

Mental Health Module 3

Module 3 - Getting to Know Ourselves

Outcomes

As a result of completing this module, participants will be able to:

- ✖ Recognize their own behavior as influencing the mental health of co-workers and Head Start families;
- ✖ Assess the program's mental health services plan to determine how well it supports the mental health of staff and the relationships between adults in the program; and
- ✖ Recognize their own mental health strengths, needs, and areas for growth.

Key Concepts

- ✚ **The relationships between adults in the program, that is, between parents and staff, between co-workers, and between supervisors and staff, will be reflected in their relationships with children.**
- ✚ **Supporting children and families, particularly children and families who are experiencing stress, is very hard, emotional work. To support the mental health of staff, supportive and safe supervision and mental health consultation are essential. This will enable workers to bring their skills and energy back to the children and families.**
- ✚ **Caring for the emotional needs of others can trigger strong feelings. This happens to all of us. Managing these feelings in way that don't get in the way of our work is much easier with the support of our fellow workers.**
- ✚ **The challenges that face Head Start families are often the same ones that face Head Start staff. Families ask us to help them with threats to mental health posed by economic hardship, violence, depression, and other issues. It is not uncommon for staff to be struggling with the very same stressors.**

Background Information

"The most critical factor in quality child care is the human factor. Productive, confident, motivated staff are more important to children than the blocks the children play with or the buildings in which they play. Ensuring that staff work at an optimum psychic level is rightly a central concern of every program administrator."

Paula Jorde-Bloom

The work of promoting the mental health of and building resiliency in young children can sound deceptively simple - the heart of the work is in building warm, responsive, and respectful relationships. But how do we learn to be warm, responsive, and respectful partners in relationships? How are those skills nurtured and developed over time? Just as the children learn to give affection by having the experience of receiving affection, we learn to create nurturing relationships by having the opportunity to experience them.

We support the ability to be respectful, warm, and responsive in relationship to children by creating a climate where relationships among adults express these same qualities. Creating an environment for families where they are treated with respect, where power is shared, where strengths are celebrated, and where needs are addressed begins with creating a workplace environment in which these things are true of staff. Programs can take many actions that demonstrate that promoting the mental health of all members of the Head Start community is a priority.

A. Policies and working conditions that promote mental health

Working conditions for staff make a significant contribution to their own mental health, and to that of the children.

- ▮ Caregivers with optimal adult-to-child ratios and fewer competing responsibilities (i.e., not also responsible for cooking, cleaning, etc.) touch, play, and laugh with children more.
- ▮ Caregivers in supportive environments are more likely than caregivers who feel isolated and stressed to have positive interactions with children.
- ▮ Working with families to achieve economic self-sufficiency is difficult if the family advocates themselves do not make enough money to support their full range of basic needs, including adequate housing, health care, childcare, and so on.
- ▮ It is important to model self-care for children and families through the ability and willingness to set reasonable limits, and by taking time for personal days off when necessary, using stress management techniques, and asking for consultation and help when over-whelmed, for example. This is enabled by supportive and health promoting policy.
- ▮ Conflict between and among adults in the workplace is inevitable. A valuable

step toward violence prevention and mental health promotion is to model methods of peaceful conflict resolution that respect individuals and protect and value relationships.

A high-quality child development program cannot be achieved without paying attention to the quality of the working conditions for staff.

B. Mental health support: Resources for establishing a mentally healthy workplace

All too often, limited mental health consultation resources are devoted exclusively to emergencies. However, when a mental health professional only comes in to observe and handle referrals and/or treatment for a crisis, opportunities for ongoing relationships with this person, which can promote the morale and mental health of workers, parents, **and** children, are lost.

The mental health professional can support a mentally healthy workplace through roles that may not be traditionally considered. In an environment where resources are scarce, it may feel like a luxury to use the mental health professional to care for the needs of staff and workplace rather than those of families. Creating a climate where staff can feel good about their work and grow as professionals, however, is no luxury: it is a basic ingredient that enables quality care for families. We are fortunate that we have a number of in-house resources that can provide this service within our agency. These include: Social Service/Parent Involvement staff who are trained in mental health skills, several of our Resource Associates are proficient in this area also.

C. Supervision

Because we are all human, the challenges that face Head Start families are often the same ones that face Head Start staff. Families ask staff to help them with threats to their mental health posed by economic hardship, violence, depression, and other difficulties. It is not uncommon for staff to be struggling with the very same stressors. Sorting out emotional reactions to the work from professional roles and responses is critical. This can only be accomplished with access to supportive relationships within which to think about the feelings that the work can stir up.

The essential features of supervision that acknowledge the emotional nature of Head Start work and support the ability of staff to promote the mental health of the children and families with whom they work are:

- ▶ **Reflection:** The relationship with the supervisor provides a safe place to slow down, step back, and think about the work. It is a place where it is

okay to process and learn from emotional reactions to situations, think together about responses, and clarify one's roles and goals.

Collaboration: Supervisory relationships share power and are collaborative in nature. Supervisors encourage the supervisee's growth as a professional. Communication is mutual and mirrors the kind of communication staff should strive for with families.

Regularity: All relationships take time to build, and if supervision is to be useful, a reliable allocation of time be devoted to it. This will only occur when management supports this allocation of resources and protects it as a valuable contribution to quality services.

Test Questions

1. Creating an environment for families where they are treated with respect, where power is shared, where strengths are celebrated, and where peoples needs are met begins

<input type="checkbox"/>	a.	with mental health professional working with each family.
<input type="checkbox"/>	b.	when the SS/PI staff complete the Partnership Agreement.
<input type="checkbox"/>	c.	when the family asks for this service.
<input type="checkbox"/>	d.	when the workplace environment provides the same for staff.

2. Conflict among staff

<input type="checkbox"/>	a.	is always unprofessional and will not be tolerated in Head Start.
<input type="checkbox"/>	b.	must always be handled by the management staff.
<input type="checkbox"/>	c.	is inevitable and is to be handled through peaceful conflict resolution which respects individuals.
<input type="checkbox"/>	d.	must always be hidden from parents and others outside the Center or office.

3. Resources available to us in Head Start for mental health in the workplace

<input type="checkbox"/>	a.	are limited to our mental health professional staff.
<input type="checkbox"/>	b.	include mental health professional staff, Family Advocates, Resource Associates, and our EAP program.
<input type="checkbox"/>	c.	are entirely dependent upon the staff in the Center or office environment.

<input type="checkbox"/>	d.	are a luxury that Head Start cannot afford.
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4. Mental health support to staff includes

<input type="checkbox"/>	a.	acknowledgment of the emotional demands put on all of our staff.
<input type="checkbox"/>	b.	supportive relationships between staff.
<input type="checkbox"/>	c.	providing regular supervision/consultation.
<input type="checkbox"/>	d.	all of the above.
