Supporting Families in Crisis: Prevention

Taken from Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community

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

- **Identify** families at risk of crisis;

- **use** a strengths perspective and solution-focused approach in their work with families; and

- **engage** families in developing and implementing solution-focused plans targeted on crisis prevention.
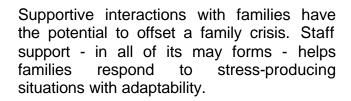
Key Concepts   The key concepts of this training activity that support the skills needed for crisis prevention include:
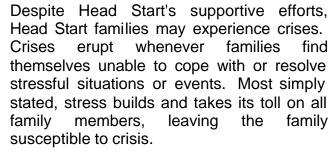
- **A crisis is an upset in a steady state causing a disruption in a family's usual way of functioning.** Families in crisis may find that their usual ways of coping or problem solving do not work; as a result, a crisis may be a time of heightened family stress and anxiety.
- **Crisis prevention is aimed at relieving family stress.** Many families experience stress and need support at some time. The interdisciplinary resources of the Head Start community are particularly well-suited to address the needs of families experiencing stress. Most families are open to help and support tin overcoming the stress-producing situations. Often, Head Start's work with families in this area is geared toward crisis prevention.
- **Some crises can be anticipated and prevented, while others crisis situations require support.** Certain life situations or events may lead to mounting tension and stress. Families, under stress and operating outside of their usual range of experience, are often open to help and support before crises erupt. In order for staff to anticipate and prevent crises, they should watch for stress-producing situations or events and then work in partnership with a family to find solutions.
- **A strength perspective, which staff can bring to families, is the key to crisis prevention.** The strengths

perspective emphasizes respect for the way the family views itself and its world. It accentuates what the family has accomplished and does well, and builds on these competencies to find solutions to stress-producing situations or events.

- **Solution-focused plans work to prevent crisis.** A solution-focused approach, which is based upon the strengths perspective, is designed to prevent a family crisis. Solution-focused plans are statements, written by families, with staff assistance, that spell out solutions to the major causes or sources of family stress.

Background Information

Supportive interactions with families have the potential to offset a family crisis. Staff support - in all of its may forms - helps families respond to stress-producing situations with adaptability.

Despite Head Start's supportive efforts, Head Start families may experience crises. Crises erupt whenever families find themselves unable to cope with or resolve stressful situations or events. Most simply stated, stress builds and takes its toll on all family members, leaving the family susceptible to crisis.

This module brings into focus the crisis prevention aspect of Head Start's work with families. Staff are encouraged to identify families particularly at risk of crises and help them find solutions to the issues that they see as the most stress-producing. The family support skills taught in other modules provide the basis for this module's solutions-focused approach to crisis prevention. In this module, staff learn some additional techniques for employing those skills in their partnerships with families.

Identifying Families at Risk of Crisis

Although no family is immune to crisis, some families are particularly vulnerable. Early identification and support by Head Start staff may help the family avoid a crisis. This module offers staff a starting place for identifying families at risk of crisis.

Family Situations. Examples include the desertion of a parent, a runaway teen, an unplanned pregnancy, a serious illness or injury, neighbors' complaints about the family, a child abuse and neglect investigation, illegal drugs use, or spouse abuse. Events that many families view as happy times, such as a marriage, the birth of a child, a child going to Head Start or public school for the first time, an adolescent becoming more independent, a grown child leaving the home, a family's move to a new community, a new job, or retirement, can be very stressful times for other family.

Economic Situations. Sudden or chronic financial strain caused by loss of employment or public assistance, a theft of household cash or belongings, high medical expenses, missed child support payments, haphazard credit card use, and money "lost" to gambling or drug addiction lead to family crisis.

Community Situations. Examples of stressful community events include deliberate acts of violence, such as drive-by shootings, neighborhood riots or civil disturbances, and gang activities. Crowded or deteriorating housing conditions, lack of access to culturally appropriate community resources and services, and inadequate educational programs are some other ways a community may contribute to family crisis.

Natural Elements. Disasters such as floods, hurricanes, fires, and earthquakes can create crises for families. Even extended periods of high heat and humidity, gloomy weather, and excessively cold weather can be very stressful and contribute to family crisis.

Attentive staff encounter many opportunities to identify families at risk. The on-going process of developing family partnerships through home visits, meetings with a family about a child's progress, observations of children's and parent's behaviors, news about a significant event in the life of a family, and/or remarks made by parents during seemingly casual conversations may signal that a family is in distress. The identification of families at risk hinges on staff with "antennas" always up to receive the signals.

Engaging Families in Crisis Prevention

When engaging families in crisis prevention, staff must come from a strengths - rather than a deficit - perspective. A strengths perspective rests on five basic assumptions. First and foremost, despite life's problems, all people possess strengths. Second, family motivation is encouraged by an emphasis on strengths. Third, the discovery of family strengths occurs through a cooperative partnership between staff and families. Fourth, a focus on strengths reduces the temptation to "blame the victim" and shows, instead, how the family has managed to survive. Fifth, all environments and situations - even the most bleak - contain strengths.

Once a family signals distress, it is critical for staff to reach out and show interest in hearing about the family's situation. Some families may not take or need the assistance offered by staff, but might still feel supported knowing that Head Start cares about them. Others may not be ready to explore "private" family matters with staff, but will be ready at a later time. Most families, however, will welcome staff into their lives, relieved that someone cares and wants to listen and help.

Test Questions:

1. *The strength perspective is an excellent approach, but if the family had the needed strength they would not need help from Head Start.*

    ☐ **True**

    ☐ **False**

2. *Solution-focused plans are statements, written by families, with staff assistance, that spells out solutions to major stressors.*

    ☐ **True**

☐　**False**

3　*Economics would not be considered an important stress factor for Head Start families because they all meet federal poverty guidelines.*

☐　**True**

☐　**False**

4.　*A focus on strengths reduces the temptation to "blame the victim" and shows, instead, how the family has managed to survive.*

☐　**True**

☐　**False**

Solution-Focused Approach

A solution-focused approach, which is based upon a strengths perspective, helps families shift away from a focus on "problems" to a focus on "solutions." Listening to a family marks the beginning of a solution-focused approach to crisis prevention. Staff ask family members to talk about what is causing them the most stress - how the issue is affecting them and their family - and the kind of crisis they fear the family will experience if no solution is found. Staff then support the family as members find solutions. Some strategies include:

Stress Reduction

One way to prevent crisis is through stress reduction. A family must be able to deal effectively with stress-producing situations in order to prevent an escalating state of crisis. Stress, when dealt with appropriately, can energize the family to grow, learn, connect, and achieve. Families that are able to see (or are helped to see) a stressful situation or event as a challenge, rather that as a threat, are likely to resolve or adapt to the situation quickly. Typically, such families have solved problems well in the past. With support and encouragement, families can avoid crises by learning and practicing stress reduction strategies that are well within their reach.

Some stress reduction strategies that staff can offer families to help ease tension include getting physical activity, making

time for fun, or practicing positive self-talk. This families are able to find the coping skills and resources to master the stressful situations, which leaves them stronger and better prepared for dealing with stress in the future.

Guided Conversations

Through guided conversations, staff use questions to find solutions to stress-producing situations or events. It is important for staff to adapt these questions to their own personality and style of relating, as well as to the family's. Types of questions include:

? **Wish questions**, to lead the family to where it wants to be;

? **Exception-finding questions**, to uncover the ways family members have solved or managed problems in the past. These questions also heighten awareness of the contributions, or the strengths, of family members which lead to previous solutions.

? **Scaling questions**, to help both the family, and staff break down complex issues into concrete and measurable terms.

? **Coping questions**, to produce up upswing in the family's confidence and motivation. The new-found confidence and motivation become yet other examples of family strengths for staff to recognize and affirm; and

? **"What's better" questions**, to provide staff opportunities to point out and reinforce how the thoughts, actions, and feelings of family members contributed to improving the stressful situation.

Solution -focused Plans

Families showing signs of severe distress are likely to require a more comprehensive approach to crisis prevention. Solution-focused plans, designed to prevent crises, are made by families with the assistance of staff, they pinpoint solutions

to the major causes or sources of family stress. A solution-focused plan is based on the following questions:

? What stress-producing situation(s) is the family facing?

? What issue is causing the most stress for the family?

? What are the family's options for resolving the situation?

? Which option(s) does the family want to try first?

? What strengths and/or resources are available within the family to improve the situation? The broader community?

For example, if a single unemployed mother sees herself as being physically drained from the demands of parenting and has no sources of support, a solutions-focused plan "to find someone to watch my kids two afternoons a week" might be one route toward her rejuvenation. Achieving this seemingly simple plan might require many steps for both the mother and the worker. The mother may need help from staff to develop a list of potential baby-sitters (e.g., other Head Start families, neighbors, relatives, friends from church); practice asking for help; or decide how she will make good use of her "free" time. The staff person may need to check out community resources that provide respite for parents in distress; introduce the mother to other Head Start parents; suggest stress reduction strategies the mother might try when feeling overwhelmed; and, encourage the mom to pursue her talents and special interests.

There is no "magic" crisis prevention recipe. Each family has different strengths, beliefs, needs, and desires. Even families experiencing similar stressors will require different types of responses. The challenge to staff is to sharpen their focus on families at risk of crisis, bring out a strengths perspective in these families, and lead the families toward solutions before crises erupt.

Test Questions:

5. The first step to a solutions-focused approach is to make a detailed

analysis of the problem.

☐   **True**

☐   **False**

6. *Through guided conversations, staff use questions to find solutions to stress-producing situations or events.*

☐   **True**

☐   **False**

7 *Scaling questions help both the family, and staff break down complex issues into concrete and measurable terms.*

☐   **True**

☐   **False**

8. *Even families experiencing similar stressors will require different types of responses.*

☐   **True**

☐   **False**