

COACH'S CORNER

Coach's Corner is a DIEEC blog dedicated to providing fresh ideas for all early childhood education professionals.



Written by Meghan Pallante
DIEEC Quality Improvement Specialist
& ECE Blogger

Editor's Note: This article was originally published in May 2024. It has since been updated with new resources and information.

Supporting Families in Crisis

There are so many layers to working in early childhood education. In addition to educating, caregiving, and running the business side of early childhood education, many programs also serve as a wealth of resources. We should be ready to support the children, their families, and our colleagues in a variety of ways. Many times families will look to their early childhood education programs when they aren't sure where to turn. Understanding how to support individuals and families who are experiencing a crisis is an invaluable skill for an early childhood educator.



Image: iStock

Identifying and Understanding

We can be proactive in our understanding of the hardships that some of our families may experience so that we are prepared when a crisis occurs. We can be better equipped to serve our families by having knowledge and training on supporting children and families in crisis. Consider adding this into your program's professional development plan. **Crises we encounter with children and families may include the following:**

- Death
- Illness
- Homelessness
- Abuse/domestic violence
- Food insecurity
- Divorce
- Natural disasters
- Incarceration
- Addiction
- Financial insecurity/job loss

These events and situations can have a profound effect on young children. At the same time, we must keep in mind that each child's experiences are different. Some children may show outward signs of trauma through their behavior while other children may not. This is why relationships with families are essential. Building a connection with the families of the children we care for lays the foundation for conversations about experiences with trauma. Open communication helps us to provide better support. **Some outward signs of crisis or trauma in child may include the following:**

- Separation anxiety
- Increased tantrums
- Changes in appetite
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Regression in areas of development
- Trouble focusing/feeling restless
- Child becomes quiet or withdrawn

Another aspect to consider is whether the trauma or crisis was a one-time event or something that is on-going. Repetitive traumatic events such as food insecurity or homelessness can also be described as complex trauma.

Supporting Children

- Providing extra attention and comfort is one of the most important things an educator can do for a child experiencing trauma. This reminds the child that their educator and caregiver is a safe space for them.
- Older, more verbal, children may want to talk through their experiences or express themselves through play or art.
- Remember that infants and toddlers may be affected even if they don't fully understand the crisis. They are sensitive to stress in the environment around them, disruptions to routine, etc. It is important to have open communication with families so that the child's needs can be communicated.
- Providing flexibility in the daily schedule. For example, allowing a child to nap earlier if they are tired and not sleeping well.
- Providing books that help put into words what they may be experiencing. In the next page you'll find a few examples.

Books to Read in Times of Crisis

Grief/Loss

- The Invisible String By: Patrice Karst
- Grief is an Elephant By: Tamara Ellis Smith
- The Memory Box By: Joanna Rowland

Incarceration

- Dear Dad, Love Nelson By: Margaret McBride
- Far Apart, Close in Heart By: Becky Birtha

Homelessness

- A Chair for My Mother By: Vera B. Williams
- Still a Family: A Story About Homelessness By: Brenda Reeves Sturgis

Divorce

- Weekends with Max and His Dad By: Linda Urban
- Two Homes By: Claire Masurel

Supporting Families

One of the best ways we can support families in crisis is to show compassion and provide resources. Being proactive and having an understanding of the resources available in your area will mean you are prepared to provide support when it's needed. Below are examples of the types of resources to learn about in your town or county.

- [Delaware 211](#) connects people throughout Delaware to essential resources including mental health, substance use, emergency shelter, medical care, food assistance, housing, legal help, clothing, and utilities assistance.

Additional resources:

- Emergency shelters
 - [Sunday Breakfast Mission](#)
 - [Dover Interfaith Mission for Housing](#)
 - [Sussex County Crisis Housing Services](#)
- [Food Bank of Delaware](#)
- [Substance Abuse](#)
- [Early Childhood Mental Health](#)

It is important for all of us to remember that children and families need our support during and after experiencing a traumatic event. Be sure to check in with families even after providing support and resources. Many times, the psychological effects of trauma do not show up until after there is time to process the event. The most important thing we can do for anyone in our lives experiencing trauma or hardship is to be a consistent support by continuing to show up for them.

Resources:

- [Supporting Young Children After Crisis Events- NAEYC](#)
- [Coping with Crisis- Headstart.gov](#)
- [Surviving a Family Crisis- UD Cooperative Extension](#)

Professional Learning Experiences

- [Understanding Children's Behavior as Communication PLUS- DIEEC](#)