

Supporting Families in Crisis: Potentially Dangerous Situation

Taken from [Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community](#)

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

- ✓ **Identify** situations that pose particular risk to the safety to children and family systems;
- ✓ **Take** steps to protect children and family members in danger;
- ✓ **Recognize** situations that raise personal safety issues and apply strategies for reducing personal risk in those situations; and
- ✓ **Recognize** and **respond** appropriately to warning signs in the behaviors of family members.

Key Concepts The key concepts of this training activity that support the skills needed for crisis prevention include:

- ✓ **Crisis situations may pose some degree of risk to the safety of family members and staff.** Since erratic, unpredictable behaviors can be characteristic of people in crisis, a crisis presents some risk to the safety of those involved in the situation. The potential for physical harm exists in any emotionally charged crisis situation; that potential should never be overlooked or discounted by staff.
- ✓ **Staff skills in handling a potentially dangerous situations shape intervention decisions.** Sometimes, staff find themselves faced with, or caught up in, a family situation that is too complex or too dangerous for them to address directly. At such time, it is critical for staff to recognize the situation is beyond their intervention abilities and to discuss alternatives with their supervisor.
- ✓ **Family situations (or family histories) involving child maltreatment, spouse abuse, emotional disorders, criminal acts, and/or substance abuse**

may require special safety measures. The best predictor of impending danger is behavior. Safety measures are called for if a family member's current or past behavior includes violent/abusive acts, threats of harm, criminal activities, the use of addictive substances, signs of a serious emotional disorder, or threats of suicide. These measures are need at several points in the intervention process; before face-to-face visits with the family, during face-to-face visits, and as part of referral and follow-up services.

- ✓ **Staff must always be aware of behaviors and situations that signal danger.** Some violent incidents may be predicted, by many helping professionals fail to recognize the signs of potential violence. Signs of loss of control and impending danger are not limited to expressions of anger and hostility. Instead, the signs include sensing that a situation is dangerous; knowing the family has access to guns or other weapons; awareness of violent acts or threats by family friends or relatives; and mounting tension, irritability, agitation, brooding, and/or limit-testing witnessed in family members.

- ✓ **The issue of staff safety can and must be addressed at many levels.** Because violence is becoming increasingly commonplace in our society, the very nature of work with highly stressed families calls for improved safety measures for Head Start staff. The threat of violence does not occur only in the homes of families, or in high-crime neighborhoods, but also in the seemingly secure surroundings of the workplace. Staff must feel and be safe if they are to support families. Work conditions favorable to violence prevention require action at management, supervisory, and personal levels.

Background Information

With violence and other dangers escalating in the streets, in the workplace, and the home, the issue of family and staff safety is one of mounting concern today. This module examines the issue of staff and family safety at a number of levels: risk management, the protection of family members, staff self-protection strategies, and program safety measures. This module prepares staff to assess fight and flight defenses and provides strategies for dealing with threatening behaviors.

Risk Assessment in Crisis Situations

Prevention is the first line of defense against behaviors that place staff in danger. Prevention begins with education and program policies designed to prepare staff for dangerous encounters. All staff must be alert to signs of impending danger, know ways to avoid becoming entangled in a dangerous situation, and know how to escape from a threatening or violent person.

Crisis or emotionally charged situations may pose some risk to the safety of families and staff. To protect family members, as well as themselves, staff must be alert to danger or risk. First, be attentive to the psychological effects of a crisis. If a family exhibits any psychological effects, such as a bout of severe depression, a parent's refusal to take prescribed medication for an emotional disorder, impulsive behavior, or difficulty thinking clearly, there is reason to proceed cautiously. The crisis state is likely to intensify a family's past difficulties and increase current risks.

Second, the crisis itself may pose danger to family members or to staff. For example, a crisis brought on by spouse abuse, gang activity, unsafe living conditions, or a drug overdose suggests that children's safety may be at stake. There are also risks to the safety of adult family members in such situations, as well as to the safety of anyone who attempts to intervene.

Third, because a crisis can have a harmful impact on family members and family functioning, there is always some potential for danger. For example, overwhelming anxiety may undermine a parent's ability to exercise self-control when a child misbehaves, to complete routine parenting tasks, or to curtail hostile feelings toward those seen as causing the crisis. If a state of crisis continues without supportive intervention, there are additional risks. Family members may attempt to gain control over their anxiety through an array of destructive behaviors that increase the risks to everyone involved.

While the risks to the safety of families and staff cannot be predicted with absolute certainty, the risks are lessened when staff are aware of the danger signs. The ***Danger Assessment Checklist*** is designed to alert staff to family behaviors and situations that suggest safety measures are called for.

Situations:

- ? Does the family have a history of child abuse/neglect or other forms of family violence?
- ? Is there any information to suggest a family member is (or may be) emotionally unstable?
- ? Is there any information regarding the family's access to guns or other weapons?
- ? Does the family live in an extremely isolated location? In a dangerous neighborhood?

- ? Does the family keep any animals in the home or yard?
- ? Does the home environment appear unsafe for the child(ren) due to deteriorating physical conditions or lack of other basic necessities?
- ? Are there any indicators to suggest the family may flee from the home/community? A parent may flee with a child(ren)?
- ? Do you sense that the family situation is unsafe? Are your instincts signalling danger?

Behaviors:

- ? Is violence or aggressive behavior exhibited by family, friends, and/or relatives?
- ? Is substance abuse or drug dealing an issue in the family?
- ? Has an adult family member ever shown sharp mood swings or other types of volatile behavior?
- ? Has an adult family member ever made verbal threats, screamed, or cursed at you? Other Head Start staff? Other persons in authority?
- ? Has an adult family member ever caused property damage to home or elsewhere during an outburst of anger?
- ? Has an adult family member ever physically assaulted anyone?
- ? Has an adult family member ever been arrested for physical assault, disorderly conduct, or property damage?
- ? Is any family member threatening to harm himself/herself or someone else?
- ? Have there been any reports of reckless driving on the part of family members?
- ? Has a family member ever talked about committing a violent act?
- ? Has a family member ever expressed fears or concerns about losing control, taking a drug overdose, or harming someone?

? Do a family member's words or actions suggest being out of touch with reality?
Being suicidal? Being severely depressed?

? During a conversation with family members, have you noticed any bodily signs of escalating aggression such as changes in skin color, breathing patterns, or posture?

? During conversations with family members, have you noticed a marked increase in angry, brooding, or sullen behavior; irritability; verbal outbursts; pacing; restlessness; agitation; or testing limits?

? Have the behaviors of any family member ever frightened you?

It is equally important for staff to recognize "fight" and "flight" behavior defenses. Fight and flight behaviors are natural ways people defend themselves and try to gain control over stressful situations. Fight defenses are spurred by the need to be the "winner" or to "out-do" someone else. Flight defenses are used to avoid painful feelings or situations. Although these two defenses are commonly seen in people in stressful or crisis situations, the behaviors that characterize them can be quite difficult to deal with. Some guidelines include:

Guidelines for *Fight* Behaviors

- ✓ Presenting yourself as being a calm, relaxed, and confident "helper" - someone who is in control of himself/herself and can keep the situation from getting out of control.
- ✓ Speak in a low tone of voice.
- ✓ Maintain a matter-of-fact attitude, don't appear bossy, demanding, threatening, lecturing, accusing, or brusque.
- ✓ Suggest that everyone sit down to talk.
- ✓ Make sure you explain your role clearly, since some fight behaviors may be due to confusion about your intentions.
- ✓ Give the person "space" by keeping a distance of about three feet, breaking eye contact, and respecting silence.
- ✓ Recognize upset/angry/resentful feelings and give the person time to vent and de-stress.
- ✓ Stay in tune with your non-verbal messages, unknowingly, you may be encouraging the fight behaviors by acting cold and detached, tense, agitated, angry or afraid.
- ✓ Let the person know there are acceptable escape routes for changing or ending the discussion. ("I hear how angry you are right now. Do you think it would be better for you if we took a short break or talked at another time?")
- ✓ Use "I" messages to present positive alternatives and to define the limits. ("I think there are a number of ways Head Start could help your family. I'd like to tell you about them and hear what you think sounds best.")

- ✓ Suggest that you get off to a fresh start together by talking about other topics, such as family support resources.
- ✓ Point out and reinforce the strengths in the family and individual family members.

Guidelines for *Flight* Behaviors

- ✓ Be as supportive as possible. Make positive statements about the family's strengths, suggest alternatives for resolving the crisis, let the person know you will stick by him or her until the end of the crisis.
 - ✓ Encourage the expression of painful emotions. ("I like to hear more about how you're feeling right now ... I understand how angry/sad you are, I would feel the same way.")
 - ✓ Repeat key questions or ideas several times to keep the conversation focused on the issues at hand.
 - ✓ Explain the consequences of the flight behaviors honestly and directly. ("I think I can help your family, if you give me a chance." "I have to hear what you want to do about this in order to help.")
 - ✓ Let the person know you are confident about his/her ability to overcome the crisis. Point out success, strengths, and resources, as well as constructive steps that can be taken now.
 - ✓ Use reframing to shift a person's views about life events from the negative to the positive.
 - ✓ Help the person feel in control of like by encouraging decision making. ("You and I could go to the food stamp office together, or you could go by yourself. Which sounds better to you?")
 - ✓ Point out the person's options for handling the situation. ("Since you want to stop drinking, you could join Alcoholics Anonymous or get counseling at the substance abuse treatment center.")
 - ✓ Let the person know you believe he/she is important, deserving, and capable. ("Anyone would have a hard time handling this; you'll be able to get everything straightened out with the resources available to your family.")
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Test Questions:

- 1. If a family exhibits any psychological effects due to a crisis this is not reason enough to proceed cautiously.**
 - True
 - False

2. Family members may attempt to gain control over their anxiety through an array of destructive behaviors that increase the risks to everyone involved.

True

False

3 Danger signs can be summarized as being situational and emotional.

True

False

4. Fight and flight behaviors are natural ways people defend themselves and try to gain control over stressful situations.

True

False

Protection of Family Members

When risk assessment raises staff concern about the safety of family members, staff must take protective steps. The steps may range from consulting with supervisors about how to address the safety concerns directly (e.g., helping the family to acquire food or other life-sustaining resources) to requesting emergency intervention from community agencies (e.g., child protective services, law enforcement, paramedics). However, for the steps to be viable alternatives, they require groundwork at program management and supervisory levels.

A comprehensive Head Start approach to family safety includes:

Immediate staff access to professionals with expertise in the areas of concern, such as child abuse and neglect specialists, health and mental health consultants, substance abuse treatment specialists, domestic violence experts, and law enforcement officers.

Working relationships with child protective, family preservation, health, mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, and law enforcement agencies in the community that permit and encourage joint Head Start - community agency home visits when family or staff safety issues arise;

Written program protocols, in accord with state, local, and tribal laws, for reporting threats of violence, suspected child maltreatment, spouse

abuse, and illegal activities to appropriate authorities;

Internal program mechanisms, such as a Head Start crisis assessment and intervention team, available to guide and support staff in making decisions about family safety issues; and

Professional consultation opportunities for staff to explore and deal with their own reactions to upsetting family situations, such as the abuse of a child or a parent's involuntary commitment to a mental hospital.

A comprehensive set of safety measures allows staff to be more effective in their work with families. Action must be taken at management, supervisory, and direct service levels to make family and worker safety a priority. An appropriate staff response in a dangerous situation is crucial to ensure personal and family safety. In a dangerous situation, staff should not work in isolation. Head Start resources, as well as resources in the broader community, must be available to assist staff whenever risky situations arise.

Staff Self-Protective Strategies

Physical and verbal assaults against helping professionals are not a new or a rare phenomenon. Professional literature suggests four major themes associated with worker safety:

- ✓ Verbal and physical assaults against staff are on the increase across the country;
- ✓ Many human service programs have ignored the personal safety risks staff face in their work with families;
- ✓ Staff tend to overlook or discount on-the-job risks to their own safety; and
- ✓ Human service programs must make worker safety a policy and practice priority.

Activities in this module are intended to bring worker safety issues to the forefront in local Head Start programs. While some safety precautions require action at the program level, there are a number of self-protective measures staff can implement on their own. These include:

- ✓ **Taking time to assess the dangers in a crisis situation before meeting with the family.** Staff must ask themselves a basic question, "How dangerous is this crisis situation?" A review of family records, telephone conversations with family members about the crisis and its impact on the family, and discussions with co-workers about their experiences with the family all contribute to the risk-assessment process.

Reviewing the ***Danger Assessment Checklist***, is one way staff can be more alert of impending danger.

- ✓ **Informing supervisors or others about home visit plans.** Plans for home visits should always be made know to supervisors or other staff. As a routine, staff should record where they are going (e.g., the family's address and telephone number) and how long they expect to be there. If visiting plans change, staff should make sure their supervisors stay informed.

The Performance Standards emphasize the importance of visits in the home setting to maximize the personal interaction of staff with parents and children. However, the standards also encourage staff to take additional steps to involve their supervisors in decisions about home visiting plans when a family or neighborhood situation presents significant safety hazards. Joint decisions should be made about the safest private place to meet the family, who will be present during the meeting, and what staff will do if threatening circumstances arise during the meeting. Visits after normal working hours require additional planning decisions to make sure someone at Head Start knows the details.

- ✓ **Using formal/informal buddy systems.** Staff should not hesitate to call on a "buddy" to accompany them on a home visit. In fact, many human service programs now have policies that require or entitle staff to a buddy during potentially dangerous field activities. Buddies might be other Head Start staff or service providers from the community, such as mental health/crisis team workers, child protective services workers, visiting nurses, or any professionals already know to the family. In a situation that seems particularly dangerous, a police companion may be the most appropriate buddy. Generally, staff should always consider buddies when:
 - The family has a history of physical assaults or threats of violence, a criminal conviction involving the use of a weapon, or a disorderly persons offense;
 - There are reports of any form of family violence (e.g., child abuse, spouse abuse), and the alleged abuser lives in or close to the home;

- A visit is to be made in a know drug-use location and/or a high-crime neighborhood; and
 - The family has recently experienced the involuntary removal of a child from the home.
- ✓ **Following home visiting safety guidelines.** Staff may inadvertently place themselves at risk of harm by not exercising common sense during home visits and trips through high-crime neighborhoods. Some methods to lessen risk are:
- Always make sure someone at Head Start knows your visiting schedule, including the family's name, address, telephone number, the date and time of your visit, and when you expect to return.
 - If an upcoming home visit presents significant safety hazards, talk with you supervisor or a trusted co-worker before you make the visit. Consider alternative private sites for visiting with the family, take a buddy, or agree on a check-in time.
 - Know what behaviors in others set you off or provoke you, and ways you can respond to the behaviors without placing yourself in danger.
 - If you are unfamiliar with the neighborhood surrounding the family's home, take time to learn about it so that you know what to expect. Identify the safest route for getting there and back, and resources for getting help, if needed.
 - Make sure your car is in good running condition, has enough gas, and is kept locked at all times; keep a flashlight and a first aid-kit in your car, back your car into parking spaces.
 - Do not park your car in someone's assigned parking space, or block anyone's access to his/her car.
 - Wear clothes and shoes that make a quick escape possible; keep your car keys in your pocket or hand - not in your purse.
 - Leave your valuable possessions at home; don't make yourself a target by carrying a purse, having valuables in your purse, or wearing expensive jewelry.
 - Take dog biscuits along t calm excited/aggressive dogs.
 - Act confident and sure of yourself, ignore provocative comments or behaviors; keep your hands free; don't walk through a group of people

standing together on the sidewalk/street.

- Get to know someone who lives or works in the community surrounding the family's home - someone you could go to for help, if needed.
- Trust your instincts regarding danger. Stay attuned to signals in your body that suggest you are feeling anxious and need to take action, such as rapid heart beat, cold sweat, dry mouth, shaking, and upset stomach.
- If you feel frightened or unsafe during a home visit, listen to your feelings, remain calm but leave as quickly as possible.
- During potentially dangerous home visits, position yourself near a door leading to the outside, don't get between family members who are angrily confronting each other; ask for a glass of water to give upset family members time to "cool off."
- Don't reveal information about yourself or your family that could increase the risk of being harmed by someone.
- If a family member becomes verbally abusive or agitated, respond calmly and quietly with "I" messages, such as "I know you are feeling angry about" Keep your statements matter of fact, simple and direct. Keep a physical distance of a least three feet. Don't reach out to touch the person, don't stand in front of him/her, don't turn your back to the person, don't get up from a chair while the person is sitting, or don't try to leave too abruptly.
- Immediately report any dangerous or threatening incidents experienced during a home visit to your supervisor.

Learning appropriate self-defense strategies. Encourage staff to learn appropriate self-defense strategies, which can range from carrying a whistle to practicing the martial arts.

Test Questions:

5. In a dangerous situation, staff should not work in isolation.

- True
- False

6. Professional literature suggests many human service programs have over emphasized the personal safety risks staff face in their work with families;
- True
- False
- 7 Plans for home visits, including family's name, address, and telephone number should always be made know to supervisors or other staff.
- True
- False
8. If you feel frightened or unsafe during a home visit, listen to your feelings, remain calm but understand it is unprofessional to leave before you are finished.
- True
- False
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Program Measures Aimed at Staff Safety

Worker safety requires more than self-protective measures; to make worker safety a reality, local Head Start programs must adopt additional measures. Program measures aimed at staff safety include:

- ✓ **Creating a Head Start staff safety guidebook.** Armed with a safety guidebook, staff are in a better position to support families in crisis with less risk to their personal safety. Topics that could be included in the guidebook are indicators of potentially dangerous family or home situations, steps to alert all Head Start staff to the risks or dangers in a situation, tips for intervening with persons under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, optional safe and private settings for visiting families, buddy system policy and guidelines, and actions to take when threatening circumstances arise during family visits.

- ✓ **Providing mandatory safety training for Head Start staff.** Training devoted to worker safety in the field is strongly advised for all staff. Police officers are a good training source. Training topics might include how to

recognize and avoid potentially violent situations, how to recognize potentially dangerous physical layouts, how to avoid being cornered, and how to get out of high-risk situations.

- ✓ **Forming a Head Start staff safety committee.** A safety committee, composed of staff representing different job positions and management, is a good vehicle for making improved worker safety a program priority. Local program measures to improve worker safety, recommended by a safety committee, could be to install a security system at the program site, tighten procedures for screening program visitors, establish protocols to handle medical and other emergencies at the program site, and provide shuttle services, transporting workers to their cars when they are parked in a high-crime or remote area.

- ✓ **Determining protocols for assisting staff who are victims of violence.** Dangerous family situations take an emotional toll on staff. Signs that the staff member's optimism and objectivity needed for family intervention are waning include:
 - Feelings of exhaustion, being "bogged down" and "burned out";
 - Not involving families in decisions or plans affecting them;
 - Feelings that a family does not really want to change or has very few, if any strengths;
 - Thinking or worrying constantly about a family;
 - Blurred boundaries between the family's situation and situations staff have experienced themselves;
 - A desire to "hang on" to a family, even though it is time to end the relationship; or
 - A great need to be successful, and maintain or stabilize the family at all costs, even when family and personal safety are at risk.

Help from supervisors and co-workers to deal with feelings stirred by a dangerous situation is an essential program component. Concern must be shown for staff who experience the pain and trauma of an assault or intimidating threat. Ways that management can show sensitivity to the needs of staff include providing available information on medical and therapeutic resources available to help staff recover from the trauma, arranging for a buddy to accompany a victimized worker on field visits, and establishing program provisions that give a

victimized worker immediate access to a trained trauma counselor.

- ✓ **Utilizing communication systems.** In line with the technological breakthroughs of recent years, cellular phones, car phones, two-way radios, pagers, and push-button call-for-assistance devices offer Head Start staff readily available means of communication. These communication systems not only help to ensure staff safety, but also make it possible for staff to get emergency help for families while in homes with telephones.
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Test Questions:

9. A sign that the staff member's optimism and objectivity needed for family intervention is waning could include feelings that a family does not really want to change or has very few, if any strengths.

- True
- False

10. A sign that the staff member's optimism and objectivity needed for family intervention is waning could include not involving families in decisions or plans affecting them.

- True
 - False
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1.F, 2.T, 3.F, 4.T, 5.T, 6.F, 7.T, 8.F, 9.T, 10.T