



# Preparing for Conversations with Parents or Caregivers Who Use Violence in Intimate Relationships

Conversations with parents or caregivers about their use of violence can be challenging and scary. Head Start and Early Head Start programs can use this resource as a guide to prepare to talk with adults who use violence in intimate relationships. The safety of everyone involved, including you, is always the number one priority. These conversations are important. They may help reduce the risk of harm to a child or partner. Discussions also can open the possibility of starting a process of change and healing for everyone.

This resource offers tips and suggestions to help you reflect on ways to talk to parents or caregivers who use violence. It is not meant to provide step-by-step instructions, a protocol, or scripted language to use. It is designed to help you find your own words for these conversations.

You may find some tips easier to use than others. This will depend on your confidence and skill, as well as the family's level of risk and engagement.

What is most important in these conversations is that you listen with a compassionate heart. At the same time, take a firm stance against the use of violence in relationships and families. You can explore your own ways of expressing openness to listening without judgment.

You should be prepared for people to feel judged or defensive. Ongoing training and supervision are essential for effective conversations with people who use violence in intimate relationships.

## Safety Considerations

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When you consider whether to talk to a parent or caregiver who uses violence, you and your supervisor should keep the other partner and the child's safety in mind at all times, as well as your own.

You should ask parents experiencing domestic violence if it is okay for you to talk with the other parent or partner. You can ask them, "What would help you? What can I say and what is off limits?"

You should never give the parent who uses violence any information you hear directly from the other parent or child. For example, you should not tell the parent who uses violence, "Pat told us that..." This could put the other parent at greater risk of harm.

Most parents who use violence are not violent to staff. However, you should always make a plan to stay safe. You can:

- Make sure other people in the classroom or building know you are meeting with the parent who uses violence. When meeting with a parent or caregiver virtually, ask if the person can speak with you in private. If there are other adults or children present, the conversation may need to be altered to protect the safety of others.
- Have another staff person with you during the conversation.
- Have the conversation in a room where you can exit easily if needed.
- Sit closest to the door.
- Beforehand, practice strategies for ending a conversation if things become unsafe.
- Plan to check in with your supervisor before and after the conversation.
- Have hotline and emergency numbers at hand, including 911. However, if you are concerned a meeting may result in a 911 call, you may want to find another way to address the situation.

Use the following suggestions to help you find your own words. Think also about how to tailor your messages to fit each family and their situation.

- **Remember that people who use violence can change.** Many people who use violence as adults experienced violence as children. Suspend your judgment and listen if the person you are speaking with brings up these experiences.
- **Try to build a relationship with a parent or caregiver who uses violence.** You might gain their trust and be in a better position to offer help for positive change and referrals for services.
- **Offer universal messages about domestic violence.** Consider how you might share these messages in your conversations with families:
  - Children are affected by violence, even if they do not seem to be.”
  - When people hurt their partner, they also hurt their children’s ability to become respectful adults.”
  - When people show care and concern for the well-being of their family, they become role models and can improve their children’s future.”
  - Parents and caregivers are examples for their children in everything they do. Their children will carry memories of them and their actions forever.”

- **Build rapport.** Head Start and Early Head Start teachers and staff are skilled at creating relationships with parents and caregivers. When you suspect or know there is domestic violence, these relationships might be more difficult, especially when dealing with the person who uses violence. However, developing trust and connection is particularly critical in these circumstances. Consider how the following kinds of strengths-based and neutral questions or statements might help begin conversations:
  - “How is everyone doing in your family?”
  - “I have really enjoyed working with your child. [He/she] is delightful.”
  - “You are very important to your child.”
  - “We wanted to talk to you because we know how important parents and parent figures are to their children.”
  - “Talking about family struggles can be really hard.”
- **Engage the person as a parent or caregiver.** Explore the relationship with their child and foster the parent’s strengths. A common strategy to engage parents and caregivers who use violence is to focus on their strengths as parents. Acknowledge that parenting is not easy for any of us. Be curious about what aspects of parenting feel easy or difficult for the caregiver. If they bring up their own childhood experiences as a source of difficulty, it can be powerful to simply listen without judgment. You can appreciate the caregiver’s insight, thoughtfulness, and trust in bringing up the experiences with you.

If you feel the parent or caregiver might want to talk more about past experiences, you could ask whether additional support might feel useful. If they are interested, you can help with a referral and a warm handoff to a counselor or therapist. The following questions may provide ideas for ways to engage a struggling parent:

- “In our experience, most people really want to be good parents. What do you think it means to be at your best as a parent and caregiver?”
- “What do you like to do with your child? What do you do to have fun together?”
- “What are your dreams for your child?”
- “What parts of parenting do you think come naturally to you? Can you tell me about a time when you felt like you handled something really well as a parent? How about a time when you wished you’d done something differently?”
- “What kinds of activities is your child involved in? What does your child love to do, and how do you support those things?”
- “What is your child good at? Are there ways your child likes to help that seem to encourage confidence and good feelings?”

- “What adults does your child feel most connected to? Who does your child want to spend time with? Is there a teacher, neighbor, friend, grandparent, or other family member who cares a lot about your child? Having several caring adults around is really important for everyone, especially for children.”
- “How does your family show love and affection? What do you do together as a family?”
- **Share concerns about the child.** If you are concerned about a child’s behavior, you can start by asking parents and caregivers if there are any behaviors that worry them. If they overlap with your own, this is a good place to join them by speaking to those shared concerns. If they do not, you can share your observations about specific behaviors without offering judgments or explanations. You might ask parents and caregivers to look out for those behaviors. If they agree, ask them if they could also think about what might be causing such behaviors. Ask what they think might help the child feel and behave differently. Consider these questions as a way to encourage parents and caregivers to explore and share their expertise and knowledge of their child.
  - “Are you worried about anything in particular with your child? Is there anything you think your child might be worried about?”
  - “Tell me about how your child handles emotions, like how [he/she] deals with frustration or a fight with a friend or sibling. Are you able to help your child deal with things that feel hard for them? How do you do that?”
  - “Parenting isn’t easy for anybody. What do you think is hardest about the stage that your child is in right now? How do you handle that?”

Some parents and caregivers are unable to offer observations about their child’s behavior. This inability may be a sign of challenges in the parent-child relationship. In such cases, consult with supervisors, mental health consultants, and professionals who work in programs that support people experiencing domestic violence.

- **Encourage the person to be accountable for the violent behavior.** Offer support for positive change. You must consider the risks and potential effects on the child and partner experiencing violence before sharing your concerns directly with the person who uses violence. You may determine your relationship with the person using violence is strong enough for you to raise questions with them and to discuss their understanding of the impact of this behavior on their family. Consider how you might use these questions to encourage a conversation about the person’s violent behavior:
  - “What kinds of things have your children seen or heard when there is fighting at home? Very young children, even babies, often know when one parent is threatening or hitting the other parent or breaking things. This is the case even when parents try to protect the children, or when the children weren’t directly involved, or even asleep.”

- “As you know, children who grow up in homes where this is happening might have nightmares or trouble in school. They may become withdrawn and anxious, or aggressive. Older children are more likely to use drugs or alcohol, act violently themselves, or struggle in school.”
- “I imagine you care a lot about the memories your child will have.”
- “We can help you get connected to services that will help you and your family. Are you interested in finding out about those services? It could be a very positive step for you and your child’s future.”

You can let parents know that even when children have been through hard and stressful events, they can heal. The sooner parents can reduce the use of violence, the better children will do later.

- **Explore past negative and current positive role models to motivate change.** People who use violence sometimes explain their behavior through the behavior of the adults who were in their lives when they were children. These observations and memories can also be a source of motivation for change. Consider asking the following kinds of questions:
  - “When you were growing up, who were the people in your community you admired and respected? What did they do or how did they behave that made you admire and respect them?”
  - “It sounds like you saw a lot of violence in your home as a child. Did you know other people in your community who acted differently than your parent or caregiver who used violence, who treated their families with respect?”
  - “It is clear how much you care about your child and how your child feels about you. Do you sometimes think about how you would like your child to remember you when he or she is grown up? What do you want them to learn about what it means to be a member of your family?”
  - “Tell me about what is important to you culturally. How do you want to share those cultural priorities with your child?”

You can use these tips to prepare for and engage in ongoing conversations with parents or caregivers who use violence. These ideas are not instructions or protocols for these conversations. They are intended to encourage you to reflect and find your own words. Seek support and guidance from supervisors and mental health consultants before and after conversations. Prioritize partnerships with professionals who specialize in working with families experiencing domestic violence. They are your best partners and resources for planning how to effectively support families.

## Resources

- National Domestic Violence Hotline (24/7, multiple languages offered):
  - 1-800-799-7233 (toll-free)
  - [https:// www.thehotline.org/](https://www.thehotline.org/)
- National Domestic Violence Hotline: Help for Abusive Partners
  - <https://www.thehotline.org/help/for-abusive-partners/>
- Responding to an Abuser
  - <http://stopabuse.umich.edu/colleagues/abuser.html>
- Talking to Abusive Men
  - <http://www.neighboursfriendsandfamilies.ca/how-to-help/talking-to-abusive-men>
- Engage: Roadmap for Frontline Professionals Interacting with Male Perpetrators of Domestic Violence and Abuse
  - <https://respectphoneline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Engage-roadmap.pdf>

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