing sleep, hydration, and nutrition. Work towards establishing small moments of self-care, for example: you may not have an hour for a gym session. Instead, find 5 minutes for deep breathing, a walk to the mailbox, or a quiet cup of coffee before the house wakes up. It is also okay to limit who you talk to about the situation. You do not owe the "story" to anyone who isn't part of your inner support circle. Often families grieve the "loss" of the life you had before the trauma. Whatever you're feeling is valid, and you are not alone.

Your CAC Advocate is here to support the entire family, including you! Please reach out to your CAC Advocate for support, to ask questions, or provide resources for additional help like therapy. Therapy can help you navigate this incredibly difficult time and help you provide the best support to your child.

You might benefit from individual therapy if you: find yourself unable to stop "reliving" the details of the trauma, feel intense guilt or self-blame, your own past trauma has been triggered by your child's experience or you are struggling to stay calm when your child exhibits difficult behaviors.

Remember, healing is a marathon, not a sprint. By reaching out for support, you are showing your child that it is okay to ask for help and that recovery is possible for everyone. The CAC is here to help you find therapy or any other resources you or your family may benefit from. Please find area therapy and other referrals on the CAC website

<https://childadvocacyportage.org/resources/family-resources/> or by calling or emailing the CAC at 330-297-8838 or CAC@UHHospitals.org.

Help is only 3 Numbers Away

211 maintains a comprehensive database of community resources and provides information and referrals for essential needs like:

- Government Services
- Housing and Shelter
- Healthcare Services
- Utility Assistance
- Food

211 can also connect people with information and referrals for:

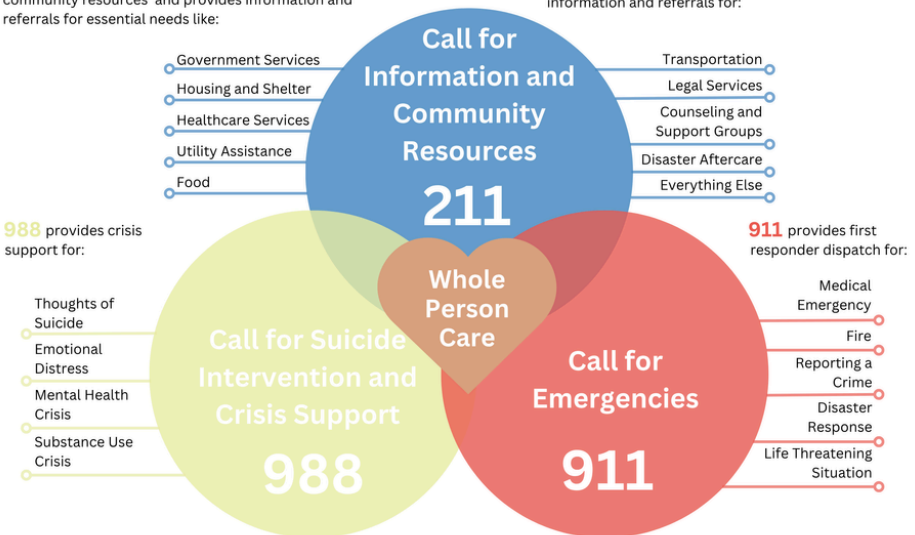
- Transportation
- Legal Services
- Counseling and Support Groups
- Disaster Aftercare
- Everything Else

988 provides crisis support for:

- Thoughts of Suicide
- Emotional Distress
- Mental Health Crisis
- Substance Use Crisis

911 provides first responder dispatch for:

- Medical Emergency
- Fire
- Reporting a Crime
- Disaster Response
- Life Threatening Situation



Multi-Disciplinary Team

Contact Information

Title	Name	Phone	Email
CAC Advocate			
CAC Nurse Interviewer			
Children Services			
Law Enforcement			
Prosecution			

