Introduction to the Family Connections Training Modules

Welcome Workshop Leader!

Leading a series of workshops for a Head Start/Early Head Start staff is both an interesting opportunity and a significant responsibility. By providing the workshops in the Family Connections Training Modules you are providing a resource for professional growth across a variety of topics related to parent engagement, mental health outreach, depression, and fostering resilience in the families served. Keep in mind that these topics can also be emotionally and professionally challenging for staff. They may bring attention to issues that are often ignored or avoided. And they can also bring up personal experiences and emotions for the participants and the Workshop Leader. This training series therefore puts special emphasis on participants and the Workshop Leader practicing reflection, and invites all to stretch their professional abilities. The Training Modules have been written with all of these factors in mind, providing guidance, strategies, ideas and support to you, the Workshop Leader.

A Description of the Family Connections Training Modules

Each module presents three workshops. While each of the workshops is delivered separately, they are designed to build on one another and therefore should be done in the order presented. The workshops are designed to create an environment where participants feel supported to learn new skills and information and share day-to-day experiences in their program. Alongside the training exercises, handouts, and workshop evaluation forms provided in each workshop description, you will also find Workshop Leader Preparations, Workshop Leader Strategies, and Workshop Leader Reflections to support your efforts in presenting a supportive and successful training experience.

An Outline of the Training Modules

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Module One is an opportunity to reflect on the general experience of working with parents, practice skill in reflection and perspective taking, and to learn about parental depression for the purpose of supporting parent involvement, both with their children and the Head Start program.

The training exercises in Module One focus on:

- increasing staff awareness and knowledge about tools for successful parent engagement
- improving staff communication and problem-solving skills through perspective taking
- increasing knowledge of signs, symptoms, and concerns regarding depression

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Module Two encourages participants to consider their roles in the program and how to contribute to program improvements. The trainings in Module Two review and integrate some of the themes and skills introduced in Module One for the purpose of building a program climate that is strength-based, positive, and supportive of the mental health needs of families and staff.

The training exercises in Module Two focus on:

- defining the concept of "Program Climate" and providing strategies for staff to contribute to a positive program climate
- encouraging staff to use a strength-based approach with families and colleagues
- building a program-wide response to depression

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Module Three is designed for teachers, encouraging them to examine how their own professional practice impacts classroom environment, their communication with children, and child development. The trainings in this module review and integrate some of the themes and skills introduced in Module One and Module Two to understand key concepts (e.g. social-emotional development, resilience, communication around difficult issues) and reflect on what each individual brings to their work.

The training exercises in Module Three focus on:

- learning how social-emotional development can foster resilience in children and how to promote social-emotional growth in the classroom
- learning how to talk with children about troubling issues
- identifying opportunities for communication during Circle Time and conversations on social-emotional themes

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Module Four focuses on three critical pieces of a Head Start Program's success: communication, resource and referral, and home visits. The trainings in this module are an opportunity for staff to recognize existing strategies in each of these areas, and also to develop new skills.

The training exercises in Module Four focus on:

- recognizing the importance of successful communication and ways to improve communication within the program
- identifying resources to effectively support families
- recognizing the opportunities to engage families during home visits

Organization of the Modules:

As explained above, there are four main modules, each containing a set of exercises that supports the overall concept of the module.

The format for each module is consistent and we have provided tools throughout to support the delivery of each workshop in a clear and methodical way. These tools are not intended to substitute for individual style and experience, but are offered to the Workshop Leader as guidelines. More experienced trainers may feel comfortable conveying the materials in their own words while newer trainers may want to use the guidelines more strictly.

Each Workshop Description Provides:

An initial section dedicated to Workshop Leader preparation

This section is intended as an orientation to the materials and the training set-up, including:

Introduction: Gives an introduction to the training topic
Goals: Lists specific goals for the training
Objectives: Lists specific participant objectives
Method and Content: Lists and summarizes each exercise in the training
Getting Started:
- ***What You Need:*** Lists the materials, space, and time needed
- ***Preparing the Workshop Space:*** Provides suggestions for set-up

A section dedicated to implementation

This section is intended to guide the Workshop Leader as s/he delivers the workshop content. It includes:

Workshop Leader Preparation: Throughout the trainings, we have included specific suggestions for being thoroughly prepared for the content and process of the training.
Workshop Leader Strategies: Throughout the trainings, we have included specific strategies related to a particular topic or exercise. For example, you may want some ideas about how to set-up the group most effectively or get the group focused on the topic at hand.
Individual Exercise Instruction: For each exercise, there are guidelines about content and delivery.
Transitions From One Exercise to the Next: Since moving from one exercise to the next can be challenging, we have given suggestions about how you can summarize what was learned and build a bridge to the next topic.

Tables of Sample Responses: In many exercises, participants will share their ideas in a large group and record them on paper. To help the Workshop Leader facilitate this process successfully, we have provided tables that include examples of potential responses to the exercises, as well as suggestions of themes the Workshop Leader can introduce to the discussion. The themes listed are not meant to restrict you but instead to give you a jumping off point for where to focus the group's attention.
Handouts for Participants (including Workshop Evaluation form): To be distributed at the beginning of each training per the instructions in the exercises.
Suggestions for Concluding the Training - Wrapping Up: At the end of each training, it is important to allot some time to recognize the group's efforts, highlight the key elements discussed and look forward to the next training. Suggestions for how to do this effectively are included.

A final section devoted to follow-up activities

This section is provided in order to encourage Workshop Leader reflection while suggesting ways in which the training experience can continue through supporting the transformation of skills.

Extended Learning and Supporting New Skills: A crucial part of successful professional development and program change is follow-up. If the new skills learned in the trainings are not revisited, this neglect may serve to disempower the staff. As part of the training preparation, it is essential that you commit to follow-up. Suggestions about how to do this are included for each training.
Workshop Leader Reflection: Self-reflection helps us improve our skills by giving us time to recognize our successes and challenges as workshop leaders and plan to make changes for the future. It is recommended that you consider the questions included in this section shortly after the workshop has been completed.

Starting A Training Module

The Family Connections materials do not prescribe methods for training, but instead offer recommendations to consider. Training modules include instructions for carrying out each segment of training as a place to begin with specific guidelines written for each exercise. However, you can expect that the training in your setting will be influenced by multiple factors and some strategies and suggestions may work better than others. Factors like group and trainer characteristics, the training environment, program morale, comfort level with the materials, longevity of the program, and the status of existing mental health services will all contribute to a unique experience for your setting.

General Guidelines for Effective Training

When planning your agenda for each module, there are some general guidelines and strategies you may want to consider in order to help you create a training that is well-received and successful.

Needs Assessment A needs assessment of participants honors the fact that people come to trainings with different experiences and expectations. You can conduct an informal needs assessment while preparing to present the first workshop through conversations with a variety of staff members. Or, you may choose to implement a more systematic interview with program administrators. In either case, asking questions about the training group's range of experience, education, and language needs will provide you with an important tool to anticipate the strengths and challenges of your workshop participants.

Hospitality Making participants feel welcome during workshops is essential. Small gestures and comforts mean a great deal to participants. People should be well cared for during the training. If the program has the resources to provide food and/or beverages, the group will be grateful. Make sure the room temperature is as comfortable as possible. Provide the most comfortable seating available in the program.

Ownership In order to conduct any workshop you need to understand the material and believe in it. Before getting up in front of a group become familiar with the content, find ways to describe it in your own words, and question if it fits with what you know about work with children and families. If possible, preparation is best done with other people (e.g., mental health providers, other staff involved as trainers or administrators). Try the language out with each other, experiment with the exercises, and imagine how some training participants might interpret and/or respond to the material.

It is important to remember that ownership of the material does not mean "being the expert." The materials are designed to support the expertise of everyone who participates. Most of the knowledge generated in the modules will, in fact, come from the participants, not the Workshop Leaders. However, that does not diminish the importance of getting to know the materials and what they represent.

Managing difficult questions Avoid getting into the position of answering questions for which you truly don't have the answers. It is perfectly acceptable to say "That's a great question, and I don't know the answer." Let the group know that you will identify a resource and get back to them. Make sure to follow through. Another way to manage a difficult or controversial question is to turn it back to the group. Ask them what they think about the question. Often the group will come up with a collective "answer" that is far more satisfying than giving just one person's opinion.

Confidentiality When discussing mental health issues confidentiality must always be enforced. This doesn't simply mean the names of families are withheld in discussions. It also means that when family or staff issues are discussed during training, they are "kept in the room" – or, in other words, not discussed outside of the training. Participants should be reminded that many of the issues discussed in training can be emotional and personal. The only way to deal with them is with respect for people's privacy. The *only* purpose of bringing up cases in training is to help participants learn how to do a better job with children and families. Therefore, by paying special

attention to issues of confidentiality, every workshop participant can feel secure speaking honestly about their own concerns, emotions, and learning process.
A major threat to confidentiality is that staff may have personal relationships with each other, often talking about work outside of work and also turning to each other for support during challenging times. This is both good and natural. However, it also creates opportunities to violate the confidentiality of families and other staff. It is important to understand the relationships among workshop participants ahead of time so that you can anticipate the boundaries of the group and reinforce the need for discretion.

Listening, and Listening Carefully As a facilitator of the training modules it is your job to listen to participants. Most of the training exercises involve individual or small group activities that are then discussed with the whole group. Knowledge and understanding is created by the whole group. So, it is far more important that you listen and find openings to provide encouragement for further conversation. This means establishing a balance between providing workshop content and being comfortable with a little silence between questions and responses. It can be a strong temptation to fill up silences with your own ideas. Therefore it is important to stay focused on your job as a facilitator of discussion. Set a pattern for the group by modeling thoughtful listening yourself. Help the group refrain from interruptions or talking over each other.

At the same time, listening does not mean being passive; you'll want to show you are an active listener. Gestures such as nodding your head and eye contact are very effective. Sometimes even when you listen carefully, you won't quite understand the meaning of the message. Or you may feel that others in the group didn't understand. At these times, it can be useful to ask a participant to restate what they said or repeat what they said. For example, "I want to make sure I understand. It sounds like you are saying this...." Using these strategies demonstrates that you are listening and that you care about everyone's understanding.

Resistance One of the most difficult challenges for a Workshop Leader is when participants reject, dislike, or challenge what is offered in training. There can be many reasons for this:

- Feeling overwhelmed by the emotional connection to the topic
- Finding the material too challenging or not challenging enough
- Belief in another way of doing things
- Stress outside the workplace
- Avoidance because of strong personal identification with the topic
- Self-doubt and insecurity of communication skill or intelligence
- Fatigue at the end of a long day

As a Workshop Leader, it is easy to respond to this with anger, confrontation, or self-doubt. But, if you know where the resistance stems from, then it is easier to make sense of it and give your attention to these feelings. Acknowledging and respecting participant opinions can be a strategy for building collaboration and breaking down barriers. It can also be helpful to trust the material and yourself. Focus on the fact that all participants desire a common goal – to do the best for children and families. If necessary, take a minute to remind the group verbally that you are all there for a common goal. Another strategy is to remind the participants that they have the opportunity to improve the trainings by providing their constructive feedback on the Workshop Evaluation, provided at the end of each training experience. Use these evaluations as a way to learn more about what your group needs.

Occasionally, someone interferes with training in a way that simply must be addressed. This should be done privately, during a break, and with the goal of having the training be successful for the entire group. Stating this goal to a difficult participant often helps resolve the behavior.

ORGANIZATION Every group needs a general structure and every facilitator needs some tools to help provide that structure. When the workshop is well-organized and participants know what to expect, training will always be more successful. Here are some strategies for every training.

Provide a General Orientation of the Workshop – A welcoming attitude is very helpful. Discussing the agenda, the expected length of the workshop, and scheduled breaks will help orient participants. You should also announce any other expectations, such as cell phones being turned off. Let participants know they can stop you to ask questions and should use the restrooms as needed. Showing that you care for the physical well-being of participants is essential.

Establish a "Parking Lot" for Ideas – When a group comes together to discuss a topic there are likely to be many ideas that surface. Some of these ideas will directly relate to the topic while others may get the group off topic. On the one hand, it is important that all participants feel like their input is valued, but on the other hand, you want to respect the goals and focus of the training. If a participant asks a question or has a comment that does not directly relate to the topic but needs further discussion, you can list it on the Parking Lot for Ideas. Let the participants know that you will do your best to revisit the topic at the end of the training, if time allows. If not, agree on another time and place to follow up on the question or comment.

Reinforce Training Ground Rules – All groups need a common understanding of group expectations for participation. The Training Ground Rules will provide a structure for these expectations. The Workshop Leader should review the ground rules at the beginning of the training and ask the group to agree to them. If the Workshop Leader or a participant notice the group is not respecting the rules, it's important to take a few minutes to review the rules again and get the group back on track.

Manage Group Size – Sometimes you may want to count off for random groups; at other times you may want people to work in their natural teams. Consider what group size is appropriate for a particular activity, and establish what the Workshop Leaders will do during the small group time (note-taking, observing the groups, facilitation).

Manage Time – Workshop Leaders will want to have a general sense of flow, rhythm, suggested time, etc. for each exercise and may need help moving to the next exercise if a discussion seems to be going too long.

Be Prepared for Each Module – Read through all the materials provided for each workshop before presenting. Know your content, what you are going to do, how much time it will take to conduct the exercises and what you hope to accomplish.

Know Your Workshop Participants – Who are they (culture, experience, education)? What do they do (job roles, informal roles in the agency)? Which members may need more help to feel part of the group? Which members may have authority over others, and need to be tempered? Be cautious not to create bias, but be ready to address the unique needs of the group.

Climate

All of the guidelines and strategies described thus far contribute to a positive workshop climate. Ownership of and enthusiasm for the material, assurance of confidentiality, listening to and respecting the group, effectively managing resistance, and clear organization make it possible for a group to work well together. Despite all of this, there may be situations that can affect the workshop climate. Some examples of such situations are:

- Conflicting cultural perspectives on child-rearing
- Differing views on how to work with a particular child or family
- Strong expressions of anger, frustration, or sadness
- Expressed dissatisfaction with the agency or others in the service system
- Disrespectful interactions between participants

When encountering these situations it is best to make sure that you keep control. Your investment in the success of the training may seem at risk, but challenges like those listed above are to be expected, particularly in trainings that involve strong personal feelings and beliefs.

Showing respect for differing opinions – even those that may seem outrageous at the time – is essential. Showing empathy for people who are experiencing difficult emotions is always helpful and reassuring to participants. At these times, it may be best to slow down the process and remind people that this is difficult work that can bring up differences and/or emotions. If necessary, remind people of the training ground rules.

Only occasionally does a Workshop Leader need to confront a participant who displays difficult behavior in public. If this happens, it should be done calmly and respectfully. Such instances are rare. When they do occur, it can be an opportunity to reassure participants in the group and support the training process.

Conclusion

The Family Connections Training Modules are designed to be both challenging and satisfying. Following the above guidelines during each of the modules will help staff become more competent at working with families and acknowledging mental health issues. You will also learn a great deal about your work and yourself. This is one of the joys of being a Workshop Leader. Learning is never one-sided. When people recognize that you are excited about learning and are open to learning with them they are far more likely to participate fully.