

Supporting Families in Crisis: Responding

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

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

- ❖ **Develop** a planned response for supporting and stabilizing a family in crisis;
- ❖ **Make** appropriate decisions about their role in the crisis intervention process; and
- ❖ **Use** crisis intervention techniques to help defuse a family crisis.

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

- ❖ **Crisis intervention is an intensive short-term service.** As a carefully planned and focused service, crisis intervention addresses the "here and now" needs of the family through the resources of the family, Head Start, and the broader community. Crisis intervention is guided by six primary goals, which aim to stabilize the family.
- ❖ **In working with families in crisis, Head Start staff must always be aware of how their own feelings are affecting them and the intervention process.** Sometimes staff experience feelings similar to those of families in crisis. They become overwhelmed, angry, confused, frustrated, hopeless, anxious, helpless, etc. When such feelings go unheeded, they take a draining toll on staff and the family partnership. Thus, it is important for Head Start to provide staff with opportunities to explore their reactions to a family crisis, their level of comfort in handling the crisis, and any personal values or feelings that may make professional boundaries difficult to maintain.
- ❖ **Skillful crisis interveners involve the entire family in the assessment and problem-solving processes.** Families are systems, what affects one member of a family affects other family members. Therefore, whenever possible, the skillful crisis intervener encourages all family members to share their

views about the crisis, what they want help with, and how they want the situation to change. It may take many hours of active listening and observing for a crisis intervener to sort out the family interactions, conditions, and/or events that triggered the crisis, and to help the family choose a path for resolving the crisis.

- ❖ **Families in crisis often require specialized crisis intervention services.** Unresolved crisis can cause a serious breakdown in parent, child, and family functioning. For Head Start programs, crisis may take up a large amount of staff time and energy. As a result, other Head Start families in need of support and crisis prevention services may go unserved. To ease the dilemma, Head Start's response to a family in crisis should primarily be to assess the situation, provide support where appropriate, and refer the family to a crisis intervention program or to an intensive family support program in the community. Such programs, often publicly funded, are called family preservation services or home-based counseling services.

Background Information

This module focuses on crisis intervention and the role of Head Start in carrying out or supporting that process.

Crisis Intervention Goals

Crisis intervention is guided by six goals, which influence decisions about Head Start's role with a family in crisis and aim to stabilize and strengthen the family. Major goals are to:

- ❖ **Identify** and understand the crisis triggering event(s);
- ❖ **Relieve** the acute symptoms of stress being experienced by the family and individual family members.
- ❖ **Restore** the family and family members to their best pre-crisis levels of functioning or better;
- ❖ **Identify** the steps the family, Head Start staff, and community resources providers can take to remedy the crisis;
- ❖ **Establish** a connection between the family's current situation and past

experiences; and

- ❖ **Support** the family's use of new ways of coping with stressful situations.

The Crisis Intervention Role of Head Start Staff

The role of Head Start staff is generally one of recognizing and assessing the crisis situation, listening and providing reassurance, and helping the family to use specialized resources in the broader community. Sometimes, however, the Head Start staff member may be the crisis intervention team leader.

The crisis intervention role of staff varies from family to family, depending upon many factors. Important considerations include:

- ❖ **The Nature of the Crisis.** Some crisis situations may require specialized crisis intervention from a doctor, a mental health counselor, a lawyer or substance abuse treatment specialist.
- ❖ **Family and Staff Safety.** If a family crisis poses serious risk to the safety of family members, staff, or the community, lead responsibility for crisis intervention is usually shifted to law enforcement agencies, child protective services, or domestic violence programs.
- ❖ **The Strength of the Current Staff-Family Partnership.** Families in crisis are likely to be most open to the intervention of staff whom they already know and trust. If a strong staff-family partnership exists, it is best for the partnership to continue with staff supporting the crisis intervener.
- ❖ **Staff Availability.** A family in crisis may require a significant number of staff hours each week. The staffing resources of the Head Start community may not allow for the frequent and intense contacts the lead role requires.
- ❖ **The Availability of Specialized Crisis Intervention Programs.** Many communities today have government-funded programs designed to stabilize and support families during crisis. Such programs are usually accessed through social services, child welfare, mental and physical health services, and court services.
- ❖ **Local Program Policy.** In line with community partnerships, local programs may have interagency agreements or protocols that spell out crisis intervention roles and responsibilities. Thus, local policy may determine the type and extent of Head Start's role with a family in crisis.

When it is inadvisable or inappropriate for Head Start to take the lead role in crisis intervention, there are still ways staff can support a family in crisis. Example include:

- ❖ **Referring** the family to specialized community services;
 - ❖ **Being** the family's advocate;
 - ❖ **Offering** practical and emotional support to the family and assistance to the lead program as services are provided; and
 - ❖ **Supporting** the lead program's intervention with the family.
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Test Questions:

1. **For crisis intervention to be effective for Head Start families, a Head Start staff member would always be the most appropriate intervener.**
 - True
 - False

2. **Specialized interventions, such as medical care, must always work through the Head Start staff with Head Start families.**
 - True
 - False

3. **When it is inadvisable or inappropriate for Head Start to take the lead role in crisis intervention, the Head Start staff should stay out of the intervention process entirely.**
 - True
 - False

4. **Some crisis situations may require specialized crisis intervention from a doctor, a mental health counselor, a lawyer or substance abuse treatment specialist.**
 - True
 - False

Step of Crisis Intervention

Crisis intervention is a short-term, carefully planned, and focused service that addresses the "here and now" needs of the family through the resources of the family, Head Start, and the broader community. Whether Head Start staff assume the lead crisis intervention role or act as a support system to the family and the community resources involved, they should observe eight basic steps:

- ❖ **Step 1: Assess the crisis situation.** In this first step, the crisis intervener involves the family in an exploration of such questions as:

What happened? Is anyone in danger? Who is involved?
What triggered the crisis? When did the triggering event occur?
What are the immediate effects of the crisis on the family?
Where do we go from here?

- ❖ **Step 2: Rapidly form a family partnership.** Families in crisis are likely to be most open to an intervener whom they already know and trust. If a family does not already have a trusting relationship with staff, staff should quickly lay the groundwork for a family partnership by evoking sincerity, nonjudgmental attitude, and sensitivity to the family's feelings and situation. belief in the family's ability to overcome the crisis also encourages the family to partner with staff.
- ❖ **Step 3: Examine contributing elements.** After rapport is established with the family, the crisis intervener's focus turns to the stress-producing situation(s), coping strategies, unmet family responsibilities, or lack of supports that contributed to the crisis.

Every family member needs to be given the chance to express his or her opinion about what happened and why; different opinions help the intervener gain a complete picture of all the contributing factors. Discussion is encouraged with comments, such as:

I can see you are really upset. Can you tell me what happened? Can you remember when you began feeling this way?
Can you tell me what started all this? Have you been under a lot of stress?

- ❖ **Step 4: Assess family strengths and coping strategies.** To help the family develop effective strategies for dealing with the crisis, the intervener focuses on family strengths, including ways the family has coped and problem-solved well in the past. During this step, the crisis intervener;
 - Encourages a strengths perspective in the family by identifying and

- reinforcing family strengths and resources;
 - Explores the family's current strategies and alternatives for coping with the crisis; and
 - Clarifies family priorities (What do you want to have happen? What do you want to change? What do you want to do?)

- ❖ **Step 5: Decide on the role of Head Start staff.** The crisis intervention role of staff may vary from family to family. Head Start's response to a family in crisis should primarily be to refer the family to a program providing the needed services, a crisis intervention program, or family support program in the community. Questions to ask when deciding on the role of Head Start staff include:
 - What is the nature of the crisis? Does it require specialized services?
 - Is any family member in danger due to the crisis?
 - What is the strength of the current staff-family partnership?
 - Can Head Start staff devote the appropriate time and resources to defuse the crisis?
 - Are specialized community intervention programs available in the community?
 - Does local program policy clarify the crisis intervention services offered by Head Start staff?

- ❖ **Step 6: Take action.** Once the Head Start staff members has decided on his/her appropriate role, he/she must take action and either: 1) assume the lead in crisis intervention and develop and implement an action plan; or 2) find appropriate resources and make referrals.
 - *Develop and implement an action plan.* Rather than attempt to address all the issues affecting a family in crisis, the crisis intervener helps the family to examine its needs and establish priorities. This intervener then helps the family develop an action plan in response to the family's chosen priorit(ies). The action plan needs to be brief, simple, and have short time limits set for its completion in order to ensure success. Armed with a concrete action plan, the family begins to feel more in control of the crisis situation.

When developing an action plan, the staff-family team identifies specific tasks and sets time limits for completing the tasks. As tasks are completed, the intervener reinforces any success, no matter how small, with comments such as "That really worked well, didn't it?", "I am pleased you were able to do that.", "What you did was very important!", "I think you're on the right road now!", Further, the intervener always makes sure the family knows what will happen next, saying for example, "Tuesday is a good day for me to see you again. How is it for you?" or "By next week, I will arrange for you to meet with your son's teacher."
 - *Find appropriate resources and make referrals.* Many families in crisis require help from community resources. Head Start staff should pave the way for the family's use of community support. This often means making sure

resources are available and accessible prior to referral; working through any distress the family may have about getting outside help; explaining program eligibility criteria; giving the family the name of a person to contact, rather than just the name of the agency; accompanying the family to initial appointments, and being a family advocate.

- ❖ **Step 7: Prepare for the termination of crisis intervention services.** Crisis intervention services are both intensive and short-term. The crisis intervener lets the family know the time limits at the beginning. A short timeframe serves an important purpose: family realizes they must move ahead quickly to complete their action plan. Preparation for service termination continues in subsequent weeks with reminders about when crisis intervention contacts will end. Gradual declines in the frequency and length of contacts with families as they stabilize also help to ease the service termination process.
- ❖ **Step 8: Follow up.** Final crisis intervention contacts with families include plans to follow-up. Follow-up ensures that the kind, quality, and timeliness of the services received through referrals met the family's expectations and circumstances. Follow-up involves checking in with families to make sure that continuing resources and supports are in place to maintain family stability. Further, during follow-up contacts, the crisis intervener assesses and reinforces family progress in coping more effectively.

Techniques for Defusing a Crisis

Active listening, providing information, modeling a sense of humor and fun, showing enthusiasm, instilling hope, and questioning are some techniques useful for defusing a family crisis and helping a family to stabilize.

- ❖ **Active Listening.** Active listening is perhaps the most important technique for defusing a crisis. For many families in crisis, active listening may be all that is needed to restore family functioning. Active listening with families may involve:
 - Encourage the expression of feelings;
 - Acknowledging the real loss or tragedy experienced by a family;
 - Reflecting feelings expressed by the family;
 - Normalizing the family's reactions;
 - Conveying acceptance of the family, by not of destructive behaviors;
 - Reframing family statements or behaviors to emphasize the positives;
 - Focus on the "here and now";
 - Confronting inconsistencies in family statements or behaviors in tactful ways; and
 - Summarizing and bringing closure to emotional topics.
- ❖ **Providing Information.** It is important for family members to know what to expect throughout the crisis intervention process. Sharing information about the

intervention period, when and how often the crisis intervener will visit the family, and what the intervener plans to do to support the family can relieve much of a family's anxiety about what lies ahead. Information about issues related to the crisis can also be helpful.

- ❖ **Modeling a Sense of Humor and Fun.** Some families need to be able to relax and take themselves and their situation less seriously. Showing a sense of humor about one's own mistakes lets families know that no one is perfect and that laughter is sometimes the best medicine. Many families in crisis can benefit by setting aside time for fun or social activities.
- ❖ **Showing Enthusiasm.** The crisis intervener's enthusiasm promotes feelings of enthusiasm in the family. Family members begin to gain confidence in their own abilities to resolve the crisis when they see the worker as someone who believes they can do so, too.
- ❖ **Instilling Realistic Hope.** The crisis intervener's own ability to instill hope in families is a critical variable in defusing crisis and motivating families to try new coping strategies. When family members sense that positive approaches and outcomes to the crisis are possible, they begin to feel confident in their ability to baring about change. And, when interveners keep their promises, families begin to trust and believe in change.

Instilling realistic hope requires helping the family to see its strengths. Encouraging the family to try new approaches imparts hope. Choice of words is critical when discussing action plans, words such as "when" and "will" send much more hopeful messages to families than "if" or "maybe".

- ❖ **Questioning.** In periods of crisis, it is important for families to be able to organize their thoughts. Asking questions is one way to help families start thinking clearly again. For example, "What have you already tried?", "What do you want to try next?" and "Who can you usually count on?" are questions that can lead families toward a better understanding of their alternatives.

With appropriate support and services, the tension and struggles created by a family crisis can be channeled quickly into constructive courses of action. The family in crisis learns t use new resources, apply new problem-solving skills, and cope more effectively with stress. The result is often a very strengthening experience that can carry the family through complex challenges in the future.

Test Questions:

5. Crisis intervention is a short-term, carefully planned, and focused service.
- True
 - False
6. One way to help families develop effective strategies for dealing with a crisis might include finding out how the family has coped and problem-solved in the past.
- True
 - False
7. Once it is determined that an intervention is needed the Head Start must take action by taking the lead or making a referral.
- True
 - False
8. When interveners keep their promises, families begin to trust and believe in change.
- True
 - False
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