

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



Talking with Children About Difficult Issues is designed to support learning for a facilitator and group of parent participants. It offers interactive activities and reflective exercises.

This workshop can be adapted as a virtual offering. Refer to the National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement resource **Leading Online Parent Meetings and Groups** as a guide.

Introduction: Family Connections Workshop Series for Staff and Parents



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



Workshop Focus

Parents may encounter difficult topics in conversations with their children. A child may start a conversation about something that has happened that takes a parent by surprise.

Or, parents may see and hear children exploring a sensitive topic in their play. For example, play may reflect themes that address topics such as death, racism, housing instability, illness, violence, substance abuse, and domestic violence (among others).

While it is natural to experience a range of emotions when these topics come up, there are strategies that can help us feel more skilled in our response.

This workshop will give parents an opportunity to share their challenges, explore strategies for supporting their children, and look at ways to take care of themselves.

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.

Goal

To promote an emotionally supportive environment for children by supporting parents' ability to respond to difficult topics.

Learning Objectives

Participants will:

- Reflect on a challenging conversation with their child
- Learn concrete strategies for more effective communication with their child
- Learn about potential emotional/mental health impacts of challenging conversations and what children need at these times
- Understand the importance of self-care

Method and Content

This workshop has three sequential sections:

- Exercise 1: Remembering a Challenging Conversation With Your Child
- Exercise 2: Strategies for Talking About Challenging Topics With Your Child

In Exercise 1 the participants are asked to remember and reflect on a difficult conversation with their child.

In Exercise 2 the group will focus on building strategies and concrete skills for future conversations with children.

Throughout the workshop, it is important to emphasize that one of the best ways for parents to support children is to practice self-care.

Estimated Time

1.5–2 hours

This does not include facilitator preparation.

Learning Environment

- A space large enough for participants to engage in whole group discussions and smaller break-out groups. Consider including two workshop facilitators for large groups (e.g., more than 20 participants).
- Seating for the group

Materials

- Six large pieces of paper.
- A pen or pencil for each participant.
- Two different colored markers for the facilitator.
- A packet for each participant with the following materials:
 - A blank piece of paper
 - Handout 1: “What do I do when my child says something to me and I don’t know what to say in response?”
 - Workshop Evaluation Form

Facilitator Preparation

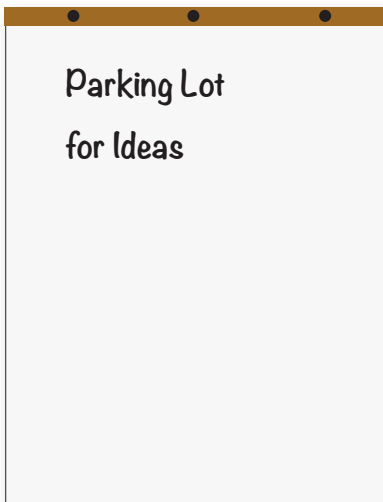
Read through all of the workshop materials. Reflect on the questions in Exercise 1. This can help you anticipate the possible responses that might surface during the workshop. (See examples of responses in the description of Exercise 1, Table 1 on page 8).

Remembering and sharing memories of difficult conversations can be painful and uncomfortable for some. For others, it may feel empowering, providing a chance to understand a past challenge.

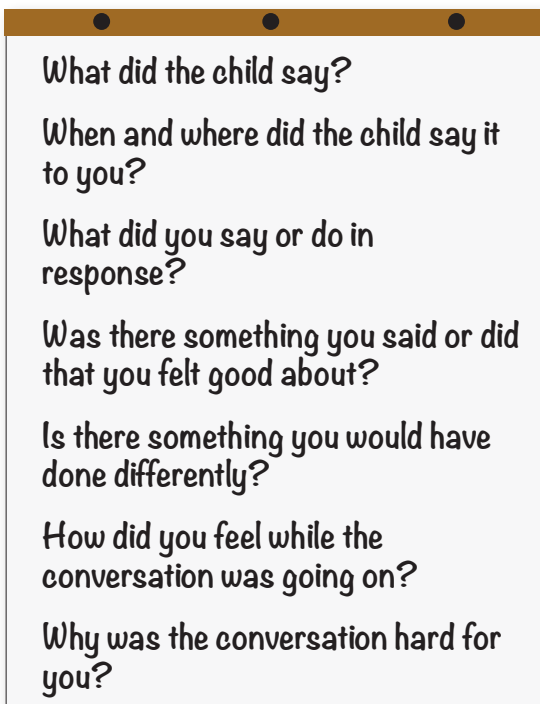
Throughout the workshop it is important to give attention to participants' positive responses as well as the challenges they identify. This will help the group feel valued and safe, and encourage them to be open to self-reflection and growth.

Preparing the Workshop Space

- Set up chairs so that the participants can begin as a large group. Plan in advance how you will move into smaller groups.
- Place a training packet on each chair in the room.
- Prepare a large piece of paper, entitled “Parking Lot for Ideas.”



- Prepare a large piece of paper with the questions from Exercise 1.



- Prepare three large pieces of paper with titles.



- Display the large pieces of paper so that the whole group will be able to see them and the facilitator can write on them easily.
- Markers can be set out in front of the papers or given to each participant prior to the exercise.
- Consider which strategy you will use to create small groups in Exercise 1. You can:
 - Invite the participants to create their own groups. This works well if you feel participants work well together overall, demonstrate trust and respect for each other, and will engage in the activity easily.
 - Assign participants to groups you have created in advance. Before the workshop begins, review your participant list and decide who might work well together. This strategy is especially useful for individuals who could benefit from interacting with less-familiar colleagues. Assigning groups may also be useful for keeping participants on task or to enhance the conversation through new combinations of viewpoints.

Introduction

Facilitators are encouraged to use their own words to introduce the training. Key points to consider are:

- Welcome the group and review logistics – general agenda, time frame, when to expect breaks, materials, sign-in sheet, etc.
- Introduce the topic. For example, you might say, “The title of this workshop is Talking With Children About Difficult Issues. Today we will focus on times when a child says something that leaves us at a loss for words. We simply don’t know the right thing to say or we are not sure what they really need us to say or do. Sometimes, children bring up topics that trigger our own emotional response. This can make it difficult to stay focused on the child. We want to think about how to prepare ourselves for these times – what can we do to be ready? How can we support the child, stay connected, and give the child what she or he needs? Staying connected in strong relationships with children is key to their success and well-being. Today, we will reflect on some past experiences and then work together to come up with strategies to help prepare for future difficult conversations with our children.”
- Describe the objectives of this workshop:
 - Reflect on a challenging conversation with your child
 - Learn concrete strategies for more effective communication with your child
 - Learn about potential emotional/mental health impacts of challenging conversations and what children need at these times
 - Understand the importance of self-care
- Explain the “Parking Lot for Ideas” to the group. If a question, suggestion, or concern is offered that is related to the topic but unrelated to the specific exercise, the facilitator will record it on the “Parking Lot for Ideas”. The facilitator will refer back to these ideas at the end of the workshop for further discussion as time permits.
- Create a Group Agreement with the participants. This is a short list of co-constructed statements intended to promote a safe, positive environment for all participants. Ask the participants what they will need to fully participate in the workshop. These can be printed on a large sheet of paper. Creating a Group Agreement is an important step before beginning the exercise.

Sample Group Agreement

Treat each other with respect.

Agree to disagree.

Maintain confidentiality—what is shared in the group stays in the group.

Managing technology (use of phones, etc.).

Humor can be helpful.

(Additional suggestions to create a positive, safe environment.)

Facilitator Strategy: Keeping the Workshop Environment Safe

Participants may feel vulnerable when asked to share a challenging experience. Some will feel supported in this exercise, but some may find it unsettling. For those who do not trust the workshop environment, you will want to reaffirm the safety of the group. Ways in which you can support the emotional safety of the workshop environment include:

- Review the Group Agreement and guidelines of confidentiality with participants. Emphasize that the scenarios discussed in the workshop are considered confidential.
- Monitor participants' behavior and reactions by glancing around the room. Take note of those who seem uncomfortable. Consider ways to check in quietly with these individuals in order to find out what support they might need (positive reinforcement, supporting their responses, asking how they are feeling if you have a private moment, etc.).

Exercise 1: Remembering a Challenging Conversation with a Child

The first step toward improving our skills in talking with children is to reflect on a time we felt challenged. It can help us identify what we thought we did well and remember what made the experience especially difficult. Keep in mind that this exercise can bring up a range of powerful feelings. Facilitators can look for opportunities to honor and validate all responses.

- Ask participants to take a moment to remember a time when their child told them something that left them feeling unable or struggling to respond. Encourage them to focus on an experience that they feel comfortable reflecting on and sharing in a small group discussion.
- Remind group participants that they will be asked to share in the large group if they are comfortable at the end of the small group breakouts. A prompt of confidentiality and the Group Agreement may be helpful at this time.
- Once the participants have picked a memory to reflect on, ask them to consider:
 - What did your child say?
 - When and where did your child say it to you (i.e. play time, a walk, in the bathroom, when you woke them up in the morning, naptime)?
 - What did you say or do in response? How did you handle it?
 - Was there something you said or did that you felt good about?
 - Is there something that you would have done differently?
 - How did you feel while the conversation was going on? (e.g. your heart raced, jaw or fist clenched, etc.)?
 - Why was the conversation hard for you (e.g. it was during a tough time of the day, the topic upset me, etc.)?
- Ask participants to use the blank piece of paper in their packet to record some thoughts about their experience. They can make notes, write a short paragraph, or draw the memory. Assure them that their work will not be collected, but will be for their own personal reference and use.

- Give participants several minutes to reflect. Check in with a one-minute reminder to finish up and bring their attention back to the large group.
- Ask participants to break into small groups and share their responses to Exercise 1. Encourage focused small group discussion by directing participants' attention to the posted questions:
 - Where and when did the conversation take place?
 - How did this challenging conversation with your child make you feel?
 - What are some strategies you used that were helpful?
- It is important at this point to remind the participants of the Group Agreement. Ask the group to keep in mind that reflections and personal stories are private and considered confidential.
- Reconvene the large group. Ask participants to share what was discussed in their small group. Depending on what time allows, you may want to ask groups to choose only one response from their group.
- Record responses on large sheets of paper. Table 1 presents examples of participant responses and themes to develop.

Table 1. Sample Responses for Exercise One

Response Category	Examples of potential responses	Themes for facilitator to develop in the discussion
How did this challenging conversation with a child make you feel?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uneasy • Scared • Angry • Frustrated • Surprised • Worried • Dumb • Inadequate • Flustered • Vulnerable • Thankful that my child shared it with me • Confused • Awkward • Protective 	<p>These conversations can catch us by surprise and contain details that are unsettling. It is understandable how this could leave us feeling angry at others, doubting our own parenting, or remembering unpleasant personal experiences.</p>
Where and when did the conversation take place?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play Time • In the bathroom • On a walk • Right before nap • When I woke them up in the morning • When we read a book about a family • While my child was coloring • When I asked my child what was wrong 	<p>These conversations can happen when you and your child are alone, or when other people are present. They can seem to have either a logical prompt or no prompt at all.</p>
What are some strategies you used that were helpful to both you and your child??	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gave my child a hug • Asked my child to wait until we could talk about it in private • Brought it to my co-parent or another supportive adult • Told my child s/he is safe • Asked my child for more detail so that I could understand it better 	<p>Some strategies help us feel more in control in the moment, others help us focus on the comfort of the child, and still others address what to do after the conversation is over. All are important to consider.</p>

Transition to Exercise 2

Exercise 1 can be powerful for participants. Remembering a time when you felt unprepared or upset can be unsettling. You may find that some participants feel pleased about how they handled the situation while others may feel less confident and question their choices. Take a few minutes to acknowledge the feelings that arise and thank the group for sharing so honestly.

Emphasize that the next exercise will focus on developing strategies based on the reflection about these experiences. Making this connection can help all participants feel empowered moving forward.

For example, you might say...

“You have all shared important stories with each other in this exercise. Sometimes remembering a past experience is helpful in learning what we do well and what we can improve. Remembering those experiences together reminds us that everyone is challenged at times. It also gives us a place to begin the conversation about which strategies we find most useful when talking with our children about difficult topics. In the next exercise we will use this information to continue the conversation and build on our skills.”

Exercise 2: Strategies for Talking About Challenging Topics with Children

This activity is designed to help parents develop strategies for having conversations with their children about difficult topics. The facilitator can use Handout 1 to highlight any strategies already mentioned by the group. This exercise is likely to be more meaningful when participants feel ownership of these strategies.

- Begin by reviewing the strategies discussed in the large group, and then bring the participants' attention to Handout 1 in their materials packet.
- Looking at Handout 1 together, mention the strategies already shared by the group. Discuss how these strategies can also be used when talking to teachers and other staff. Invite participants to describe their own examples.
- Engage participants in a follow-up discussion. Ask how they feel about the suggestions and new strategies. Do they find them helpful? What resources would they need to use them (e.g., more workshops, opportunities for practice, discussion with a teacher, family advocate or mental health consultant)? What are some reasons they might not use them? Do these strategies leave them with any questions? Are there other strategies they would suggest that have been useful?

Facilitator Strategy: Follow-Up Discussion

The group has now had the chance to share their own ideas and talk about new ones. Use this time to discuss remaining questions or concerns. Participants may ask questions that:

- Ask for guidance about a specific challenge
- Ask for clarification of a principle or element of the content
- Represent either doubt about or resistance of the content
- Seems irrelevant to the current topic

Points to consider in leading the discussion:

- **Listen.** Model careful and respectful listening. This is important even if the question seems unusual or inappropriate. Ask for clarification if the point is not clear to you. Restate the question to confirm your understanding and to help clarify it for the entire group.
- **Invite participants to share their ideas.** Maintain a balance between being a knowledgeable facilitator and utilizing the resources in the group to respond to these questions.
- **Model collaboration and reflection.** The discussion session is an opportunity to model collaboration and reflective group problem solving. The facilitator can use the group to help respond to and discuss questions. The readiness to have a real discussion is more important than answering individual questions.
- **Avoid leading as the “Expert.”** Try to avoid getting trapped into being the expert who has all the answers, or being perceived as “selling” a particular approach. This can be avoided by seeing the discussion as an exploration of ideas instead of a time for getting the “right answers.” When appropriate, facilitators can answer specific questions about the approach for which they have clear answers. They can ask the group if they have other responses to the questions. You can remind parents of other resources, such as the program mental health consultant, when concerns go beyond the expertise in the room.
- **Be curious and open.** Avoid defensive responses, especially when the question seems more about concerns or resistance than about ways to enhance parenting. For example, the facilitator might say, “That is an important perspective and I do understand. I wonder what that might be like for your child?”



Wrap Up

Bringing ideas together at the end of the workshop is important for everyone. As a workshop gets close to the end, it can be tempting to skip this step. Let people know that you will honor their time and end the workshop as scheduled, but want to take a few more minutes to wrap up the time you've spent together. Take a few minutes to get the group thinking about appropriate opportunities for using what they've just learned.

1. Review Key Concepts

- Talking with children about difficult issues is an important way to promote healthy social-emotional development.
- Strategies such as remaining calm, reassuring children, listening carefully, and seeking help are important when faced with difficult conversations.
- You don't need to have an answer for your child. Children want to be seen, heard, and acknowledged.
- One of the best ways to be prepared is to take care of ourselves.
- All parents benefit by getting support from others.

2. End on a positive note. Remind the group that this workshop offers strategies for supporting difficult conversations with children. Encourage participants to use the exercises as a way to reflect on their style of parenting communication and to support one another in developing new skills.

3. Review some or all of the comments written on the “Parking Lot for Ideas” sheet posted on the wall. Consider responding to one comment. Ask participants which of the other comments they would like discussed in the time remaining. If you don't have time, acknowledge that the comments are important and think with the group about other ways to address them. These comments may be considered in preparation for another workshop.

4. Express your appreciation. Let the group know how much you appreciate their time and hard work. Thank them for sharing their ideas with you and being willing to think about change together.

5. Make yourself available. Be willing to answer questions and respond to concerns on an ongoing basis after the workshop. If you or another facilitator cannot be available, an on-site staff member may be designated in this role and announced at the end of the workshop.

6. Collect attendance and evaluation forms. Collect signed attendance sheet and pass out evaluation forms for the group to complete. Remind participants that these forms are anonymous and collected for the purpose of improving future workshops.

Facilitator Reflection

Take time to review the workshop experience, read the evaluation forms, and summarize the results. Reflect on the following:

Was I prepared? Did I have all the materials I needed? Was the room adequate? Did I feel confident with the topic?

Did the workshop go as I imagined it would? Did the group respond the way I thought they would? Were there any surprises? Were there any elements of the workshop that went especially well? Were there parts that were especially challenging?

Were the participants engaged? Did the group size seem appropriate? Who seemed comfortable enough to share their thoughts with the group? Who did not seem comfortable? Do I know why? Did I get the feeling that the participants understood the exercises and materials? Who was present and who was missing today? Is there anyone I need to follow-up with immediately?

What were some of the themes that people talked about in this workshop? Was there a group of issues that the responses and discussions had in common? Are any of these issues a surprise? How can I use these issues in future parent workshops to make the exercises more effective? Are there any Parking Lot items to integrate into other learning opportunities?

Facilitator Reflection, cont.

What would have made this workshop better? What could I have done differently? Why? How can I use that information to make the next workshop more successful?

Did I gain new knowledge from this workshop? What did I learn? Did I gain any new knowledge about the group or individuals in the group? Did I learn something new about myself as a facilitator?



Handout 1: “What do I do when a child says something to me and I don’t know how to respond?”

When your child shares something that is upsetting or involves a complex issue it can be difficult to know what to say or do. Your child may tell you something you did not know about, something that raises your concern about safety, or maybe something you aren’t sure you completely understand.

Remember that when children share their thoughts, questions, and feelings with you, they are letting you know that they trust you. Keeping this trust in mind can help you stay focused on your child, and the good that may come from this interaction. The following strategies may help you in these challenging moments.

- **Stay calm and think about the message you want your child to receive.** If your child catches you off-guard by what he or she says, you may feel unprepared and worry that you don’t have the “right answer.” It is important to take a deep breath and try to stay calm. This will help you think more clearly. It will also give your child the message that even if he or she is upset, you are calm.

Staying calm will reassure your child that he or she has not done something wrong. Take a moment to think about the message you would like your child to receive. Here are some ideas your child could benefit from:

- I care about what is on your mind.
 - It is a good idea to share your feelings and worries with a grown-up who cares about you.
 - I am here to help make sure you are safe.
 - The grown-ups at child care or school can also help make sure you are safe.
 - Home is a safe place to share your questions, feelings, and worries.
- **Listen and make sure you let your child know you heard him or her.** Sometimes in these challenging moments, it can be hard to stay focused. If you are thinking about how to respond while your child is still talking, you may miss important information. Focus on listening and then make sure your child knows that you heard him or her. You can do this through eye contact, offering a hug, by nodding, or by repeating what you heard. This last strategy can also help you check if you heard what you think you did.
 - **Consider your response.** Start by following the child’s lead. You can answer questions simply and briefly. Children will ask for more information if they still have questions. Consider your child’s developmental age when choosing your words. If the conversation happens during play, join your child in their play to continue the conversation.

If your child shares information at another time, invite your child to tell you more either through words, a drawing, or an activity or play.

Handout 1: “What do I do when a child says something to me and I don’t know how to respond?” cont.

- **Reassure your child.** There are many ways to reassure a child in these moments. How to do this depends on the child, your relationship, the situation, and your style. The first step is to breathe, remain calm, and be aware of your own emotions. Young children read as much into your emotional and physical presence as the words you say.

It is common to remain focused on words alone, but touch and other physical gestures and affection may be just as important to your child. There is no one “right answer.” Whatever your strategy, your goals are to let your child know that s/he was right in sharing what was on her/his mind. You likely already know what kind of response will reassure your child most.

- **Remember you are not alone.** Sometimes a child will ask or tell us something that tests our limits mentally and emotionally. If your child brings up something you cannot address, reassure her or him that you are going to help. Then seek help from your co-parent, partner, or other trusted adults. While some might worry that this is a sign of weakness or lack of parenting skill, seeking support in parenting is a sign of strength and commitment to your child. In addition, seeking support may help you learn new skills and build community.
- **Reflect on the experience and follow up with your co-parent, partner, or another trusted adult.** Reflection is an essential element of parenting that helps build resilience. By discussing challenging moments with others, you can learn and feel more prepared for the next time it happens. If your child has told you something that concerns you regarding health or safety, you may want to call your child’s primary care provider (if you have one) or speak with a mental health professional.

Reflection can also provide an opportunity for self-care. Often parents are so eager to help others, they sometimes forget to take care of themselves. Acknowledge the challenges that parenting presents and be sure to accept praise and positive feedback for all that you do. Self-care is essential to your health and well-being!

Remember:

- Take a deep breath, and remember that you and your child learn from any conversation.
- If you are not sure you understood your child, repeat what you heard to confirm what he/she said.
- Reassure your child with your words and touch. You don’t need to have an answer for your child. Children want to be seen, heard, and acknowledged.
- If you have a concern about safety or health, communicate your concerns with a co-parent, partner, other trusted adult, or your child’s primary care physician.
- Participate in regular self-care. Taking care of yourself in small (and big) ways is critical to being the best parent you can be for your child.

Family Connections: Workshop Series for Staff and Parents

Workshop Evaluation

Title of the Workshop: **Talking with Children About Difficult Issues**

1. Please rate the extent to which you agree that the workshop met each objective:

	Strongly Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree a Little	Agree a Little	Mostly Agree	Strongly Agree
Objective 1: Participants will reflect on a challenging conversation with their child.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Objective 2: Participants will learn concrete strategies for more effective communication with their child.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Objective 3: Participants will learn about potential emotional/mental health impacts of challenging conversations and what children need at these times.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Objective 4: Participants will understand the importance of self-care.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Mostly Disagree	Disagree a Little	Agree a Little	Mostly Agree	Strongly Agree
I was satisfied with this workshop.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The information presented was useful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The workshop activities were useful.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The workshop activities were creative.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Facilitator was knowledgeable about the subject presented.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Facilitator's presentation style was engaging.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Family Connections: Workshop Series for Staff and Parents

Workshop Evaluation, cont.

3. Is there anything you would have liked to learn more about this topic that was not presented?

4. Would you like more workshops that expand on this topic? (please select one)

- Yes
 No

5. I would like more learning opportunities about:

Additional Comments:

Related Resources

Explore the following resources on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website:

Family Connections Short Papers

These short papers are designed to share information on topics that are central to creating open and positive communication between children and adults. 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 parents 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. Applicable for parents as well.
- **Self-Reflection in Parenting: Help for Getting Through Stressful Times**
Explore how self-reflection can be helpful to parents and strategies to practice productive self-reflection.

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