

# ROLE PLAY EXERCISES ADDRESSING HIGH-RISK BEHAVIORS

**Objective:**

To give staff members the opportunity to practice their skills working with families with high-risk behaviors and to receive feedback and coaching

**Intended Use:**

The following role plays are intended to be used for staff learning as part of in-service training

**Audience:**

- Family service supervisors and family service workers

**Outcome:**

- By using role play, staff members are able to practice skills that are used when working with families in home visits and other meetings. Through practice and feedback, skills and confidence are increased

**Context:**

Skill development is generally strongest when training is followed by practice and coaching. When only training is provided, workers are left on their own to develop their skills in the field. Simulations and scenarios are good tools to replicate real work with peers, supervisors and partners in a learning environment utilizing a cycle of practice, feedback, discussion, and practice again.

Each role playing exercise includes a description of the general situation and a more specific “immediate situation.” In some, there are additional notes for individuals who will be playing specific family members. These notes are not intended to be shared with the group as a whole.

It is suggested that staff members review and have available some of the points on how to identify and make referrals for high risk behaviors. Staff should also review the key components of motivational interviewing.

Be clear about how the simulation will be practiced by the group. Generally, there are four ways to use these scenarios.

1. Have one person volunteer to play the family support worker. Give that person the option of pausing the action to get help and ideas from the group.
2. Have one person act as a funnel for the ideas of the group for interacting with the client. This is a slow-motion version in which the person acting as the funnel delivers a response, gets the client’s reaction, and then asks for ideas for the next thing to say.
3. Have two or three people play the role of the family support worker working with the client in front of the group. They can play “tag-team” by passing off to the next person after each interaction or after a set period of time (1-2 minutes) or when they get stuck. Other group members act as observers and coach the team if they get stuck.
4. With a larger group, you can have small groups practice the simulations simultaneously with a person taking each role and one acting as coach or observer. Bring the whole group

**Tip:**

It can be helpful to have observers track particular motivational strategies used by the person playing the worker such as:

- the number of reflective responses
- the number and types of questions asked (open vs. close-ended)
- examples of affirming family members; using summaries; etc.

Observers can also track examples of the worker:

- providing information
- giving advice
- offering solutions

It is often helpful to make an observer's sheet in advance that lists behaviors to be tracked.

back together after a set period of time and debrief their experiences.

The simulations can be adapted to match situations encountered in the community or to mirror specific situations that workers are encountering in the field. It is also possible to use these situations as the basis for group discussion rather than actually enacting them.

The simulations are not the most difficult or challenging situations family support workers might face. People who volunteer to role play clients don't need to play the most resistant client imaginable. The idea, at least initially, is to practice in a situation where the "clients" might actually respond to a motivational approach.

Give people playing the family support worker time to think about how they are going to approach the session. How will they open the session? What are their goals for the session? What strategies will they use? etc.

**Guidelines for Debriefing the Simulations**

- First ask the people playing the family service worker what seemed to work for them in the session and what did not work so well.
- Ask for a similar response from the person playing the client. How did they feel during the session? What seemed to work? What put them off?
- Ask for input from observers including any tallying of interviewer actions (reflections, questions, etc.).
- Develop some questions for the simulations that get at specific issues and skills. For example: What was the high-risk behavior or situation being addressed? How did family members feel about this situation and the interaction with the family support staff? What strategies were being used to approach the issue and how did they work? What other approaches might be tried? What could be done differently? What resources does this family need? How can they be connected to those resources? What issues arose about how these high-risk situations are handled as an agency? What skills are needed to boost effectiveness?

## ROLE PLAYING EXERCISES

### ROLE PLAYING

#### Exercise 1

The family member is a 20-year old single mother. She has a 5-year-old girl in Head Start by a previous partner who is out of the picture and an 8-month-old infant boy by her current boyfriend, a 22-year-old she had been going with for 2 months when she got pregnant. The mother is receiving assistance. The boyfriend lives much of the time in the home. He does not appear to have steady employment. The family support person has gone through the family assessment with the mother and is working on a family partnership plan with some input from the boyfriend. Needs that have emerged include: the mother's desire to complete her GED; the boyfriend's desire to find work to support the family; parenting skills (the 5-year-old still has tantrums, occasionally wets her pants, and talks back); basic home management skills; better housing. The mother has told you that her boyfriend tries to find work and is very supportive of her. He doesn't get along too well with the 5-year-old and will sometimes stay away from the apartment for a few nights in a row without contacting her. She says he is worried about her "finding someone else," but she stresses to him that she loves him and wouldn't look for anyone else. She is bothered by men who come on to her around the housing project and tries to keep that from him.

**Immediate situation:** The mother calls you in the morning and says she had an argument with her boyfriend last night. He slapped her face and pushed her down in front of the children and left. She wants to see you right away. You discuss plans for keeping her safe and arrange to see her in the early afternoon. When you see her, the first thing you notice is that there appears to be a bruise under her make-up and her lip looks a little swollen on the same side.

**Information for the client only:** Your boyfriend had been drinking when he accused you last night of sneaking behind his back with other men. Although he had been verbally abusive to you in the past, this was the first time he struck you. You were angry at him when you called the family support worker, but your boyfriend came by soon afterward and apologized. He was crying and said he doesn't know what had gotten into him. Part of you feels like the whole situation was your fault—you should understand that he loves you and is under a lot of pressure to find work. You're lucky to have someone who cares. Although you rarely drink yourself, you have been a little worried about his drinking, but you accept his explanation that he sometimes needs to blow off steam. He certainly doesn't drink as much as your father did, who died of alcoholism when you were 15. You are wondering how to keep the family support worker from getting all worked up about this situation even though there's part of you that is still a little scared by your boyfriend's behavior. You feel like leaving, but decide to stay for the appointment anyway. You apply make-up to the bruise on your face where your boyfriend hit you with the back of his hand.

## ROLE PLAYING

### Exercise 2

A 22-year-old mother and 23-year-old father have one son (4 years-old) who just started in Head Start. They also have an 18-month-old daughter. You are aware that the older child has missed some school because of colds and ear infections. The father is employed in construction and the mother works occasionally helping a cousin with housecleaning jobs. The family support person has had some difficulty making contact with the family to complete a family assessment—not answering the phone or not being at home on attempted home visits. Last Monday the family support worker attempted a visit mid-morning and found the mother in bed. She wouldn't let the worker in because it was "too messy."

**Immediate situation:** As the family support worker, you have arranged to come back to meet with her early in the afternoon on the next day. The husband will be at work. You suspect that there may be some form of substance abuse going on.

**Information for the client only:** Both you and your husband like to party, especially on the weekends. You will typically drink 4 or 5 beers on weekend nights and will smoke some marijuana. Your husband drinks more, occasionally up to a 12-pack. He has had a DUI and takes it easy on the marijuana because of the possibility of drug tests on the job. You both smoke cigarettes, although you try not to smoke in front of the kids. You will occasionally have a beer or two on weeknights to unwind; you have also started having a toke or two of marijuana in the morning to get going and to help you deal with the daily routine. You are a little worried about your growing reliance on alcohol and marijuana during the week as well as how you and your husband both overdo the weekend drinking sometimes. You don't like the hangovers and have had a few situations where you woke up and couldn't remember part of what happened the night before when you were drinking. (This has happened more frequently to your husband.) You also worry about the legal consequences of use, but generally feel it's no one else's business. You and your husband both think marijuana should be legalized. The Head Start staff members seem nice—you like your son's teacher—so you are willing to meet with the family support person, but you are a little wary.

## ROLE PLAYING

### Exercise 3

You have been meeting with the parents of a 5-year-old girl for over six months. The mother is 25 years old and the father is 28. They also have two older children (boys 6 and 8) who are in school. The father works in a low-paying job in retail as an assistant manager at a store in a nearby mall. The mother has returned to part-time clerical work with help from her mother who watches the children after school. The family did not show any major signs of risk in the family assessment and they have been fairly active in meeting the goals of the family partnership plan which include having the father take some classes at the local community college. The family support worker has been meeting with them once per month for about 5 months just to check in.

**Immediate situation:** You have arranged a routine late-morning meeting with the parents on the mother's day off before the husband goes into work. When you arrive, the wife is still in her robe and looks like she just got out of bed. She appears to have been crying and the mood is somewhat tense between the couple.

**Information for the clients only:** Mother: You have had periods of being down in the past, particularly after the birth of your first child. You've never asked for help on this before and things seem to get better over time. You would be embarrassed to admit you had a "mental health" problem. Your mother complained about her worries and anxieties and you found that extremely distressing. Over the last six weeks you feel like you have "crashed." You've been sad and worried about the future for no reason; you've lost your appetite and had trouble sleeping; you feel like a failure and sometimes think your family would be better off without you. Some days it is all you can do to get up and deal with the day. You've been taking time off from your part-time job and you are afraid you will lose it.

Father: You have been both concerned and irritated by your wife's slip into depression. You've tried to be supportive and cheer her up but nothing seems to work. You find it hard to deal with her when she mopes around and starts crying for no reason. She always pulled herself together in the past, why can't she do it now? You wonder if she isn't jealous about the classes you are taking at the college, but you both agreed that she would wait until you got through school and the kids were older before she would start back. On the one hand, you would like things to get better, but you don't really want to air the family's problems in public by asking for help.

