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Making the **right choice**

A psychotropic medications guide for youth in foster care

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Understanding the link between trauma and medication

Children and youth in the child welfare system often have experienced abuse, neglect, or other traumatic experiences or events that impact their mental and physical health and well-being. Oftentimes, these experiences lead to complicated emotions and behaviors. **Many times, they can heal from their experiences, but it takes time and a combination of trauma-informed services, stability, and support.**

Inside this guide, you'll find information about:

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What are psychotropic medications?

Doctors prescribe these drugs to help people focus on school or work and enjoy their lives more.

Many young people in the child welfare system are prescribed these types of medications to help treat their emotions and/or behaviors.



Youth in care often struggle with past trauma and loss, lots of changes, and issues with family, friends, or their placement. Sometimes, the feelings that result can become overwhelming, or even result in depression, anxiety, or stress symptoms that need to be treated with medication. While some youth may benefit from medication to treat certain illnesses, these drugs may have significant side effects if not used as a doctor prescribes. Also, medications do not address the root causes of a child's trauma. This is why it is important to combine medication, if needed, with other trauma-informed mental health services.

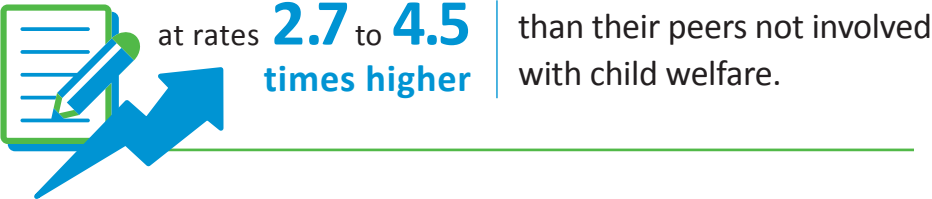


Psychotropic medication fast facts

Youth who have experienced trauma, such as abuse or neglect, may heal and become more resilient over time.

Others may need additional supports and services, like medication. While there is a role for these medications to help address certain illnesses, emotions or behaviors, they can be harmful if used improperly.

Studies have shown youth in the child welfare system are **prescribed psychotropic medications**



Youth in care are often prescribed psychotropic medications for extended periods while in the child welfare system. It is important to consult with the prescribing doctor regarding long-term side effects of medication use (e.g., weight gain, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, hallucinations and suicidal thoughts).

Prescribing more than one psychotropic medication is called **polypharmacy**.

41% Research shows 41% of youth in the child welfare system are prescribed drugs from more than three drug classes.

72% As many as 72% are getting drugs from more than two classes.



Many psychotropic medications are **not FDA approved for use in young children**. Studies show the use of psychotropic medications by infants and young children can lead to serious long-term health effects.

How do I know if I need help?

It's not always easy to know when you should seek help from a doctor, caseworker or caring adult.

Signs that it may be time to ask for help include:

- Symptoms occurring most days.
- A big change in feelings or emotions.
- Symptoms getting in the way of school, a job or relationships.
- Behaviors that are dangerous to yourself or others.



If you see these signs, talk to a trusted adult about scheduling an appointment with a doctor or mental health specialist. The doctor will work with you or your child to figure out what is wrong, and what may help you or your child feel better.

Concerns about psychotropic drug use among youth in foster care have ignited efforts to ensure better delivery of care and services in the Georgia Families 360°SM program. **If you ever have questions about medication or treatment options, our team of doctors, specialists, and pharmacists are ready to assist you.**



Georgia Families 360°SM is here to help.

We have a team trained to answer your questions about psychotropic medications and treatment options for children in the Georgia Families 360°SM program.

Call your or your child's prescribing doctor or case manager for help with questions about psychotropic medications and treatment options. You can also contact the Georgia Families 360°SM Intake Line at 1-855-661-2021 (TTY 711) 24/7.



If your child is in crisis ...

If you're experiencing a BH crisis, first call your BH provider for help.

If a situation is life-threatening, always call 911.

Choosing the right treatment

Each individual's needs are different. A case manager, doctor or mental health specialist can help discuss what options may work best for you or your child.

These options may include:



Treatment types other than medication, such as counseling or therapy.



Psychotropic medication for short- or long-term use.



A combination of both.



Meditation, exercise, and changes to diet or sleep.



In addition to medication and therapy, there are many other **types of activities that can aid in a youth's healing, like:**



Keeping a journal, doing artwork or listening to music.



Spending time with friends, classmates or your foster family.



Joining a faith community (church, synagogue, mosque, etc.).



Participating in clubs, sports or volunteering.

Important things to keep in mind

Here are some of the most important things to consider when figuring out what treatment plan is best for you or your child:

Consider options besides medication. While psychotropic medications may be helpful for some, it should rarely be the first and only treatment option.

Learn about safe medication use. If you or the child in your care is prescribed medicine, learn:

- How it works.
- Its side effects.
- Its expected benefits.



Give youth a voice. Get them involved often through talks about:

- How they are feeling.
- Treatment options and decisions.
- The importance of taking care of themselves.



Learn about trauma and its effects. Childhood trauma can have long-lasting effects if gone untreated. The more you understand trauma, the better equipped you or your child will be to heal and learn healthy coping skills.

Honor specific ethnic, racial, cultural, gender and sexual identities.

This includes native languages, beliefs, values, and attitudes about care and treatment. Cultural and religious practices and the use of spiritual traditions should be welcomed. Some of these may be considered “nontraditional.”

It’s also important to support youth in building a deeper understanding of their identities. This includes sexual orientation and gender identity.

Don't be afraid to ask lots of questions to doctors and specialists. The more you understand, the better decisions you can make. On the next page, there's a list of questions to use as a guide.

Have realistic expectations. Change doesn't happen quickly. When needed, don't be afraid to ask for support for yourself or the child in your care.





Questions to ask the doctor

The questions below can help guide you as you discuss treatment options with a doctor or mental health professional. Based on what you learn, this information can be helpful as you decide what is best for you or your child.

- What is the diagnosis, or is there more than one?
- Do you recommend medication? What is the name of the medication you recommend?
- How much do I have to take, and how often? (This is called “dosage.”)
- How long will I have to take the medication?
- How will I know it is working? When will it start working?
- Is this medication good for all ages?
- How much experience do you have with this medication?
- How will this medication make me/my child feel?



- What are the medication's side effects? How long do they typically last?
- Is this medication addictive (hard to give up once started)?
- What do I do if a problem develops (get sick, miss taking the medication, side effects)?
- Will blood work or other kinds of medical tests be needed before, during, or after treatment? What will the doctor look for?
- What do I do if I start taking the medication, and then decide I don't like the outcome? Who do I talk to?
- If I want to, can I just stop taking the medication?
- Who can I talk to about medication other than my/my child's doctor? Who needs to know about this medication, and why?
- What might help other than medication (meditation, changes in diet, exercise, etc.)?
- Should I try other things that might help at the same time as the medication?

Tips for medicine safety

Medications can help you or your child feel better. It's important to take them the right way. To increase the benefits and to reduce the risks of using psychotropic medications, remember to:



Follow the directions on the label. It works best if you take it the way it was prescribed for you.



Work closely with your doctor. Be sure to follow dosage instructions, don't be afraid to ask questions, and try to keep appointments to check in and watch your progress.



Learn about what things don't mix well with the medication. Some medicines, foods and drinks, like alcohol, should not be taken together. When mixed, they may reduce the positive effects of the medication, or cause harmful effects. Learn to look at prescription labels, and talk with your doctor or pharmacist.



Keep records. Keep an updated list on paper or digitally of all medicines being taken. This includes vitamins and other supplements. Make notes on how these make you or your child feel, side effects, and changes over time.



Store medicines properly. Store medications in a cool, dry place. Keep them away from children and pets.



Do not share medications. Giving any medications to someone else could result in serious side effects, and even death.



Prevent breaks in taking medications. Don't wait until you run out of medication before you ask for a refill. Add a reminder to your calendar or phone to check your supply, and call for a refill. In some cases, you may have to see a doctor to get a refill.

Important phone numbers

Georgia Families 360°SM Intake Line:

1-855-661-2021 (TTY 711) 24/7

My case manager's name:

My case manager's phone number:

My primary care provider (PCP)'s name:

My primary care provider (PCP)'s phone number:

My behavioral health (BH) provider's name:

My BH provider's phone number:





Sources:

- <https://www.anthempublicpolicyinstitute.com/blog/improving-psychotropic-medication-use-among-children-in-foster-care>
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- <https://www.pcori.org/research-results/2019/ensuring-foster-youth-are-only-prescribed-psychotropic-medication-when-their>
- <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/systemwide/bhw/casework/medications>



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