

# Strategies for Talking With Children About Difficult Issues

Often in our work with families, we encounter difficult topics. A child may initiate a conversation about something that has happened at home that takes you by surprise. Or, you may see and hear children exploring a sensitive topic in their play. However it happens, topics such as birth, death, divorce, loss, illness, violence, substance abuse and domestic abuse are bound to emerge in early childhood programs. While it is natural to feel uncomfortable when these topics come up, there are strategies that can help us feel more skilled in our response. This workshop will give teachers an opportunity to share their challenges, explore strategies for supporting children, and look at ways to take care of themselves.

## Goal

To promote an emotionally supportive environment for children by supporting the staff's ability to respond to difficult topics that might occur in early childhood settings.

## Objectives

Participants will:

- Reflect on a challenging conversation with a child
- Learn concrete strategies for better communication with children
- Learn about potential emotional/mental health impacts of these types of conversations
- Reinforce the importance of professional self-care

## Method and Content

This workshop has three distinct sections, each designed to build on the other.

- Exercise One: Remembering a Challenging Conversation With a Child
- Exercise Two: Strategies for Talking About Challenging Topics With Children
- Exercise Three: The Question and Answer Period

In Exercise One, the participants are asked to remember a difficult conversation with a child and think about what went well and what might have been challenging. Keeping in mind what is learned from these conversations, Exercise Two will focus on building strategies to make these conversations feel supportive. In the last exercise, the group will have the chance to ask the Workshop Leader and each other any questions that might still remain. Throughout the workshop, it is important to emphasize that one of the best ways for providers to support children and families is to practice self-care.

## Getting Started

What You Need:

- Time – this training should take 1.5 hours, not including Workshop Leader preparation. For more information on **Workshop Time Management**, see the **Organization** section in the *Introduction to the Tell Me A Story Workshops*.
- A training space large enough to accommodate the members of the training to participate in large (e.g., 20 people or more) and small (e.g., 3-6 people) group discussions. For large groups, you may want to consider including 2 Workshop Leaders to help manage and respond to participant needs. For more information on considerations with **Group Size**, see the **Organization** section in the *Introduction to the Tell Me A Story Workshops*.

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

### Workshop Leader Preparation

Read through all the workshop materials first. Take time to consider which strategy you will use to create small groups in Exercise One and to reflect on your own responses to all of the exercise questions.

Remembering and sharing memories of difficult conversations can be painful and uncomfortable for some. For others, it may feel empowering, providing a much needed chance to understand a past challenge. A good way to prepare for this variety of response is to complete Exercise One on your own and anticipate the possible responses that might surface during the workshop (see examples of responses in the description of Exercise One, Table 1).

We can always learn more and improve our skills, but sometimes it’s hard to admit that we don’t feel good about something we did. As the Workshop Leader, remember to give attention to the positive (e.g. What worked well? What did you feel good about?) as well as the challenges. This will help the group feel valued and safe, making them more likely to open themselves to change.

#### Preparing the Workshop Space:

- Prepare the training space by positioning chairs so that the participants can begin as a large group, and then move easily into smaller groups.
- Place a training packet on each chair in the room.
- Prepare one large piece of paper, entitled “Parking Lot for Ideas.”



Parking Lot  
for Ideas

- Prepare a piece of large paper with the questions from Exercise One:

What did the child say?

When did the child say it to you?

How did you handle it? What did you say or do in response?

Was there something you said or did that you felt good about?

Is there something you would have done differently?

How did you feel while the conversation was going on?

Why was that conversation hard for you?

- Prepare the three large pieces of paper with the following titles:

Where or in what part of the day did the conversation happen?

How did these challenging conversations make you feel?

What are some strategies you used that were helpful?

- Display the large pieces of paper so that the whole group will be able to see them and the Workshop Leader can write on them easily.

## Introduction to the Training

Workshop Leaders 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.

- The training will focus on “Strategies for Talking With Children About Difficult Issues.”  
*For example, you might say...*

“Today we will focus on those times when a child says something that leaves us at a loss for a response. We simply don’t know the right thing to say or we are not sure what they really need us to say or do. We want to think about how to prepare ourselves for these times - what can we do to be ready? We’ll reflect on some past experiences and then work together to come up with strategies to help us prepare for the times when those conversations happen again.”

- ▶ Describe the objectives of this training:
  - To reflect on a challenging conversation with a child
  - To learn concrete strategies for better communication with children
  - To learn about potential emotional/mental health impacts of these types of conversations
  - To reinforce the importance of professional self-care
  
- ▶ Explain the “Parking Lot for Ideas” sheet as follows: During the training, if a question, suggestion, or concern unrelated to the training exercise, but related to the topic is offered, the Workshop Leader will record it on the “Parking Lot for Ideas” sheet. Refer back to these ideas at the end of the training for further discussion as time permits.
  
- ▶ Review the *Training Ground Rules*, which are a short list of statements (listed below) intended to promote a safe, positive environment for all participants. These can be printed on a piece of paper for all to see, but reviewing the rules and asking for group agreement is the most important step before beginning the exercise.

### Training Ground Rules

**There are no right or wrong answers** in any of the activities we will be doing today. Everyone’s opinions and feelings are respected here.

**One at a time.** We want to hear what everyone has to say so it is important to remember that group discussion requires strong listening skills.

**Learning takes time.** We will not rush one another when trying to understand and participate.

**Maintain Confidentiality.** While sharing our experiences we do not need to use names of children, parents or staff.

## Exercise One: 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 helps to 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, all of which should be honored.

- ▶ Ask participants to take a moment to remember a time when a child brought up something in conversation that left them feeling unable to respond. Ask them to isolate one such conversation. Encourage them to focus on an experience that they feel safe reflecting on and sharing in a small group discussion.
  
- ▶ Once the participants have picked a memory to reflect on, ask them to consider:
  - What did the child say?
  - When did the child say it to you (i.e. circle time, a walk, in the bathroom, when they greeted you in the morning, naptime)?
  - How did you handle it? What did you say or do in response?
  - 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?
  - Why was the conversation hard for you (e.g. it was during a tough time of the day, the topic upset me, etc.)?

## Workshop Leader Strategy: Keeping the Workshop Environment Safe

Inviting participants to share challenging experiences makes each participant vulnerable. Some will feel supported in this exercise without question, but for those who do not trust their co-workers or the workshop environment, this exercise can be unsettling. Ways in which you can support the emotional safety of the workshop environment include:

- ▶ Review guidelines of confidentiality with participants, emphasizing that the scenarios discussed in the workshop are considered confidential.
  - ▶ Remind participants that the purpose of the exercise is to think about new ways to manage difficult situations with children and families.
  - ▶ Monitor participants' behavior and reactions by glancing around the room. Take note of those who seem uncomfortable. Consider ways to quietly check in with these individuals in order to find out what support they might need.
- ▶ Ask participants to use the blank piece of paper in their packet to record some thoughts about their experience in a drawing or a short paragraph. Assure them that these will not be collected, but should be created for their own personal reference and use.
- ▶ Once people have had enough time to record some thoughts ask them to break into small groups of 3 or 4 participants.

## Workshop Leader Strategy: Creating Smaller Groups

Here are some options for creating smaller groups. You can:

- **Allow 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 devised ahead of time.** 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.
- ▶ Ask participants to share their responses to Exercise One in the small groups. Encourage focused small group discussion by directing participants' attention to the posted questions:
- How did this challenging conversation with a child make you feel?
  - Where and when did the conversation take place?
  - What are some strategies you used that were helpful?
- ▶ It is important at this point to remind the group that guidelines of confidentiality should be observed when sharing their reflections. Participants should be asked to abstain from using names or should change any names or details about the experience that may identify a family.

- ▶ Reconvene small groups into the larger group. Ask participants to share what was discussed in the 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 Workshop Leader to develop in the discussion
<b>How did this challenging conversation with a child make you feel?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uneasy</li> <li>• Scared</li> <li>• Angry</li> <li>• Frustrated</li> <li>• Surprised</li> <li>• Worried</li> <li>• Dumb</li> <li>• Inadequate</li> <li>• Flustered</li> <li>• Vulnerable</li> <li>• Thankful that the child shared it with me</li> <li>• Confused</li> <li>• Awkward</li> <li>• Protective</li> </ul>	<p>These conversations can catch us by surprise and contain details that are very unsettling. It is understandable how this could leave us angry at parents, doubting our own skills, or remembering unpleasant personal experiences.</p> <p>You might also feel a greater sense of responsibility because the child shared this information with you instead of someone else.</p>
<b>Where or in what part of the day did the conversation happen?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Circle Time</li> <li>• In the bathroom</li> <li>• On a walk</li> <li>• Right before nap</li> <li>• When the child arrived</li> <li>• While the child was coloring</li> <li>• When I asked the child what was wrong</li> <li>• When we read a book about a mommy</li> </ul>	<p>These conversations can happen at times of 1:1 contact, but may also happen in group settings, during transitions, and can seem to have either a logical prompt or no prompt at all.</p>
<b>What are some strategies you used that were helpful?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gave the child a hug</li> <li>• Talked to other members of my team</li> <li>• Asked the child to wait until I could talk about it in private</li> <li>• Brought it to my supervisor</li> <li>• Told the child s/he is safe at school</li> <li>• Asked the child for more detail so that I could understand it better</li> </ul>	<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 Two

This exercise 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 have come up and thank the group for sharing so honestly. Emphasize that the next two exercises will focus on developing enhanced strategies based on the reflection of 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 children about difficult topics. In the next exercise we will use this information to continue the conversation and build on our skills."**

## Exercise Two: Strategies for Talking About Challenging Topics With Children

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This activity is designed to help the group develop strategies for having conversations with children about difficult topics. The provided handout gives the Workshop Leader the opportunity 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 training packet.
- ▶ Looking at Handout 1 together, pay special attention to the strategies already shared by the group and how these strategies can also be used when talking to parents. Let participants describe their own examples.

# Handout 1

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

When a child shares something with us that is upsetting or involves a complex issue it can be difficult to know what to say or do in response. A child may tell you something you did not know about his/her home life, something that raises your concern over his/her care or safety, or perhaps 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 the 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 the child to receive:** If a child catches you off-guard by what he or she says, you may feel unprepared and perhaps also worried that you don’t have the “right answer” to share in response. It is important to take a deep breath and try to stay calm. This will help you think more clearly and will also give the child the message that even if he or she is upset, you are under control. Take a moment to think about the message you would like the child to receive. Here are some ideas about the messages children 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
- The grown-ups at school are here to help make sure you are safe
- The classroom is a safe place to share your questions, feelings, and worries

**Listen and make sure you let the 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 the child is still talking, you may miss important information. Focus on listening to the child and then make sure the child knows that you heard him or her. You can do this through eye contact, by nodding to them, and by repeating what you heard them say. This last strategy can also help you check if you heard what you think you did.

**Reassure the child:** There are many ways to reassure a child in these moments, depending upon the child, the situation and your style. The first step is to remain in control of yourself. 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 a child. There is no one “right answer.” Whatever your strategy, your goals are to let the child know that he or she was right in sharing what was on his/her mind, and to pay close attention to the kind of response that seems to reassure the child.

**You are not alone:** Sometimes a child will ask or tell us something that tests our limits mentally and emotionally. If the child brings up something you cannot address, seek help from your co-workers while reassuring the child that you are going to help. While some might worry that this is a sign of weakness or lack of skill, seeking help and feedback are important parts of professional development.



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**Reflect on the experience and follow up with your team members and supervisor:**

Reflection is an essential element of quality childcare practice that is often over-looked. By discussing these challenging moments with your co-workers, especially your supervisor, you are helping yourself learn from them and feel more prepared for the next time it happens. If the child has told you something that has concerned you, it is also important to document the interaction and share this information with your supervisor as soon as possible. If your concern is over the child's health or safety you should contact your supervisor immediately.

Reflection can also provide an opportunity for self-care. Often so eager to help others, childcare providers can sometimes forget to take care of themselves. Acknowledge the challenges that working in childcare present and be sure to accept praise and positive feedback for the hard work you do. Self-care is essential to your health and well-being!

**Remember:**

- ▶ Take a deep breath, and remember that this can be a positive interaction.
- ▶ If you are not sure you understood the child, repeat words to confirm what he/she said.
- ▶ Reassure the child with your words and touch.
- ▶ Document and share what the child said – with other teachers, case managers, supervisors, and parents.
- ▶ If there is a concern about safety or health, communicate concerns immediately.
- ▶ Take care of yourself.

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- ▶ Ask participants how they feel about getting suggestions and new strategies. Do they find them helpful? What resources would they need to use them? (e.g., more training, opportunities for practice, regular discussion with their team or supervisor). What are some reasons they wouldn't use them? Do these strategies leave them with any questions?

### Transition to Exercise Three

The group has now had the chance to share their own ideas and talk about new ones. This is a good time to remind the group that in order for them to support families, Head Start staff must devote energy to their own self-care. In the next exercise, the group will have a chance to discuss questions that may be left over from this discussion.

*For example, you might say...*

*"We've discussed a lot of different strategies for approaching difficult conversations with children. Sometimes we feel worn out from our work with families, especially when children are going through difficult times. In addition to caring for ourselves, one of the most important resources we have is our co-workers and supervisors. Even though we are around people all day, sometimes this can be lonely work. Remember to ask for help when you need it, and to offer help when you see another staff member struggling. We all need each other to do our best. Now we're going to think about all of the work we've done and whether there are some burning issues left to address."*

## Exercise Three: The Question and Answer Period

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The training ends with a Question and Answer session about the topics discussed in Exercises One and Two, and an opportunity to revisit ideas in the "Parking Lot for Ideas." In the wrap-up, take a few minutes to get the group thinking about the next training, appropriate opportunities for using what they've just learned, and to look at the classroom environment as a whole.

- ▶ Ask if there are lingering questions.
- ▶ Revisit the "Parking Lot for Ideas."

## Workshop Leader Strategy: How to Manage a Question and Answer Period

Participants may ask questions that can be understood in a number of overlapping categories, including those that:

- ▶ Ask for guidance about a challenge related to a specific child, family or co-worker
- ▶ Ask for clarification of a principle or element of what has been presented
- ▶ Represent either doubt about or resistance to what has been presented
- ▶ Have nothing to do with the issue at hand

**Points to consider in responding to such questions:**

- ▶ Listen. Model careful and respectful listening even when the question seems outrageous. Ask for clarification if the point isn't clearly made. Restate the question to confirm your understanding and to help clarify it for the entire group.
- ▶ Maintain a balance between being a knowledgeable leader and utilizing the resources in the room to respond to these questions.
- ▶ Model Collaboration and Reflection. The question and answer period is an opportunity to model collaboration and reflective group problem solving. The leader should use the group itself as much as possible in responding to questions. The readiness to have a real discussion is more important than answering individual questions.
- ▶ Avoid leading as the "Expert." The leader should avoid getting trapped into being the expert who has all the answers, or being perceived as "selling" a particular approach. This can be avoided, again, by seeing the question and answer exercise as an exploration of ideas as opposed to a time for getting the "right answers." When appropriate, Workshop Leaders should answer specific questions about the approach for which they have clear answers, but remember to ask the other participants if they have responses to the questions posed, and remind staff of mental health resources when concerns go beyond the expertise in the room.
- ▶ Avoid defensive responses, especially when the question seems more about resistance to the approach than about improving practice.

## Wrapping Up

Pulling things together at the end of the training is an important step for everyone. As a workshop gets close to the end and people are feeling tired, it can be tempting to skip this part. Let people know that you will get them out of the workshop on time, but want to take a few more minutes to wrap up the time you've spent together.

### 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 circumstances
- ▶ One of the best ways to be prepared is to take care of ourselves
- ▶ All providers working with families need support from colleagues

**2. End on a positive note.** Remind the group that this workshop is a first step in supporting the social-emotional development of the children served by the program. Encourage participants to use the exercises as a way to rethink their classroom practices and encourage supervisors to continue to check in with teaching teams about the strategies proposed in the training.

**3. 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.

**4. Make yourself available.** After the training, be willing to answer questions and respond to concerns on an ongoing basis. If the Workshop Leader cannot be available, an on-site staff member should be designated in this role and announced at the end of the training.

**5. Collect Attendance and Evaluation Forms.** Pass out evaluation forms. Ask participants to sign an attendance sheet and complete an evaluation form. Remind participants that these forms are anonymous and collected for the purpose of improving future trainings. During this time, you might also want to title and date any large group work so you can save it for future reference.

## Extending Learning and Supporting New Skills

In order to extend the workshop's content to changes in professional skill and behavior, the Workshop Leader and administrators should consider these followup activities:

**Provide Supportive Supervision for Individuals and Teams.** Teachers may need additional opportunities to discuss the experiences they remembered during Exercise One, and the strategies from the handout. Be patient with this need and remember that reviewing scenarios and approaches can lead to valuable professional self-reflection. Staff may also need reminders to take care of themselves when they are anxious or worried about a child.

**Implement Classroom Observation & Social Service Support.** Workshop participants may need extra support in order to feel comfortable trying these new strategies. Supervisors and mentors should be available to spend time in the classroom in order to offer support to the staff who are trying to cultivate new skills.

**Create Action Plans.** These discussions and observations can result in requests for additional training or new opportunities to reflect on the conversations staff have with children. Use these requests and suggestions as an opportunity to generate group goals and discuss possible steps toward those goals. Change takes time so starting small and charting any changes or achievements can boost a staff member's confidence. This is also an opportunity to understand the resources required.

## Workshop Leader Reflection

The Workshop Leader should take some time to review the training experience once it is over, read through and tally the evaluation forms, and review the results. Some additional questions to consider are:

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

**Did the training 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 training that went especially well?

**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 training?** 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 trainings to make the exercises more effective?

**What would have made this training better?** In hindsight, what could I have done differently? Why? How can I use that information to make the next training even more successful?

**Did I gain new knowledge from this training?** What did I learn? In addition to new information on the training topic, did I gain any new knowledge about the training group or individuals in the training group? Did I learn something new about myself as a Workshop Leader?

# Workshop Evaluation

Title of the Workshop: Strategies for Talking With Children About Difficult Issues

Location \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Please rate how well the training met the objectives below:

	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Not Good
Objective 1: To practice reflecting on a challenging conversation with a child	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Objective 2: To learn concrete strategies for better communication with children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Objective 3: To learn about potential emotional/mental health impacts of these types of conversations and the importance of self-care	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Overall rating of this workshop:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Usefulness of information presented:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Usefulness of workshop activities:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Creativity of workshop activities:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trainer's knowledge of subject:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trainer's presentation style:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Is there anything you would like to learn that was not presented in this workshop?

Would you like more trainings that expand on this topic? Yes No (Please circle one)  
I would like more training on:

Additional Comments:

## Additional Resources

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**For more support on this topic please see the following Family Connections materials:**

**Short Papers for Staff:**

*Better Communication With Children: Responding to Challenging Subjects*

*Better Parent Communication: What Do I Say When a Parent Tells Me Something Difficult?*

*Self-Reflection and Shared Reflection as Professional Tools*

*Fostering Resilience in Families Coping With Depression: Practical Ways Head Start Staff*

*Can Help Families Build on Their Power to Cope*

*Encouraging an Expressive Environment: Supportive Communication From the Inside Out*

