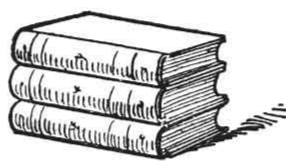


Topic 13

Safety & Protecting Children



INFORMATION *for* GROUP FACILITATORS

CHILDREN NEED TO BE SAFE and secure at home in order to believe that they have the right to be safe and to develop confidence and a positive sense of self. For families affected by substance use, mental illness and violence, the first step in re-establishing safety is for parents to provide a safe physical environment for themselves and their children. Parents may need skills and support in creating and maintaining a safe, consistent and peaceful environment.

Once this is accomplished, parents will need to begin with re-establishing and maintaining trust in their parent-child relationship. When extreme stress is part of a parent's life, as is true when parents are threatened by violence or affected by substance use or mental illness, they are often understandably focusing on their own survival and not on the needs of their children. In these circumstances, it is not uncommon for a parent to be physically or emotionally abusive to a child. Even if abuse did not occur, parents under this kind of stress may have had difficulty being emotionally available and responsive to their children.

Parents who are numbing or blocking their own feelings are often not able to be empathic with their children. In addition, parents may have failed to protect their children from others who have abused them or from witnessing violence. All of these circumstances create situations in which children do not trust their parents to keep them safe. When the situation is safe again, children need time to recognize

the change and come to trust it. If children are old enough, parents can talk to them about the circumstances that made things unsafe before and explain why it is safe now. Even so, it will still take time (and maybe some testing) for children to believe that the change is real and will last.

Children also need to be safe in their communities to be able to explore and develop relationships with people. Parents need to teach their children how to distinguish between safe and unsafe people and situations. Parents can help their children feel confident and secure by teaching them what to do in situations that feel unsafe to them.

The first part of this session will examine and process parents' childhood experiences of being afraid and of being protected. This includes *ghosts* (Fraiberg, 1975) and *angels* (Lieberman, Padron, Van Horn, & Harris, 2005) who continue to impact and influence us throughout our lives. The Angels Activity is intended for participants to explore and define the important people who have impacted their lives and who they hope will touch the lives of their children, both directly and indirectly.

This exploration is aimed at drawing out beliefs about their own right to safety and about their ability to adequately protect their children. Some members of your group may have experienced a number of injuries which could have been prevented if they had been protected by adult caregivers. Some may have experienced injuries at the

hands of caregivers. You may need to mobilize the group's resources of support, tolerance of affect, and containment. You will need to have available information and referral material to assist group members who may need additional professional help in exploring and understanding their childhood experiences.

This exploration of childhood experiences provides the groundwork for providing parents with a sense of their own ability and authority to protect their children and to help their children learn to protect themselves. The second portion of this session is devoted to practical actions parents can take to protect and strengthen their children. It will be important to emphasize that children who feel strong are better able to act to protect themselves. Therefore, we need to avoid instilling fearfulness into children in the process of teaching them how to avoid danger. Parents can do this by practicing protective skills with their children in an affectionate and relaxed way. We recommend using role plays to explore the dangers parents are concerned about, and to teach children to protect themselves, without frightening children. Exploring parents' fears will help them to empower their children.

Teaching safety and protection begins at home. If parents can provide a safe, dependable and nurturing environment from the beginning, their children get the message that they have a right to be safe. As this belief is reinforced by parents, children become more and more competent at identifying and reporting dangers.

The most important element in helping children become strong, aware and caring about themselves is a nurturing

relationship with a parent or caregiver. This relationship provides the model for nurturing boundaries and for open communication, so that children are able to recognize danger, and to report it.

The most basic element of safety, and an early step in behavior management, is baby proofing: creating a safe environment. This step serves two purposes: first, it allows babies and toddlers to use their natural drive to move and explore in a safe way; second, it allows children to do this without parents having to intervene and say "no" repeatedly.

Parents may feel anxious or helpless about protecting their children when the children are out of their care (such as at day care or school), but there are ways in which parents can increase their ability to protect *at a distance* and to ensure that, should anything happen, their children will be able to tell them so.

Note

Due to length of this session, facilitators may need to pre-select an activity (or activities) that would best support the needs of the group members. For example, if the majority of your group members have children younger than three years old, then the Baby-Proofing game would be ideal to use with this group. If group members have children older than six years old, then the activity Protection Planning for Children would be a good choice.

Whichever activity you pre-select, be sure to read the directions *before* implementation.

Getting Ready for Group

Goals

- To increase parents' self-awareness of their beliefs regarding their right to be safe
- To increase parents' ability to provide a safe environment for their children
- To increase parents' self confidence in protecting their children in a variety of environments

Objectives

- To enable parents to evaluate various environments in terms of safety
- To enable parents to acquire and use information and guidelines for providing for their children's safety

Materials Needed

- Flip chart
- Paper in a variety of colors, if available—papers with angel outlines (can be printed online)
- Markers
- Crayons
- Scissors
- Paste
- Red and green adhesive spots or adhesive spots of two different shapes, if any group members are color blind
- Pencils
- Colorful 5x7 index cards

If there is a local organization, such as a pediatric hospital or Department of Public Health, which produces safety handouts, obtain a supply of those and have them available to give to group members.

Prepare Ahead

On separate flip chart sheets, write the relevant items accompanying the following headings, as described in “Group Facilitation:”

- Icebreaker
- Safe Practices
- What if My Child is Hurt or Assaulted?
- Wrap-up

Have additional flip chart sheets available for recording participants' responses as needed.

Group Facilitation

Recommended time: one 90-minute session

1. Welcome & Icebreaker

1. *Welcome & Icebreaker*
2. *Being Protected*
3. *Baby-Proofing Game*
4. *Protection Planning*
5. *Safe Practices*
6. *Home Safety Checklists*
7. *What if My Child is Hurt*
8. *Wrap-Up*

Welcome the group to today's session and summarize the topic. Explain that often our ideas of what is safe and what is not are acquired from our own childhood experiences. To start examining those experiences, the icebreaker (displayed on flip chart) will be:

One time I felt protected as a child was...

One thing I do now to keep myself safe is...

Begin yourself, or ask for a volunteer to begin. When everyone who wants to share has done so, allow some brief discussion about how children respond to fear—how some children are openly afraid, while others pretend to be brave, or others become combative. Today, we will talk about creating a safe environment for children.

2. Experiences of Being Protected

We will now think more about the people in our lives that help us to feel protected. We will call them *angels*.

Angels Activity

On pre-cut angel shaped pieces of paper (or blank pieces of paper), ask participants to list all of the people in their lives whom they consider to be angels. Explain to participants that they are people who have influenced us in a positive way, who have helped us or made a positive difference to our lives; i.e., it is because of this person that we feel good about certain aspects of ourselves, it is because of this person that we have made changes, it is after this person that we try to model our behavior. Instruct the participants that they can either write the names, draw their pictures, or make a symbol representing their angels on the paper.

When participants have completed their angels, ask them to turn their angel over and to make a list of people who they think would list them as an angel in their lives.

Have the participants share their angels, allowing them to explain how these people were their angels, and to share how they have been an angel for someone else. Allow the group time to process.

3. Safe Environment Baby-Proofing Game

Recall the concepts discussed in the session on setting boundaries (Topic 11): Nurturing boundaries are clear and consistent, providing protection at the same time that they allow growth and learning. The concept of safety is closely tied to that of boundaries. When children grow up with abusive or neglectful boundaries, they grow up without adequate safety. Child-proofing a home is a way of setting nurturing boundaries that provide safety. We will explore this with a game.

Ask the group to form two groups, one group of adults and one group of babies and toddlers. Each group should identify one person to be their scorekeeper.

Give the adults the green spots and the babies the red spots. Explain that the babies will need to crawl around the floor or climb, but they cannot stand up (i.e., they have to travel at baby height).

Explain that the game is a competition between adults and babies to see who can find the items or places in the room that are not baby-safe. The adults will have a 30-second head start, and when they find something in the room that is not baby-safe, they are to mark it with a green spot, indicating that they have made it safe. Once an item is marked by a green spot, it cannot then be marked with a red spot by the babies. The babies, after the 30-second head start, will then also go through the room, at baby height, and put a red sticker on any item that is not baby safe. Once an item has a red spot on it, it cannot then be marked with a green spot.

Each team's scorekeeper will keep a record of how many green and red spots are used.

Allow the game to run for 3 to 5 minutes. Then ask each scorekeeper how many spots each team got, allowing 10 points for each green sticker and 10 for each red sticker. Ask the group to look around at where the red stickers are: Are they all near the floor or within one or two feet of the floor? What are the items that the adults missed? Discuss the differences between what the babies found and what the adults found.

4. Protection Planning—Teaching Children about Protecting Themselves

Explain to group members that parents are ultimately responsible for the safety and well being of their children. However, in cases of family violence and other dangerous situations where they are at risk, children need to know what to do to be safe. Children will need to protect themselves inside and outside of the home. The aim of protection planning is to equip them with some practical and realistic skills to be used in case of emergency. We are

going to focus on safety practices in or outside of the home. Suggest that a relaxed way to teach these safety skills to children is through role-playing and pretending. Avoid frightening children. Emphasize the idea of identifying and building resources. Begin with the activity, Protection Planning for Children.

Explain that participants will be developing a protection plan for their child or children. Each card will identify safe places to go or to hide in case of danger or when feeling threatened. Participants should list, on their children's protection plan cards, names and telephone numbers of trusted relatives, friends or neighbors who live or work in close proximity to them. Distribute index cards to the participants. This could involve some discussion of past unsafe events and potential risks. It would be important to allow this type of discussion but be sure to keep the focus on safety rather than on actual events. The work on protection planning can be uncomfortable for both parents and children especially if families are living in violent situations. This activity could trigger intrusive memories and provoke anxiety for some group members.

The group leader should continually bring the discussion back to what would make the situation safe. Alert group members that this could occur when they begin to practice with their children at home and suggest they direct children in the same way, toward what would make the situation safer.

Ask participants to alert you if they begin to feel uncomfortable. Be sure that everyone is feeling safe before proceeding to this practice activity.

5. *Safe Practices*

Present the following topics, displaying on the flip chart the list in the left column below, while explaining aloud the information from the right column, and eliciting participants' additions and comments.

Safe Practices	Explanation
Teach children their first and last name, their address, your first and last name, and your telephone number	Start doing this before children can use words. Parents can teach this by calling children by their names. Once children can use words, parents can ask them to repeat their first and last name; as they get older, add the address and telephone number. Ask the group for other suggestions. If group members are currently living in a confidential setting such as a battered women's shelter, then you will want parents to be alert to teach their children not to divulge this address. For older children, parents will need to explain the importance of not telling their classmates and friends where they live to ensure safety for the entire family. Parents may need to role play this with children to help their children feel secure in not telling their friends. Parents also need to let their children know when and to whom they can divulge this information.

Safe Practices	Explanation
Establish a family password	<p>Parents and children identify a word to establish as a password. A discussion should include who to tell and who not to tell the secret password. Teach children, through role play, not to go with anyone who cannot give the password. Use role plays in which a stranger:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Asks for directions• Asks for help in finding a lost puppy or kitten• Reports the child's parent has been hurt• Offers something appealing, such as candy, a present, or an introduction to someone famous• Calls to a child from a car, asking the child to come to the car
Teach your children how to respond to telephone calls	<p>Teach your children how to respond to telephone calls, especially when you are not at home. They should never tell anyone that you are not home, and they should not divulge their names. Use role play with children to teach them how to respond to telephone calls. An example of how to respond would be: the child states that you cannot come to the phone, to call back later and hangs up. Parents should tell children to whom they can give information, especially if families are living in a confidential setting or if there is a restraining order against a batterer. (This is a situation where a password could be used to identify to whom they should and should not give information.) Emphasize: <i>All children should be taught a password, not just those living in a protective setting.</i></p>
Teach your children to use 911	<p>Children should know how to use the telephone, how to identify themselves, how to give their address, including city or town, and how to describe the emergency. Practice this with toy/make believe phones and role-playing. Role playing a call to the police may evoke strong feelings in both parents and children; especially families who have had previous experience of calling the police or of having the police visit the home. Again, elicit suggestions from the group.</p>

Safe Practices	Explanation
Good/bad touch—education	<p>Teach children boundaries regarding their bodies. Teach children to use proper words to describe body parts. Explain to children what is “good touch” and what is “bad touch” with examples of what touch is allowed. For example, good touch is non-intrusive and welcomed, and bad touch is forced either physically or through manipulation. Children can learn how to call for help through role playing. Ask for examples or ways that children can call for help. State that when parents express a lot of affection for and interest in their children, they are less likely to be tempted by offers of affection that are disguised attempts at molestation. It is important that parents teach their older children about valuing and respecting their bodies, ask their children more questions and pay more attention because they can become more elusive. Good communication and positive parent–child relationships help parents and children feel comfortable in discussing daily events. If participants or their children have been sexually molested or abused and have not received treatment (counseling or therapy), it would be important to talk with these individuals, on a case-by-case basis, and have resources or referrals available at the end of this group.</p>
Get to know your older children’s acquaintances and friends	<p>Get to know your child’s friends by asking for and writing down their names, parent’s name, address and telephone numbers. Ask your children who they spend time with before and after school. Invite their friends to your home for dinner. Get to know what kind of music your child is listening to and what television shows your child is watching by participating in these activities with them. Discuss with your children any music, video games, radio or television shows that promote violence or drug use as attractive. Brainstorm with parents things they can do to get to know their older children’s friends and acquaintances. Devote an additional 10 minutes to this activity if you have group members with older children in the group.</p>

Safe Practices	Explanation
Fire safety tips	<p>Teach your children fire safety procedures.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stop, drop and roll: If clothing catches fire, do not run. Stop, drop to the floor, and roll from one side to the other to put the flames out. 2. Fire escape crawl: If there is smoke or a fire, crawl close to the floor. This is where the oxygen will be. 3. Be sure your home is equipped with working smoke detectors. Check with your fire department to be sure that fire extinguishers are located in a proper and accessible place. 4. Test the temperature of a door and doorknob before opening. If it is hot, do not open the door. 5. Establish and practice following a fire escape route. Mark the route on the floor or floorboard with glow-in-the-dark paint or tape. 6. Identify a place or area where household members will meet so that you can be sure everyone has escaped.
Internet safety	<p>If your children have access to the internet, make sure children are supervised while “surfing the net,” and blocks are put on sites with inappropriate content. You may consider having children share their social networking sites’ passwords with you, being their “friend” on those websites, or discussing rules for use.</p>
Other concerns	<p>The following sections present ways of responding to some particular concerns: items within the home needing adjustment, selecting caregivers, responding when children have been assaulted. Present these topics to the group, if time allows, and ask which they would prefer to explore.</p>

6. Home Safety Checklists

Members were provided with the “Home Safety Checklists” during the last session. These are to be used to conduct a family and household safety inventory, including older children as part of a home safety team. Any item which was answered “No” requires action. In this segment, parents will review their checklists, highlighting areas needing improvement by developing an action plan.

Describe to the group that we will review the home safety inventories completed during the previous week. This will happen in three stages: first, if anyone has any questions about any of the items, the group will discuss those so that everyone understands each item on the checklist.

Then, each member will report on their inventory and how they managed the activity at home (or residential program, if appropriate). Each person should include descriptions of what they learned, and what areas they identified as needing improvement.

Each member will develop an action plan, and these will be discussed with the group.

Ask if there are any questions regarding any items on the checklist. Ask a group member to list these questions on the flip chart or blackboard, and then review them in order.

After this discussion, ask each member in turn to report on their inventory, focusing on who conducted the inventory, how the parents assessed the process and their conclusions about the safety of their homes.

Provide members with the Safety Action Plan form and ask members to complete it, allowing about 5 minutes. Then ask each member to report, allowing and encouraging group comments and suggestions for each member's plan.

Additional activities, *Selecting Child Care Providers* and *Selecting a Day Care*, can be found in Appendix J.

7. What if My Child is Hurt or Assaulted?

Acknowledge that despite precautions parents take to make their children safe, at times children do get hurt or assaulted. Often, when children are assaulted, the assault comes from someone in close contact with the child—in the household, in the community or in the daycare/school environment. Because of the closeness of the connection, and because of the horror that assaults on children can instill, sometimes it is hard to acknowledge that the assault has happened. Describe the following important elements in responding to assaults of children. Display the emphasized words below on a flip chart.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT HAS HAPPENED: A child may not directly report an assault or injury. However, parents may notice:

1. CHANGE IN BEHAVIOR in the child should alert parents to the possibility that some event or factor in the child's life is having an effect on the child; the child may become withdrawn, start to have nightmares, or have sleep disturbances.

2. SOPHISTICATED SEXUAL KNOWLEDGE displayed by young children should lead parents to question how the children acquired this knowledge.

3. **SUDDEN FEAR** of a familiar person or place is another warning sign that parents should investigate.

4. **PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS** may be subtle, such as change in bowel or bladder habits, or obvious, such as vaginal or anal lacerations or symptoms of sexually transmitted disease. Children may suffer severe pain from these injuries. However, some children may attempt to cover up their pain. Note any reluctance on the child's part to urinate or have a bowel movement.

ACT TO PROTECT THE CHILD: As difficult as it may be to contemplate the possibility that an assault has taken place, it is essential that the child be protected and feel protected. This means both removing the danger from the child's life and obtaining necessary medical and mental health care for the child. Discuss that the steps a parent takes, if handled with sensitivity, can have a positive impact on the child.

CARING FOR YOURSELF: It will be essential that the parent mobilize supports for him or herself. The powerful emotional response that parents can have will require a safe outlet that is not directed at or near the child.

INVESTIGATING: Report the assault to the proper authorities and cooperate with them.

PARTNER IS THE ASSAULTER: Reinforce the importance of protecting the child. Encourage the group to think about ways of dealing with a situation in which a partner has assaulted a child, including:

- Asking the partner to leave
- Helping the partner to get help; determining the sincerity of efforts
- What if the partner is threatening or violent? How can a safety plan be developed for both the parent and child?

8. *Wrap-Up*

Explain that it is now time to close. Ask if anyone has anything that needs to be said before we end, and allow time for brief discussion. If the group has decided on its own way to close, proceed with that. If not, ask group members to complete the following statement (displayed on flip chart), beginning yourself:

One way I can be strong in protecting myself and my family is...