



Implementing Universal Education Strategies on Domestic Violence in Head Start and Early Head Start Programs

Head Start and Early Head Start Programs can use this resource to learn about universal education strategies to prevent and respond to domestic violence.

Use this resource with the *Families Thrive, Zero to Five* educational card.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs work to create welcoming program environments that are responsive to the languages and cultures of families in the program and community. Creating a culture of trust and mutual respect between staff and families is important. Families are more likely to ask for help during challenging times when families and program staff have trusting relationships and ongoing, two-way communication.

Having conversations about domestic violence may be challenging for families. A parent may be more willing to have a conversation about domestic violence with a staff member with whom they already have a trusting relationship. Together, a staff member and a parent can talk about healthy relationships and ways to access information and supportive services. These conversations can be important to family safety, parent-child relationships, and family well-being.

Traditionally, many social service programs have focused primarily on screening for domestic violence or looking for “red flags.” They might ask a question such as “are you safe at home?” and then provide referrals. In some cases, these programs only ask people who were showing signs of experiencing domestic violence.

Years of research and experience have shown that using a universal education approach to address domestic violence is more effective and responsive to families (Miller et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2015; O’Doherty et al., 2014). Family members do not need to describe their experiences of domestic violence in order to receive critical information and support for themselves or a friend.

A simple process called CUES has been developed for talking with families about these issues. CUES stands for the four elements of the conversation:

C: Confidentiality

U: Universal education

E: Empowerment

S: Support

Preparing Your Program

To prepare staff to use CUES, consider the following:

- **Know the limits of confidentiality.** Review your mandatory reporting requirements. Ensure staff have a clear understanding of when and how to file a child abuse report or call law enforcement. Even general conversations about healthy and unhealthy relationships may result in a disclosure of domestic violence or child abuse.
- **Build partnerships with your local domestic violence program.** Head Start and Early Head Start program staff don't have to do this work alone! Collaborate with local domestic violence prevention and response programs and domestic violence advocates.

Domestic violence advocates can help if a parent discloses abuse. Staff can make a warm referral for families. In a warm referral, a staff person offers to contact the community partner with the family member. The staff makes a plan with the parent to follow up. The staff person checks in with the family member and the community partner after the referral. The staff member also asks for feedback about the service and referral process.

Domestic violence advocates are also an important resource for Head Start staff to consult. Your program can develop or revise an existing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Head Start or Early Head Start program and domestic violence program.

- **Order educational materials.** The *Families Thrive, Zero to Five* card serves as a guide for CUES and offers support strategies for parents and children. This educational card is designed for use in Head Start and Early Head Start programs. It provides information about healthy relationships, relationship safety, and supportive resources. Use and display any posters and brochures that your local domestic violence programs make available.
- **Take care of staff.** Allow time and provide space for Head Start and Early Head Start program staff to talk about the impact of families' experiences of domestic violence on the well-being of staff. Building self-care skills—and making self care a priority—is important to reduce burnout and compassion fatigue.
- **Establish a safety protocol.** Ensure that Head Start and Early Head Start program staff know what to do in the event of an immediate threat, such as a partner using domestic violence on site or making threats. Although these situations are rare, it is important to have clear directions in place.

Using CUES in Your Program

CUES is an evidence-based intervention that can be implemented to prevent and respond to domestic violence. Staff use the four elements of CUES in conversations with parents experiencing domestic violence. Staff promote healthy relationships and support parents to access domestic violence advocacy services for themselves and their children.

With practice, most staff find they can use CUES easily and naturally in the conversations they have regularly with parents and other adult family members. We recommend Head Start and Early Head Start program staff use the CUES card only after a trusting relationship has been formed, and not during initial intake. Staff can plan focused and follow-up conversations at regular intervals—and after relationships are established.

The elements of CUES are:

- **Confidentiality.** Disclose the limits of confidentiality. Before asking families any direct questions, clearly state what situations require a mandatory report. For example, you may say, “Everything we talk about is confidential, unless you were to tell me...” Reinforce limits of confidentiality. Include confidentiality information on the forms you use, on the posters you display, and in your program materials.
- **Universal education.** Provide universal education and information to all families. It is important to have conversations about domestic violence with ALL families. Make sure you are able to speak to a parent alone, without their partner or child present. It is helpful to start the conversation by normalizing the topic so no one feels singled out.

Begin by saying something like, “Since we know many families experience domestic violence, we talk to everyone about this” Then talk about elements of a healthy relationships. Avoid starting the conversation with questions about experiences of domestic violence.

- **Empowerment.** Promote empowerment. Always give a family member at least two *Families Thrive, Zero to Five* educational cards. Make sure to frame them as resources for family and friends. You could say, “I wanted to share this with you so you can talk with your friends about this, too.” This allows people experiencing violence to take the card without having to disclose abuse. It sends a powerful message that you believe they can help others in their life who may want or need support.
- **Support.** Offer support, and shift the conversation to talk about unhealthy relationships. Ask direct questions about relationship safety, such as “Is this happening to you?” or “Is this part of your story?”

When family members say “No” to these questions (domestic violence is not occurring):

- Let them know you are glad their relationship is safe.
- Continue to offer the card. Remind the family members that they might be able to use it to help a family member or friend, or as a resource if their situation should change.
- Don’t try to force families to disclose information when you suspect domestic violence is happening.
- Keep in mind that some family members may be unable to take the card because of safety concerns. For example, they are worried a partner using domestic violence would find it. They may say “no” or throw the card away.

When a family member says “Yes” to these questions (domestic violence is occurring, or has occurred in the past):

- Thank them for sharing. Remember that it can be hard to disclose painful and personal experiences. Listen to their story with empathy and compassion. Do not blame, minimize, or judge.
- Before you ask any questions about their experience, ask yourself, “Do I need this information to offer support, or am I asking out of curiosity?” In most cases, you do not need many specifics in order to connect parents with other resources. Remember: if you don’t need the information, don’t ask the question.
- Refer to the *Families Thrive, Zero to Five* card. Review the support strategies for parents found on the *You Matter A Lot* panel. Read the support strategies for children on the *Helping Children* panel.
- Make a warm referral to your local domestic violence program. Let families know what services are available. Offer your office or another private space to call an advocate. You could say, “There is an organization I have worked with that helps people who have gone through situations similar to yours. Would you like us to call together to get more information?”
- Ask if there are immediate safety concerns. Domestic violence advocates can help with crisis counseling and safety planning.
- Determine if you will need to make a child abuse report or call law enforcement. Consult with your supervisor.

- Follow up next time you see the family member. You don't need to probe or ask many questions. Simply saying, "I just wanted to see how you are doing after we last talked" is often enough. A family may be embarrassed or regret disclosing domestic violence. Do not push them to talk to you more about their experience.
- Work with your leadership team on safety considerations for continuing to engage with the family. Give special attention to how the program will continue to engage the partner who has used domestic violence.

References

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