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Three Things That Can Help Stressed-Out Parents

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A father is accused of killing his 22-month old son after he [left him in a hot car](#). A mother abandons her 11-month old baby on a [subway platform](#). A woman intentionally [suffocates her 11-month old baby boy](#) because she "didn't want him anymore." These tragic stories all happened within days of each other. For those of us in the child protection field, it's agonizing to think that no one is reaching these parents who are at the end of their rope.

While there were doubtless many factors at play in the above examples, what resources could have possibly helped in these situations? There are a few that I'd like to highlight: Safe Havens, Crisis Nurseries and Parent Crisis Helplines.

Every state in the United States has a law that allows an unharmed child to be relinquished to the proper authorities, no questions asked. It's called the "**Infant Safe Haven Law**" It was first enacted in Texas, in 1999. It was developed as an incentive for mothers in crisis to safely give up their child to designated locations where the babies are protected. The laws generally allow the parent to remain anonymous and to be shielded from prosecution for abandonment or neglect in exchange for bringing the baby to a safe haven. You can access the [law](#) for each state through the Child Welfare Information Gateway. The locations that are designated Safe Havens vary by state, but they include: fire stations, police stations, hospitals, emergency medical provider by responding to a 911 call or a church. These providers then contact child protective services to let them know the infant has been relinquished.

Interestingly, the window of opportunity that a distressed parent has to give up their baby varies tremendously. The National Safe Haven Alliance has a [map](#) on its website that give you the number of days following the birth that a parent has to give up the infant. Each state's criteria is listed. The time range is from three days after the birth (California, Oregon, Michigan) to one year (North Dakota and

Missouri.) The average is 30 days. This website also tells you the providers that can accept infants into their care.

Crisis Nurseries are another option for parents at their wit's end, or, are in an emergency situation whereby they can't care for their child(ren). These programs were developed to prevent child abuse and neglect. Most offer free 24/7 crisis nursery care for children up to age 12, when parents are overstressed, need a break or have an emergency arise. Usually, you can leave a child for up to 72 hours at a time. The services vary, but at most programs, the children can receive medical services, developmental screening and assessment, age appropriate recreational play, education and transportation to local schools and crisis counseling for parents. The staff at these programs work with the parent(s) to develop a safety plan for the children's return to home.

A partial list of crisis nurseries can be found at this [link](#). From the research I could find, it appears that 47 states have a total of 175 programs that are funded through federal funding. The best way to identify programs in your area is imply to google "crisis nursery" along with the name of your state.

Parent Crisis Helplines can help too. First, they can put the parent in touch with one of the crisis nurseries or explain the Safe Haven law, if it applies. Second, they can provide a supportive outlet for a stressed-out parent to discuss the difficulties that they are having in parenting their children. The counselors range from trained volunteers to paid professional staff. Many operate 24 hours a day and offer services in several languages too. The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress offers a nationwide crisis [hotline](#) number for each state. These hotlines offer counseling services for issues such as parental crisis, suicide prevention or domestic violence.

In New York, I regularly refer parents to the Prevent Child Abuse New York's [Parent Helpline](#) at 1-800-Children, a confidential helpline where parents can get information and referrals to places in their community that can help.

So, we will never know if these services would have helped the parents and babies that I referenced earlier, but they could help others. Part of the problem is that parents who need these services don't know about them. There was very little funding available to advertise Safe Haven or Crisis Nursery availability when these programs were implemented.

Please forward this blog to parents you know. You may be helping a desperate parent do the right thing when they are under too much stress. You may also be saving a child's life.

For more information on keeping your child safe visit www.nyspcc.org.