

Be vigilant for families – Recognizing family stressors

In caring for children you have a responsibility to provide positive learning experiences, advocate for and protect children, and help families in their aspirations to provide good lives for their children. Sometimes children and families face difficult situations, and you are challenged to provide extra support, deal with sensitive issues, and become more aware of what is happening in the lives of children outside of your program.

What to consider

All children and families experience a variety of stressors, and for at-risk children and families, vulnerability to stressors may be greater. Be vigilant for signs that children and families may be struggling with problems or that a problem is developing. Situations to be aware of that may impact a child's well-being include:

- **Family situations:** Parents separating or divorcing, extended or traumatic family member absences (ex. out-of-town jobs, military deployment, hospitalization), a family member moving into or out of the home, unemployment, remarriages and/or newly blended families, new siblings, moving, death of a family member, incarcerated family member.
- **Unmet basic needs:** Food, shelter, medical care, hygiene, clothing, transportation, household management.
- **Unique needs:** Literacy, language, education.
- **Change in health status:** Major or chronic illness, injuries, mental health conditions, disabilities, addiction.
- **Neglect and abuse in the home:** Child or spousal abuse.

Referrals/Resources

These problems are sensitive issues, and it's difficult to think that the children and families in your programs are dealing with these situations, and even harder to discuss concerns and observations with children and families. However, as a child care practitioner, it is necessary for you to reach out to families and to take steps to enhance the well being of children.

When helping children and families with difficult situations, they will probably need additional services and resources that your program does not have. It is important for your program to identify and compile a list of community resources, related agencies, and assistance programs that children and families can use.

Here are some community resources to start your list:

- Community Help Line
- Cooperative Extension
- Department of Health
- Early Intervention Services
- Food Bank
- Head Start
- Health Clinics
- Public Library
- Salvation Army
- TANF/Public Assistance
- WIC Program

Your community probably has other human service agencies that serve families in need. In Pennsylvania, contact your local:

[Child Care Information Services \(CCIS\) office](#)

[LEARN Team](#)

When interacting with children and families in your program, be aware of the following behaviors and family situations:

Child

- Sudden changes in behavior or erratic behavior.
- Spending extra time at your program – coming in early or staying at pick up time.
- Unexplained bruises, bites, burns, or injuries.
- Talking about being treated inappropriately or about events that a child would not generally have knowledge of.
- Excessive and/or unexplained absences from your program or erratic schedules.
- The child is unwashed or poorly clothed.
- Talking about missing meals, the family joins the child for breakfast or snack, or takes “something to go”, or meals from home are often not sent or minimal food is sent.
- Avoiding contact with adults.
- Demonstrating a lack of attachment to others.
- Being overly compliant or withdrawn.
- Being anxious that something bad will happen.
- Showing reoccurring or consistent signs of illness, such as cough, upset stomach, or headaches.



Family

- Major or repeated changes in the family’s life.
- Family members overwhelmed or fail to follow through with responsibilities and requests.
- Problems with fee payments – late, missed, returned checks.
- Difficult to contact the family outside of your program. Mailing addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses given are disconnected or unavailable.

These behaviors and family situations can occur due to normal events and stressors, but if behaviors are consistently exhibited or if several behaviors are noticed, then it may signal that the child and/or family is coping with a problem situation or is at risk. If you notice these possible warning signs, follow through with focused observations and conversations, referrals, and actions as needed.