

Introduction: Family Connections Workshop Series for Staff and Parents



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1A. Workshop for Staff: Partnering with Parents



1B. Workshop for Parents: Partnering with Early Childhood Staff



2A. Workshop for Staff: What is Depression?



2B. Workshop for Parents: What is Depression?



3A. Workshop for Staff: Talking with Children About Difficult Issues



3B. Workshop for Parents: Talking with Children About Difficult Issues



The Family Connections Workshop Series for Staff and Parents features six workshops, three for professionals and three for parents. All of the workshops focus on knowledge and skills related to strengthening relationships with adults and children and promoting family well-being. Specific topics include:

- Building relationships between parents and staff
- Understanding depression and fostering resilience
- Talking with children about difficult issues

The workshops may be delivered individually or as a series. Ideally, the professional and parent workshops will both be offered, so professionals and parents are familiar with similar knowledge and language.

This workshop content is adapted from the original Family Connections Mental Health Consultation resources. The complete set of training modules and short papers for parents and staff are available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website.

In this resource, “parent” and “family” refer to all adults who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child, including biological, adoptive, and foster parents, pregnant women and expectant families, grandparents, legal and informal guardians, and adult siblings.

About the Workshops

Workshops 1A and 1B: Partnering with Parents and Partnering with Early Childhood Staff

These workshops explore the relationship between parents and early childhood professionals. The exercises focus on:

- Increasing staff awareness and knowledge about tools for successful parent engagement
- Improving parent-staff communication and problem-solving skills through perspective-taking
- Recognizing the importance of successful communication and ways to improve communication within the program

Workshops 2A and 2B: What is Depression?

These workshops explore the topics of depression and resilience, and the impact of cultural context. The exercises focus on:

- Increasing knowledge of signs, symptoms, and concerns regarding depression
- Identifying resources to effectively support families and colleagues
- Building a program-wide response to depression
- Understanding and enhancing resilience

Workshops 3A and 3B: Talking with Children About Difficult Issues

These workshops are designed to enhance teachers' and parents' ability to listen to and talk with their children about challenging issues. The exercises focus on:

- Reflecting on the adults' response to difficult conversations
- Learning strategies for listening to and talking with children
- Understanding the need for self-care

Workshop Organization

Each workshop is organized as follows:

- Workshop Focus
- Goal
- Learning Objectives
- Method and Content
- Estimated Time
- Learning Environment
- Materials
- Facilitator Preparation
- Preparing the Workshop Space
- Introduction

Workshop Organization, cont.

- Exercises
- Wrap Up
- Facilitator Reflection
- Handouts
- Workshop Evaluation Form
- Related Resources
- References

Facilitator Orientation

The Workshop Series provides strategies, ideas, and support for facilitators. Each workshop offers suggestions to support you to guide each group's experience. You will find Facilitator Preparations, Facilitator Strategies, and Facilitator Reflections to help you create an effective learning experience.

The workshops are designed to create an environment where participants feel supported to learn new information and build new skills. Participants have opportunities to share day-to-day experiences and apply the knowledge to their situation. For each workshop you will find interactive exercises, handouts, and workshop evaluation forms.

The workshops encourage reflective practice to promote active thinking, emotional growth, and ongoing learning. Activities invite participants to consider each topic fully. Keep in mind that these topics can be emotionally challenging for all participants. The topics can also be professionally challenging for staff. The content can evoke personal experiences and emotions for the facilitator and participants.

Using a Virtual Approach

Each of the workshops can be adapted as a virtual offering. Consider the following if using an online approach:

- Choose a platform that is easy to use and access.
- Become familiar with the technology including the use of chat, break-out rooms, white boards, screen share, and other features.
- Survey participants about access and scheduling.
- Plan how to provide technology help for participants.
- Learn skills to create a welcoming and respectful virtual learning environment.

Refer to the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement resource **Leading Online Parent Meetings and Groups** as a guide.

General Guidelines for Effective Facilitation

Consider the following general guidelines and strategies to create an effective learning experience:

- **Needs Assessment.** Each workshop group will be unique. Recognize that participants bring different experiences and expectations. Conduct an informal strengths and needs assessment in preparation for the workshop. Talk with a variety of staff members and parents. Or, choose to implement a more systematic interview with program administrators, teachers, or parents. In either case, ask questions to learn information about the participants' range of experience, education, and language needs.
- **Welcoming Environment.** Making participants feel welcome during workshops is essential. Small gestures and comforts mean a great deal to participants. Provide food and/or beverages if the program has resources to make them available. Be aware of room temperature, comfortable seating, and a confidential space. Find ways to communicate thoughtfulness and care for the group through simple gestures such as laying a table runner, flowers, or other decorative materials.
- **Knowledge of the Content.** Become familiar with the content before beginning the workshop. Find ways to describe it in your own words, and reflect about how it fits with what you know about children, families, and staff. If possible, prepare with others (e.g., mental health providers, other staff involved as trainers or administrators). Try the language out with each other and experiment with the exercises. Imagine how some participants might interpret and/or respond to the material. Be sensitive to cultural issues and the possible impact of any of the materials on participants.

It is important to remember that being familiar with 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 series will likely come from the group, not the facilitator.

- **Managing Difficult Questions.** The workshops are designed to be collaborative and interactive. Avoid the role of “expert.” You can open up the discussion by turning a difficult question back to the group. Often the group will come up with a collective “answer” that is more satisfying than one person’s opinion. It is also okay if you don’t have the answers for every question. You can say, “That’s a great question, and I’m not sure of the answer.” Let the group know that you will identify a resource and get back to them. Make a note to yourself and be sure to follow through.
- **Confidentiality.** Privacy and confidentiality are critical components of sensitive discussions, particularly related to mental health issues. This doesn’t only mean the names of individuals are withheld in discussions. It also means that when family or staff issues are discussed during the workshop, they are “kept in the room” – or, in other words, not discussed outside of the workshop.

Remind participants that many of the issues discussed in the workshop can be sensitive and personal. Respecting people’s privacy is very important. Pay special attention to issues of confidentiality so that each participant can feel secure speaking honestly about their own concerns, emotions, and learning process.

A major challenge to confidentiality is that staff and/or families may have personal relationships with each other. They may talk outside of work and turn to each other for support during challenging times. This is both healthy 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 and anticipate the boundaries of the group. You can reinforce the need for discretion at the beginning and throughout each workshop.

- **Active Listening.** It is the facilitator’s responsibility to listen to participants. It is important that you listen, are sensitive to cultural context, and find openings to provide encouragement for further conversation. This means finding a balance between providing content and leaving room for silence between questions and responses. It can be tempting to fill silences with your own ideas or other conversation. Try to recognize this urge and stay focused on your role as the facilitator. Set a pattern for the group by modeling thoughtful listening. Help the group refrain from interruptions or talking over each other.

Listening does not mean being passive. You want to show you are an active listener. You can use gestures to show you are paying attention. Nodding your head and making eye contact can be very effective. You won’t always understand the meaning of the message even if you listen carefully. Or you may sense that others in the group didn’t understand. At these times, it can be useful to repeat what the participant said or ask a participant to restate what they said. For example, “I want to make sure I understand. It sounds like you are saying this...” or, “Can you tell us a little more about that?”. These are useful strategies that show that you are listening and care about the group’s understanding.

- **Understanding Differences.** One of the most difficult challenges for a facilitator is when participants reject, dislike, or challenge what is offered in the workshop. Participants may have reasons for this that might include:
 - 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

You have an opportunity to choose how you will respond if a participant challenges you. It can be easy to react with confrontation, anger, or self-doubt. However, you and the group may find opportunities for growth if you are able to reflect rather than react. Consider where the challenges may stem from and how you can support the participant. Reflect and consider the impact on the group. Showing respect for participant opinions can be a strategy for building collaboration and breaking down barriers.

It can also be helpful to reestablish the group’s reasons for being together. Focus on the fact that all participants share a common goal – to do the best for children and families. If necessary, take a minute to remind the group of the shared goal. You could also remind participants that they will have the chance to improve the workshops by providing feedback on the Workshop Evaluation.

Facilitator Strategies

Consider the following strategies to organize the workshop and provide structure for the group:

- **Know Your Workshop Participants.** Who are they (culture, experience, education)? What do they do (job roles, informal roles in the agency)? Which participants may need more support to feel part of the group? Which participants may report to other members in the group? Be aware of any biases you or group members may bring. Be ready to address the unique needs of the group.
- **Provide a General Orientation of the Workshop.** A welcoming attitude is very helpful. You can orient the group by reviewing the agenda, noting the length of the workshop, and highlighting when breaks are scheduled. Let participants know they can stop you to ask questions.
- **Create a Group Agreement.** All groups need a common understanding of group expectations for participation. The Group Agreement will provide a structure for these expectations. The facilitator can create the Group Agreement with the participants at the beginning of the workshop. If the facilitator or a participant notice the group is not respecting the guidelines, pause and review the list again to get the group back on track. See individual workshops for a sample Group Agreement.
- **Establish a “Parking Lot” for Ideas.** Many different ideas may surface as part of the group’s discussions. Some of these ideas will directly relate to the topic while others may take the group off topic. It is important that all participants feel like their input is valued, yet you want to respect the goals and focus of the workshop.

List questions or comments that do not directly relate to the topic 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 workshop, if time allows. If not, agree on another time and place to follow up on the question or comment.

- **Manage Small Group Size.** Consider your goals when creating small groups for activities. Sometimes you may want to count off for random groups; at other times you may want people to work in established teams. Think about what group size is appropriate for a particular activity. Consider what the facilitators will do during the small group time (note-taking, observing the groups, facilitation).
- **Manage Time.** Facilitators will want to have a general sense of flow, rhythm, suggested time, etc. for each exercise. Being aware of time and when to move on to the next exercise is an important part of the facilitator’s role.
- **Be Prepared for Each Workshop.** 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.

Climate

The guidelines and strategies described in the previous sections contribute to a positive workshop climate. Understanding the material, assuring confidentiality, listening to and respecting the group, effectively managing challenges, and clear organization contribute to an effective workshop experience. However, there may still be situations that can affect the workshop climate. Some examples 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 faced with these situations, it is best to remain calm and support the group and individual. Challenges like those listed above are to be expected, particularly in workshops that involve strong personal feelings and beliefs.

It is essential to show respect for differing opinions, even those that may seem extreme or unusual at the time. 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 and remind participants that these topics can bring up differences and/or emotions.

Occasionally, someone interferes with the workshop in a way that must be addressed. You can do this privately and focus on the goal of making the experience successful for the whole group. Stating this goal to a participant often helps resolve or calm the behavior.

Closing Thoughts

The Family Connections Workshop Series for Staff and Parents is designed to be both challenging and thought-provoking. You can help staff and families become more comfortable working together and talking about mental health by following the guidelines provided. You can also learn a great deal about your work and yourself. This is one of the joys of being a facilitator; learning is never one-way. When people recognize that you are excited about learning and are open to learning with them, they are far more likely to participate fully.

Related Resources

Explore the following resources from the Family Connections Mental Health Consultation Model on the ECLKC website:

Family Connections Short Papers

These short papers are designed to share information on topics that are central to understanding depression, resilience, and best practice in engaging parents facing adversities. They are intended to work as stand-alone handouts for parents and staff as well as materials used in workshops and in parent groups. Selected short papers for staff include:

- **Better Communication with Children: Responding to Challenging Subjects**
Explore strategies for responding effectively to children and the difficult topics they can bring to Head Start staff.
- **Better Parent Communication: What Do I Say When a Parent Tells Me Something Difficult?**
Explore strategies for responding effectively to parents and the difficult topics they can bring to Head Start staff.
- **The Challenges and Benefits of Making Parent Connections**
Explore strategies for effective parent outreach.
- **Fostering Resilience in Families Coping with Depression: Practical Ways Professionals Can Help Families Build on Their Power to Cope**
Explore this resource to learn about the four levels of resilience and how to apply them in your work.
- **Parenting, Depression, and Hope: Reaching Out to Families Facing Adversity**
Learn how to foster effective parenting and help parents build strengths and resilience in their families.

Selected Short Papers for Parents include:

- **The Ability to Cope: Building Resilience in You and Your Child**
Explore strategies for building resilience and facing adversity.
- **Parenting Through Tough Times: Coping with Depression**
Learn how to recognize depression, understand how it can affect parents and children, and review suggestions for help.

Additional resources about depression, trauma, and healing are available from the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement

- **Family Well-being: Parental Depression**
Learn about parental depression and how mental wellness can lead to improved family well-being, one of the PFCE Framework outcomes.
- **Understanding Trauma and Healing in Adults Series**
Explore this series to learn about trauma and how traumatic events can impact families and staff. Find information to guide your conversations with families. Use these resources to promote healing, resilience, and family well-being.

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PFCE@ecetta.info | 1-866-763-6481



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