



 Cartwheel

Summer Wellness

12 Budget-Friendly Summer Activities
to Support Family Well-Being



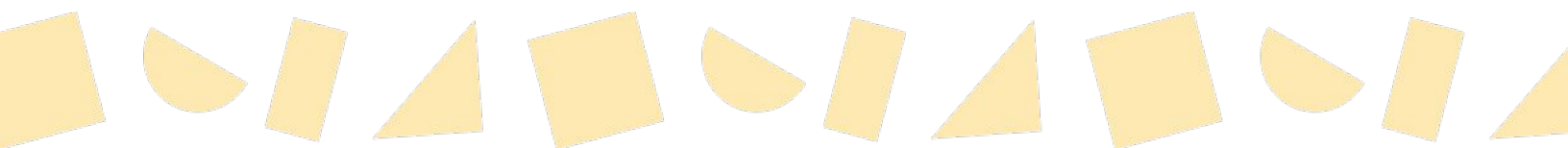
Summer brings sunshine, free time, and more opportunities for family connection.

However, this season can also present its fair share of challenges, including negative impacts on mental health. The sudden shift from structured school routines to open schedules may lead to feelings of restlessness or uncertainty. Some children and teens may experience boredom or isolation from friends, while others might face increased stress from family dynamics or changes in routine.

Summer can also be especially stressful for caregivers, who often have to find new arrangements for childcare or scramble to find ways to keep kids active and occupied.

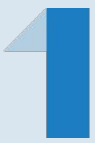
This guide offers easy, low-cost activities designed to support the mental well-being of everyone in your family. These activities can help maintain emotional balance, strengthen family bonds, and create meaningful memories together, regardless of your location or budget.

Even though school is out for the summer, it's important that students still feel emotionally supported. Cartwheel provides mental health services over the summer so that kids and families can have access to virtual therapy any time of year.





The activities in this bundle are organized into four sections



Mindfulness & Relaxation

Practicing mindfulness reduces stress, builds emotional regulation skills, and can create a family framework for managing feelings.



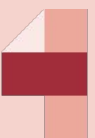
Creative Expression

Art and storytelling can help young people (and adults!) process emotions while building self-confidence. Joint creative activities can help strengthen family connections.



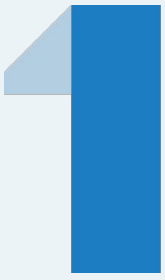
Connection & Communication

Intentional time together as a family can be especially helpful over the summer as kids and teens' social routines may change. Finding times to connect and share can help create a sense of safety for kids.



Structure & Predictability

Loose but consistent routines around sleep, meals, and activities provide stability that supports mental health when school schedules end.



Mindfulness & Relaxation

Research shows that being mindful can help lower anxiety and stress by helping our bodies relax. For kids and teens, these activities help them build important skills to manage their emotions as they grow. When families practice mindfulness together, they learn to talk about all types of feelings and build resilience together.

◆ Family Outdoor Scavenger Hunt

✚ Guided Family Relaxation

◐ Calm Corner Creation





Family Outdoor Scavenger Hunt

Going on a scavenger hunt outside encourages present-moment awareness, connection with nature for those who have access to green spaces, and family bonding.

Materials needed

Paper and pencil (optional)

Setting

Any outdoor space (park, yard, neighborhood). A safe, public indoor space can also be a nice alternative.

Age Adaptations

Younger children can search for simple items like specific colors or shapes; teens can find more complex items or patterns or take photos for a digital collection.

Project Details

For those with access to a green space, search for items from nature together.

These might include:



Something
soft



Something
that makes
a sound



Three
different
leaf shapes



Something
you find
beautiful



Something
that shows the
season changing

Or modify these to fit the space that you're visiting. For example, if you're in a store you can look for different colors or types of items (such as something you eat). Take turns sharing what you found and why you chose each item.





Calm Corner Creation

A Calm Corner is a place for everyone in the family that is available whenever someone needs a moment. This helps children and teens recognize that it's OK to need a moment to regulate their emotions and gives them tools to self-soothe.

Materials needed

Cozy items from around your home

Setting

Any quiet or comfortable space in your home

Age Adaptations

Let each child personalize their own space or section

Project Details

Work together to designate and create a "Calm Corner" in your home:

1. Choose a quieter spot away from high-traffic areas
2. Add soft items like pillows, blankets, or stuffed animals
3. Include sensory tools (stress balls, fidget toys, or items with different textures)
4. Add calming activities (coloring books, journals, or picture books)

After you've created your Calm Corner, adults AND children can both use it when they need a moment to calm down. As the adult, model to your children when might be a good moment to visit the Calm Corner. If you feel like your temper is rising, say out loud, "I notice that I am starting to feel upset. I'm going to take a minute in the Calm Corner and see if that helps me feel better." Once you model it, you can help your child recognize when a visit to the Calm Corner might be helpful. Calm Corners aren't for punishment; they are positive places for a moment of quiet or calm.





Guided Family Relaxation

Having quiet moments or connection regularly (perhaps before bedtime) can help with stress-relief and strengthen relationships through moments of togetherness.

Materials needed

None

Setting

Any comfortable space

Age Adaptations

Shorten the time for younger children; teens can eventually lead the exercise

Project Details

Gather in a comfortable space and guide your family through this simple relaxation:

1. Sit or lie down comfortably and close your eyes.
2. Take three deep breaths together. Breathe in slowly through your nose, filling your belly with air, and then exhale slowly through your mouth, like blowing out a candle.
3. Starting from your toes and moving up to your head, notice each part of your body.
4. Imagine sending relaxation to any areas that feel tense.
5. Picture a peaceful place you all enjoy and spend a minute imagining being there together.

Slowly open your eyes and share what the experience was like. Share together: do you notice any changes in your feelings or in your body? Or feel free to share a bit about your peaceful place: what does it look and feel like? What do you like about it?





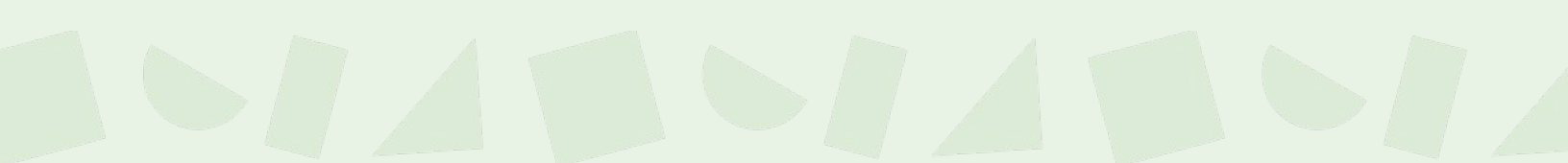
Creative Expression

Creative activities are a wonderful way to learn and share about our thoughts and feelings. For children and teens, art and storytelling are ways to explore feelings and experiences while building confidence and helping kids learn about themselves. When families create together, it validates everyone's voice and strengthens bonds.

◆ Family Emotion Art Gallery

✚ Storytelling Chain

◀◀ Worry Stones





Family Emotion Art Gallery

This activity helps children to name and talk about their feelings, and reminds everyone how helpful it can be to share our emotions—not just the happy ones—with others.

Materials needed

Paper, any art supplies you have (crayons, markers, pencils), clay, paint

Setting

Any table or flat surface

Age Adaptations

Younger children can use simple emotions and abstract art; teens can explore more complex thoughts and feelings

Project Details

Each family member creates artwork based on different emotions:

1. Choose 3-5 emotions to explore (joy, calm, anger, worry, excitement)
2. Take 5-10 minutes to create art representing each emotion
3. Display your "gallery" and take turns sharing your creations
4. Discuss how colors, shapes, and images can express feelings
5. Keep the gallery up as a reminder that all emotions are valid

Another idea: Have each family member draw a picture of a special memory. Then take turns showing your drawings, explaining why you chose that particular memory, and discussing what feelings come up when thinking about this memory.





Storytelling Chain

This activity promotes imagination, listening skills, collaboration—and hopefully fosters connection and laughter!

Materials needed

None (optional: use a phone to record)

Setting

Anywhere comfortable

Age Adaptations

Provide more structure for younger children; encourage teens to explore complex themes

Project Details

Create stories together as a family:

1. Sit in a circle or gather comfortably
2. One person begins a story with a few sentences
3. The next person adds to it, continuing around the circle. See where the story goes!
4. After a few rounds, discuss the story's twists and turns
5. Optional: Record your stories to enjoy later

Family members could share their favorite parts of the family story. Which parts were funniest? Which parts were silliest? To keep the fun going, you can continue the story over the summer or bring back characters everyone loved!





Worry Stones

By encouraging our children to say their worries out loud, it helps them know that they don't have to worry alone. Recognizing that a worry is just a thought and won't necessarily come true can help kids and teens cope with worry thoughts.

Materials needed

Small stones, markers, paints (use whatever you have available)

Setting

Any space that can get a bit messy

Age Adaptations

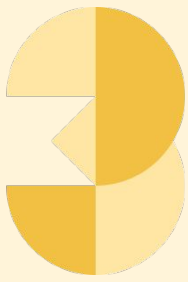
Younger children may need help if using markers or paints; teens can create on their own

Project Details

Collect and wash small stones, then paint or decorate them with happy pictures, favorite colors, or symbols of strength or calm.

Have children whisper their worries to their special stones. This simple act helps kids share what's bothering them by 'giving' their concerns to the stone. Holding something real in their hands makes it easier for children to talk about their feelings and let them go. Try this at bedtime or whenever your child seems worried.

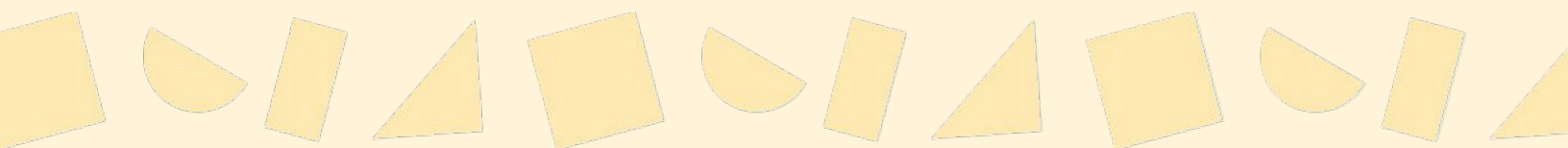




Connection & Communication

Strong social connections are important for mental health. During summer, when regular social routines change, intentional family time becomes even more important. These activities help children feel a sense of belonging and safety. Regular positive interactions also make it more likely that young people will talk to you about problems, rather than keeping them to themselves.

- ◆ "Rose-Thorn-Rosebud" Dinner Conversations
- ✚ Family Movement Challenge
- ◐ Community Connection Project





"Rose-Thorn-Rosebud" Dinner Conversations

This simple routine creates regular opportunities for meaningful communication and helps build empathy by hearing about others' experiences that day.

Materials needed

None

Setting

Mealtime or any family gathering

Age Adaptations

Help younger children identify their moments; prompt teens with specific categories if needed

Project Details

During a meal or family time, each person shares:



Rose

something positive
from their day



Thorn

something
challenging



Rosebud

something they're
looking forward to

Encourage each person to share a bit about their selections: What made their rose so positive? What was hard about their thorn? Why are they excited about their rosebud? Remember that you should share too!





Family Movement Challenge

This activity combines the mental health benefits of movement with playful connection. It requires no special equipment and works in any setting.

Materials needed

None

Setting

Any space with room to move

Age Adaptations

Adjust movements for different abilities; kids and teens can take turns leading

Project Details

Take a 10-minute movement break together:

1. Take turns choosing a movement (dance, stretch, silly walks, animal movements)
2. Everyone follows along for 1-2 minutes
3. Move to the next person's choice
4. End with some deep breaths together

Consider adding music to make your movement breaks more fun. Family members can take turns choosing songs, or create dance videos to your favorite songs!





Community Connection Project

When families participate in meaningful activities together, it builds stronger connections and helps everyone feel happier and healthier

Materials needed

Varies based on project

Setting

Home and community

Age Adaptations

Match responsibilities to abilities; teens can take leadership roles and both kids and teens can help come up with ideas for giving

Project Details

Choose a simple way to connect with your broader community:

After the activity, family members can take turns sharing about the activity: What was their favorite part? How did it make each person feel? You might want to plan your next helping project right then. Remember, when we help others, we're also helping ourselves feel good.



Write kind notes for neighbors or community helpers



Pick up litter in a local park or shared space

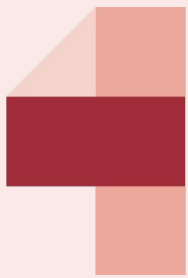


Create sidewalk chalk messages of encouragement



Organize a small food donation for a local pantry





Structure & Predictability

While summer can often mean free time and fun, the loss of structure can also sometimes be stressful and lead to changes in our mood, behaviors, and sleep. Predictable routines help all of us to feel more balanced. Even loose routines provide a foundation to help us feel better each day. Maintaining some consistency around sleep, meals, and activities helps our brains and bodies be at our best!



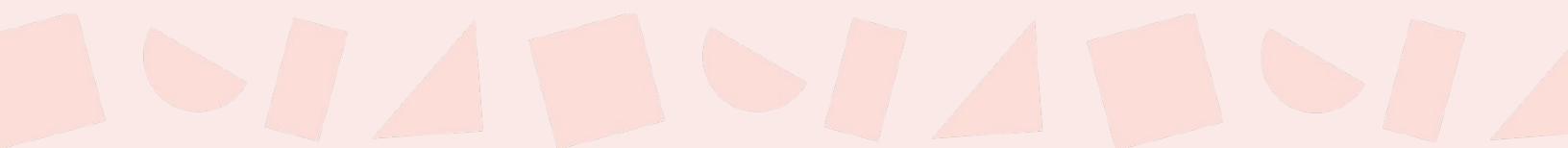
Family Rhythm Board



Screen Time Success Plan



Morning & Evening Ritual Cards





Family Rhythm Board

Having a visual “rhythm board” can serve as a gentle reminder of expectations without imposing a strict schedule. It can help children transition between activities and reduce decision fatigue.

Materials needed

Poster board/large paper, markers, sticky notes (optional); If you have a dry-erase board or chalk board that is also great!

Setting

Family space

Age Adaptations

Simpler limits for younger children; collaborative approach with tweens and teens

Project Details

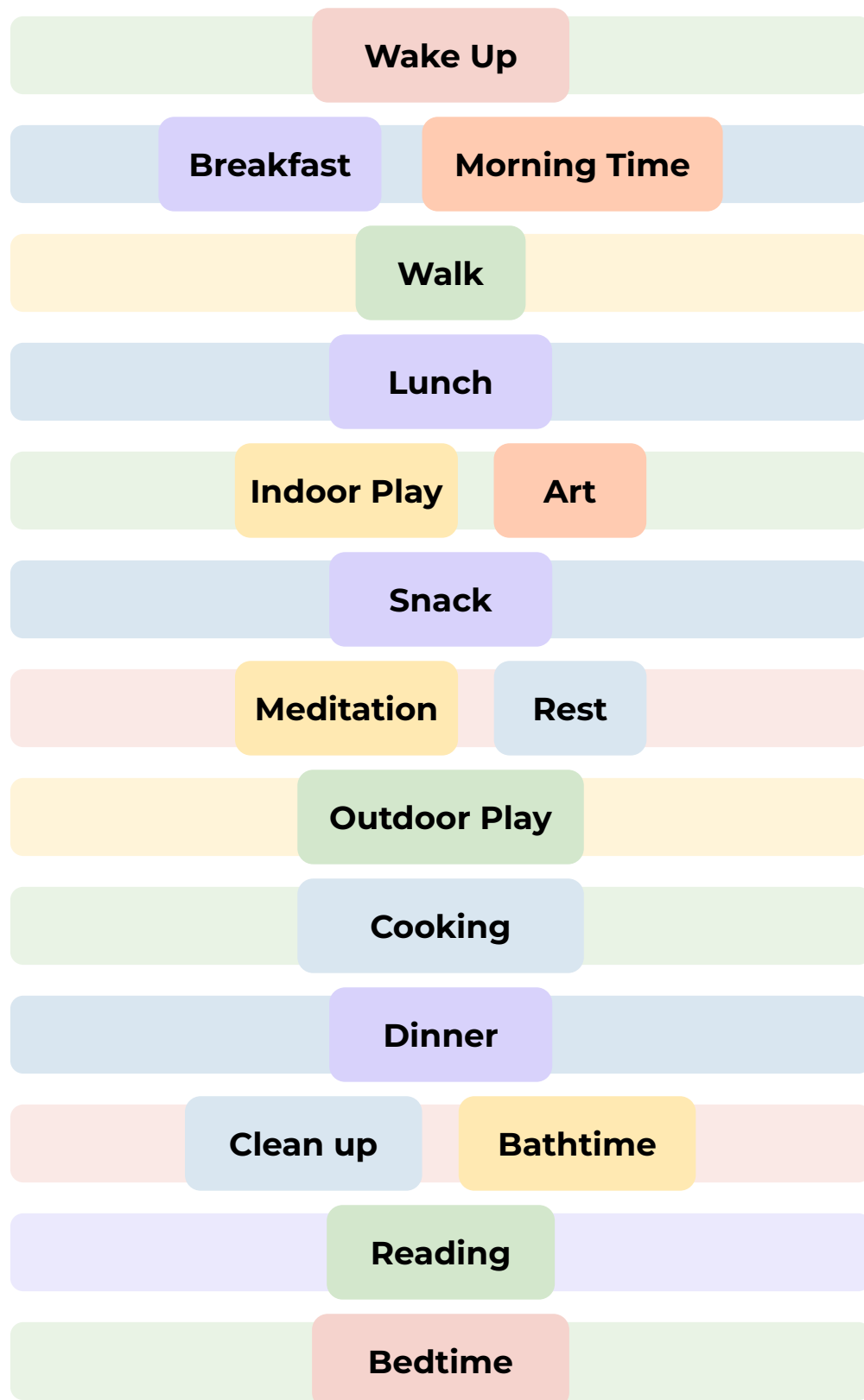
Create a visual schedule of your family's summer rhythm. Here is an example of what one might look like.

1. Identify 3-5 anchor points that will happen most days (wake-up, meals, bedtime)
2. Add flexible activity blocks (outside time, quiet time, free choice)
3. Use movable pieces (sticky notes) for changing elements
4. Keep the system simple – too rigid a schedule can create stress

Families can review their family rhythm board weekly over the summer or whenever helpful. Remember that everyone, even young kids, can participate and help make changes!



Daily Rhythm Board Example





Screen Time Success Plan

When families make screen rules together, it helps kids build their own healthy habits related to screen use. It's important to remember that every child is different; some need more structure, some need more flexibility, but every child and teen can benefit from guidance.

Materials needed

Paper, pencils, pens, or markers

Setting

Family common area

Age Adaptations

Kids of all ages can help to create a success plan. Consider your child's maturity and decision-making skills; for instance, try pictures for younger children.

Project Details

Work together to create a balanced screen time plan:

1. Identify screen-free times (e.g. mealtime, mornings)
2. Identify screen-free zones (e.g. bedrooms, car)
3. Establish reasonable daily limits that still allow flexibility
4. Brainstorm a list of non-screen activities your child enjoys. Bonus for non-screen activities that everyone enjoys!

Parents also need healthy habits around screen time. Consider making a screen time plan for yourself, alongside your kids. Remember that our children model their behaviors after us.

Also consider how you can make screen time into quality family time. Are there shows or movies you can watch and discuss? Are there video games your child can teach you how to play? Think about how screens can help you connect, not create distance.



Our Family's Screen Plan (Example)

Note: This is an example only. Every family will have different priorities and values when it comes to screen-use. Consider what will work best for your family.

Screen-Free Times



First hour after waking



During meals



One hour before bedtime

Screen-Free Zones



Car



Bathroom



Bedroom

Daily Limits



1 hour on weekdays



3 hours on weekends

Non-Screen Activities



Playing a board game



Going for a walk



Reading a book



Our Family's Screen Plan

Use this template to write out your family screen time success plan.

Screen-Free Times

Screen-Free Zones

Daily Limits

Non-Screen Activities





Morning & Evening Ritual Cards

Having regular routines gives children a feeling of safety. It also helps them learn how to take care of themselves and practice transitioning from one activity to another.

Materials needed

Index cards or paper cutouts, container to hold them

Setting

Used during transition times

Age Adaptations

Picture-based for younger children; more complex activities for teens

Project Details

Create morning and evening ritual cards so that your child has consistent bookends to the day. Cut out the ritual cards on the next page, or make your own on pieces of paper! Create cards together as a family activity. Cards can continually be created.

1. Together, make 2-3 cards for morning activities
2. Make 2-3 cards for evening wind-down
3. Arrange cards in a predictable sequence
4. Keep the sequence visible and consistent

Taking this collaborative approach to problem solving is a helpful way to address issues and helps to build important skills. Parents and caregivers also benefit from regular routines so consider making ritual cards for yourself too!





Morning Card (Example)

Morning Stretch

- 1 Take 3 deep breaths
- 2 Stretch your arms up high
- 3 Touch your toes if you can
- 4 Give yourself a morning hug



Evening Card (Example)

Bedtime Calm-Down

- 1 Find 3 things you can see
- 2 Find 2 things you can touch
- 3 Find 1 thing you can hear
- 4 Take 3 slow breaths



Morning Card

Morning Stretch



Evening Card

Bedtime Calm-Down



Morning Card

Morning Stretch



Evening Card

Bedtime Calm-Down



Morning Card

Morning Stretch



Evening Card

Bedtime Calm-Down













Summary



Keeping your family mentally healthy during summer doesn't need to cost a lot or require big plans. This guide gives you simple activities that focus on what everyone needs: quiet thinking time, ways to be creative, doing things together, and having regular routines. By trying some of these easy activities, we hope your family can build resilience and grow closer together.

There's no such thing as perfection. Even trying just one activity from this guide, or coming up with your own family activity, can make a difference. Remember: What matters most is spending time together and taking care of each other's feelings in ways that work for your family.

Additional resources

-  **School Districts:** Many offer summer educational activities and information about local resources. Ask your child's teacher or school counselor to learn what's available.
-  **Local Libraries:** Open to all and many offer free summer programs and resources.
-  **Parks and Recreation Departments:** Including both local, state, and national parks. Visit Recreation.gov or your local parks and rec website for information on free outdoor spaces and community events.
-  **PBS Kids (pbskids.org):** Free educational activities and games
-  **Scholastic Summer Reading (scholastic.com/site/summer/home.html/n):** Free reading resources and challenges
-  **Khan Academy (khanacademy.org):** Free educational content for all ages
-  **[Code.org](https://code.org):** Free coding activities for children
-  **GoNoodle (gonoodle.com):** Free movement and mindfulness videos for children
-  **Museums For All (museums4all.org):** Reduced/free admission with EBT cards at 900+ museums nationwide
-  **Movie Theater Summer Programs:** Many chains offer \$1-2 morning movies during the summer





If you or a family member needs support over the summer, remember that help is available.



If you are in one of our partner districts and interested in our 1-1 evidence-based therapy for students in grades 3-12 and/or parent guidance for PK-12, email office@cartwheelcare.org or text/call us at (617) 272-7439.



If you have worries about your child's mood or behavior, you can also reach out to your pediatrician.



If you are experiencing a crisis, call or text 988, the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (available 24/7 for free, confidential, and compassionate support), visit www.988lifeline.org, call 911, or visit your nearest emergency room.

About Cartwheel

Cartwheel is a trusted mental health partner to schools, delivering rapid access to care for students and helping schools build stronger mental health programs that catch kids before they fall. Our evidence-based mental health program is designed around the entire school community. Our licensed therapists and child psychiatrists are diverse, culturally sensitive, and committed to affordable care for everyone, including uninsured families and those covered by Medicaid.

To learn more about Cartwheel's services, contact a member of your school's counseling, guidance, or social work team. If your school isn't partnered with Cartwheel and you'd like to learn more, email us at info@cartwheelcare.org.

