

Children as young as six going to A&E in mental health crisis



There has been a sharp rise in children and young people - some as young as six - attending A&E units in England in a mental health crisis, NHS doctors are warning.

The number of six to 17-year-olds turning up in significant distress for things like self-harm and eating disorders, or in emotional crisis, rose by 36% between 2019 and 2025, according to the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health analysis.

Some faced waits of more than 12 hours once there. The college said A&Es were not the best place for them, but a lack of support in the community meant they often had nowhere else to turn.

The government said it was looking to improve services and would be setting out plans soon.

The analysis - based on figures provided under the Freedom of Information Act by NHS England - found there were 75,491 attendances at A&E by children and young people for a mental health concern in 2025.

That is up from 55,525 in 2019 with some of the biggest rises seen in very young children aged six to nine. The increases far outstrip the overall jump in attendances, which has risen by just over 8% over the period.

Doctors said the cases included children and young people brought in by families, carers and police - some of those in emotional crisis become aggressive or have challenging behaviour.

In total, more than 6,200, around 8%, waited over 12 hours in A&E.

Nicholas, a father-of-two, is someone who has seen the impact of this. His 10-year-old son has autism and suffers from mental health issues. It has caused a safety risk - he has attacked others and tried to jump out of windows.

He told BBC Your Voice: "There is no support when in crisis. GP won't prescribe anything. We are stuck on a children's mental health waiting list which is the only service who can provide interventions. The system is broken.

"When at A&E, half the time we don't see a doctor because you have to wait so long. Once my son calms down, it's best to go home rather than have him escalate again while waiting."

Frightening environment

RCPCH officer for mental health Dr Sam Jones said there was a lack of support, particularly for those in crisis, in many parts of the country.

"Behind every one of these figures is a child or young person in distress and a family who didn't know where else to turn.

"Emergency departments are a vital safety net, but they were never designed to be a place where children in mental health crisis wait for days at time.

"This is a national crisis that will only get worse without urgent intervention."

She said alongside greater investment in children's mental health services, staff from key agencies across health, social care and education needed better training in helping children who are struggling with their mental health.

Gemma Byrne, of the mental health charity Mind, said: "A&E can be a frightening environment for anyone in mental health crisis, let alone a child. Making them spend more than 12 hours there is simply unacceptable.

"The current system, where many mental health services only provide support when young people are considered 'unwell enough' to qualify, clearly isn't working."

She said expanding the network of young future hubs, which bring together a range of support covering mental health, employment, sports and volunteering, was a crucial step.

The government is planning to publish a new mental health strategy later in the summer.

But a Department of Health and Social Care spokesman said improvements were already being made with investment in mental health teams for schools and [more than 150 new mental health hubs in community locations such as banks and libraries](#).

"No child should have to reach crisis point before getting the support they need," he added.

Dr Mark Buchanan, of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, said children and young people facing a mental health crisis were ending up in A&E by "default".

"They deserve care within systems and settings that are designed to meet their needs."

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