

Strategies to Support Families Who May Be Experiencing Domestic Violence



Head Start and Early Head Start programs can use this resource to learn more about working with families and children who may be experiencing violence. This information is particularly useful during periods when communities must stay at home. Explore:

- Questions to consider when preparing to contact families
- Strategies for reaching out to and supporting families
- Strategies for self-care

During times when physical distancing is a priority to protect everyone's health, many of us are concerned about the children and families with whom we work. They may be at home for longer periods with a person who has hurt them in the past. It is especially important to prioritize connections with these families. Focus on ways to strengthen relationships, reduce parental stress, help families access resources to meet basic needs, and promote safety.

With the current health crisis, families are likely to be feeling high levels of stress. In addition to worrying about their health and access to medical care, they may be affected by unemployment or reductions in working hours. Families may be struggling to pay rent or other household expenses. They may have difficulty providing regular meals for their family. They are also adjusting to new routines with the loss of child care and school activities. Increased stress related to these and other challenges may increase the risk of violence at home.

Head Start and Early Head Start staff and programs are responding quickly and creating new ways to support families in this uncertain time. Staff working with families who may be experiencing domestic violence can still offer support while working from home. Schedule regular check-ins with families and ask what they need. Discuss ways to cope and reduce stress and plan for emergencies.

Prepare and Plan

Take time to reflect on these questions before reaching out to families.

- What kind of relationship do you have with the family? What do you know about their situation?
- What strengths might the family be able to build upon? Are there healthy relationships inside or outside of the family that can be sources of comfort, connection, and strength?
- Do you have ways of communicating with the family that does not add safety risks at home? Are you able to use any of these strategies now? For example, have you communicated through phone calls, emails, or text messages in the past? Would it be possible to continue this practice without placing anyone in danger? Do you share code words or particular phrases that indicate there is immediate danger?
- What are your concerns and how might you address them before reaching out?
- Do you need additional support from your supervisor or program leadership?

Choose Your Response

Review these strategies for ways to help children and adults who may be experiencing violence at home. Not all examples apply to every situation.

Reach Out

Families who are living with violence are often isolated from friends and extended family. Many children and adults are afraid to ask for help. They may feel ashamed or fear that the violence will get worse. They might feel like it is their fault. You can let them know it is not their fault and that you are there to listen.

Show that you care and want to help in any way you can. Ask if it is a safe time to talk. If appropriate, ask whether there are immediate safety concerns. Connecting with you may decrease families' feelings of loneliness or isolation. Domestic violence advocates can help with crisis counseling and safety planning.

Send Basic Necessities

Programs and community partners can help families meet basic needs and potentially reduce stress. Consider whether there are opportunities for staff to safely provide food, formula, diapers, and diapering supplies. Are local organizations providing food and diapers for delivery or pick-up? Is there an opportunity for you to partner with a local group and combine efforts? Ask families if they need supplies and how you can safely get them what they need.

Encourage Connection with Others

Remind families that physical distancing does not mean social isolation. Encourage parents to connect with other families for support. Offer virtual parent groups, if possible. Ask parents if they have opportunities to connect with friends and family on the phone, online, or through social media. Can they go to a public space where they can see others and still keep a safe physical distance to protect their health?

Plan in Advance with Families

Ask if parents have a safety plan. Certain strategies may be helpful, depending on the situation.

- Discuss what has been done in the past to promote safety.
- Ask if there is a place in the home for the baby or child to be protected and safe.
- Help create a list of supportive people and their contact information in case of an emergency (e.g., faith leader, friend, family, police).
- Encourage the adult to prepare an emergency kit in case one or more family members have to leave quickly. Include essential items such as money, hotline numbers, phone charger, keys, medicines, a change of clothes, and important documents (e.g., birth certificates and shot records) in the kit.

Provide a Warm Referral to a Program or Community Group

Most communities have advocates, counselors, attorneys, and faith leaders who are working to reach survivors during this crisis. Use a warm referral to connect families with these professionals and others you know in partner organizations. A warm referral is when staff partner with families to access services. You can introduce a family to a contact person at a partnering organization and coordinate a shared call, if possible. Follow up with the family about the referral, whether it was helpful, and if another support is needed. Check in with the contact person and refine the referral process as needed.

Keep a list of local services and resources you can share with families if they ask. Families may also need access to food, rent support, or hotlines for health care, parenting support, unemployment insurance, and other public benefits.

Send Messages of Care and Encouragement to Adults and Children Who Are Hurting

Sending texts and emails can remind families they are worthy of care and support. Keep in mind that anything we put in writing can be read by others. Rely on communication strategies that have been safe and effective in the past. Remind families that they are strong and courageous. Small acts of encouragement can go a long way.

Check in with Adults Who May Become Violent or Abusive

If you have a strong and trusting relationship with a person who has used violence in the past, call to check in. If the person feels in danger of losing control, or worries about becoming violent, discuss ways to reduce stress. Use this time as an opportunity to offer your support to get help.

Invite the person to work with you to make a behavioral plan. Provide information about local and national helplines. Work with your leadership team on how to stay safe while engaging with the family. Give special attention to how the program will continue to engage the person who has used violence

Practice Self-Care

You deserve support, too. Worrying about children and families who may be experiencing violence can take a toll on our emotional and physical health. You may also be concerned about your own family and friends. You may be feeling anxious or worried about what might come next.

We can only do our best for families if we find time to care for ourselves. Maintain connections with friends and family even if you have to stay physically distant. If you live with people or pets, make time to be together. Create opportunities to reduce stress, even if it is for short periods. You may discover that simply finding a quiet, private spot where you can take some deep breaths and shift your thoughts to a soothing topic is enough to settle yourself. If you need more than a quiet moment, try other coping strategies that you already know work for you. For example, you may:

- Talk to a friend or loved one
- Take a walk or do some exercise or yoga
- Practice meditation or deep breathing
- Listen to or play music
- Think about what you are grateful for

You may want to plan for a supervisor or other staff to be available when you need extra support. Supervisors can provide time and space for staff to talk about the impact of families' experiences of domestic violence on their well-being. Building self-care skills—and making self-care a priority—is important to reduce burnout and compassion fatigue.

Related Resources

Staff and families can use these hotlines for information and immediate help:

- National Domestic Violence Hotline: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)
- National Sexual Assault Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)
- Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: 1-800-4A-CHILD (422-4453)

For more information about domestic violence prevention and response, visit the Futures Without Violence website.



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