

3. Be Prepared: Finding Help for Your Child in Crisis

At a Glance...



Parents will learn how to find help for their children when dealing with a crisis.

Time Required



45 minutes

Core Concepts



- Parents should be aware of the warning signs for a child in crisis.
- When a child needs help to deal with a crisis, parents should seek help from professionals who work with children and families.

Objective



- Parents will learn the signs of when a child needs professional help in dealing with a crisis.

Materials



- ☐ Flip chart and markers or chalkboard and chalk

- ☐ "Understanding Yourself" handout (D-3-a)
- ☐ "Mental Health Professionals" handout (D-3-b)
- ☐ "Increased Risk of Violent or Dangerous Behavior" handout (D-3-c)
- ☐ "Finding Help for Your Child" handout (D-3-d)
- ☐ "Finding Help for Your Child" Answer Sheet (D-3-e)
- ☐ Handouts from local agencies on services they offer to children and families in crisis (not included)

Instructions



- Before teaching this lesson, check with your local school guidance counselor, health department, mental health center, hospitals, battered women's shelters, and the Department of Children's Services to get brochures and/or information on the services they offer to children and families in crisis.

Ice Breaker



Understanding Yourself

This exercise helps participants focus on the how much they talk about themselves and what they are willing to say. It also shows how they feel about trust, openness and honesty.

Give each participant a copy of the "Understanding Yourself" handout (D-3-a). Ask them to read the questions and think about how they would answer them. Have everyone pick a partner and decide who will go first. Have the first person select one question from the "Understanding Yourself" handout and ask her partner to answer it. The partner may answer it or not. Then the partner asks the first person the same question, who may answer it or not. Then they should take turns selecting a question and answering them until they have gone through the entire list.

Ask participants to circle the number of those questions that one or both of them did not want to answer.

When you get the group back together, ask whether anyone was uncomfortable answering any of the questions. Point out that just as parents sometimes have a hard time talking about things that might bother them, the same is true for children.

Facilitator's Script



Parents are often concerned about their child's emotional health or behavior, as well as their safety. Sometimes they don't know where to begin to get help when they can see that their child needs it. When a child is emotionally distressed, this affects both the parents and the child.

Parents may have a hard time dealing with their child's problems. They may blame themselves or worry that others, such as teachers or family members, will blame them for what's happening to their child. They might be embarrassed that their child has emotional or behavioral problems. Or they might think that seeing a "therapist" or "counselor" is a sign of weakness.

But for the sake of their children, parents need to know what to do and how to help their children. Let's make a list of some situations where you might need help -- or have needed help in the past -- with your children.

Write their responses on the left side of a flip chart or chalkboard.

Possible responses include "My child is being bullied at school" or "My child is having problems because he gets upset when his father drinks too much. "

Now let's look at our list and suggest places where we could go for help.

On the right side of the chart, write the place(s) or people from whom parents might get help.

Here are possible responses:

- Friends
- Family members
- Child's teacher
- Minister, priest or rabbi
- School counselors
- Medical doctors
- Department of Health & Human Services (DHS) Family Services Counselor
- Health Department
- Police Community Service Program
- Mental health clinics

The variety of mental health professionals can be confusing. There are psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, counselors, pastoral counselors, and people who call themselves "therapists." Let's take a look at the different professionals that we can contact to get help for our children -- and even for ourselves.

Give each participant a copy of the handout "Mental Health Professionals" (D-3-b) and discuss what each professional group does.

Try to find a mental health professional who has advanced training and experience with children, adolescents and families. However, it is also very important to find a comfortable match between your child, your family, and the mental health professional.

Parents need to be concerned about the physical safety of their children as well. Sometimes situations with our children become so serious that you might need to seek help from professional and community resources. If another child or adult has threatened to harm your child, take the threat seriously.

Several recent tragedies have involved children shooting and killing individuals after making threats. When this occurs, everyone asks, "How could this happen?" and "Why didn't we take the threat seriously?"

Most threats made by children and adolescents are not carried out. Many such threats are the child's way of talking "big" or tough, or of getting attention. Sometimes these threats are a reaction to a perceived hurt, rejection or attack. However, it is better to get professional help when it might not be needed than to have the child hurt himself or someone else after making threats.

When should a threat be taken seriously?

Let the participants make suggestions. Examples of potentially dangerous or emergency situations involving a child or adolescent include:

- Threats or warnings about hurting or killing someone.
- Threats or warnings about hurting or killing oneself.
- Threats to run away from home.
- Threats to damage or destroy property.

Child and adolescent psychiatrists and other mental health professionals agree that it is very difficult to predict a child's future behavior with complete accuracy. A person's past behavior, however, is still one of the best predictors of future behavior. For example, a child who has a history of being violent or hitting others is more likely to carry out his or her threats and be violent.

Let's take a look at a handout and see what things can increase the risk of violent or dangerous behavior in your children.

Distribute and review the handout "Increased Risk of Violent or Dangerous Behavior" (D-3-c).

Now that you are aware of some of the risk factors, what should you do if your child makes a serious threat?

1. First, you should talk with your child. If necessary, you could ask for help from your child's teacher or another caring adult.
2. Watch for these problems: Your child refuses to talk about the situation, argues a lot, responds defensively, and continues to express violent or dangerous thoughts or plans. Should these things happen, you need to set a meeting immediately for your child with a mental health professional with experience evaluating children and adolescents.
3. Any serious threat must be looked at in the context of your child's past behavior, personality and anything that may be bothering him or her.
4. In an emergency or if your child is uncooperative, you may need to contact local police for help or take your child to the nearest emergency room for evaluation.
5. Children who have made serious threats must be carefully supervised while waiting for help from professionals. Immediate evaluation and appropriate ongoing treatment of youngsters can help the troubled child and reduce the risk of tragedy.

Activity: Finding Help for Your Child

Give each participant a copy of the handout "Finding Help for Your Child " (D-3-d). Read the instructions and then give participants about 5 minutes to match the problems with where they could go for help. Go over the handout and give the correct answer(s) to each situation ("Finding Help for Your Child Answer Sheet," D-3-e).

Final Thoughts

Give participants the handouts from community agencies that offer help for children and families in crisis. Discuss where the agencies are located and how to get in touch with them, if help is needed.

Notes...

Understanding Yourself

Instructions: Work in teams. Person #1 should pick a question and ask it of Person #2, who may choose to answer it or not. Then Person #2 asks the same question of Person #1, who may choose to answer it or not. Next, Person #2 picks a question, and the process continues until all questions have been addressed. Circle the number of those questions that one or both team members did not want to answer.

1. If you could spend one whole day with your best friend, who would it be and what would you do?
2. Which of your senses (taste, smell, sight, hearing or touch) do you value the most?
3. What kind of emergency scares you the most?
4. What do you like to do that seems out of the ordinary?
5. What have you done in the past 3 months that makes you feel proud?
6. How do you feel about sharing personal problems with others?
7. What is one thing you could do to improve your life?
8. Which fairy tale character do you feel most like? Why?
9. What would you like to achieve with your life?
10. When do you feel most confident?
11. What is the most depressing thing that has happened in your life?
12. Who is the most significant person in your life? Why?
13. When do you feel most peaceful?
14. How would you want to spend the last year of your life?

Mental Health Professionals

- **Psychiatrist**

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor whose education includes a medical degree. Psychiatrists also have at least four additional years of study and training. They provide medical and mental evaluation. They also provide treatment for emotional and behavioral problems. As physicians, psychiatrists can prescribe and oversee medications.

- **Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist**

A child and adolescent psychiatrist is a fully trained psychiatrist who specializes in problems of children and adolescents. Child and adolescent psychiatrists provide medical and mental evaluation. As physicians, child and adolescent psychiatrists can prescribe and oversee medications.

- **Psychologist**

Some psychologists have a master's degree in psychology while others have a doctoral degree in education or counseling. Psychologists can provide psychological evaluation and treatment for emotional and behavioral problems and disorders. They cannot prescribe medications.

- **Social Worker**

Some social workers have a bachelor's degree. However, most social workers have earned a master's degree. In most states, social workers can take an examination to be licensed as clinical social workers. Social workers provide most forms of psychotherapy and counseling, but they cannot prescribe medications.

Parents should try to find a mental health professional who has advanced training and experience with children, adolescents and families. Parents should always ask about the professional's training and experience. However, it is also very important to find a comfortable match between your child, your family, and the mental health professional.

Increased Risk of Violent or Dangerous Behavior

- Past violent or aggressive behavior (including uncontrollable angry outbursts)
- Access to guns or other weapons
- Bringing a weapon to school
- Past suicide attempts or threats
- Family history of violent behavior or suicide attempts
- Blaming others and/or being unwilling to accept responsibility for one's own actions
- Recent experience of humiliation, shame, loss, or rejection
- Bullying or intimidating peers or younger children
- A pattern of threats
- Being a victim of abuse or neglect (physical, sexual or emotional)
- Witnessing abuse or violence in the home
- Themes of death or depression evident in conversation, written materials, reading selections or artwork
- Preoccupation with themes and acts of violence in TV shows, movies, music, magazines, comics, books, video games and Internet site
- Mental illness, such as depression, mania, psychosis or bipolar disorder
- Use of alcohol or illicit drugs
- Disciplinary problems at school or in the community (delinquent behavior)
- Past destruction of property or vandalism
- Cruelty to animals
- Fire-setting behavior
- Poor peer relationships and/or social isolation
- Involvement with cults or gangs
- Little or no supervision or support from parents or other caring adults

Finding Help for Your Child

Beside each situation, write the letter(s) of the places where you could go for help with that problem.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A. School Counselor | E. Health Department |
| B. DHS Family Service Counselor | F. Mental Health Clinic |
| C. Minister | G. Police Community Service |
| D. Child's Teacher | H. Medical Doctor |

1. _____ Comes home from school with bruises on his arms.
2. _____ Does not want to be alone.
3. _____ Is angry and mad most of the time.
4. _____ Suddenly starts making failing grades in all subjects.
5. _____ Complains of stomachaches and headaches.
6. _____ Will not attend school activities such as ball games and dances.
7. _____ Threatens to kill him/herself.
8. _____ Deliberately destroys other people's things.
9. _____ Lies to you about where he or she has been.
10. _____ Refuses to get out of bed and go to school.
11. _____ Harms and/or kills pets such as dogs and cats.
12. _____ Steals from you and other people.
13. _____ Runs away from home.
14. _____ Is very depressed and withdrawn.
15. _____ You suspect he or she is taking illegal drugs.

Finding Help for Your Child

Answer Sheet

(Answers could vary slightly from county to county)

Beside each situation, write the letter(s) of the places where you could go for help with that problem.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A. School Counselor | E. Health Department |
| B. DHS Family Service Counselor | F. Mental Health Clinic |
| C. Minister | G. Police Community Service |
| D. Child's Teacher | H. Medical Doctor |

1. D, A, B Comes home from school with bruises on his arms.
2. A, F Does not want to be alone.
3. F, A Is angry and mad most of the time.
4. D, E, F Suddenly starts making failing grades in all subjects.
5. E, H Complains of stomachaches and headaches.
6. D, A Will not attend school activities such as ball games and dances.
7. F, C Threatens to kill him/herself.
8. F, A, B Deliberately destroys other people's things.
9. A, C Lies to you about where he or she has been.
10. D, A, H Refuses to get out of bed and go to school.
11. F Harms and/or kills pets such as dogs and cats.
12. B, F, C Steals from you and other people.
13. G, C Runs away from home.
14. E, F, H, B Is very depressed and withdrawn.
15. E, F, C You suspect he or she is taking illegal drugs.