

Strengths-based Ways to Support Families Affected by Substance Use

As a child care provider, you may worry about how substance use affects children. You can help family members keep their child safe when you have a good relationship with them. This resource helps you talk with families about substance use in a respectful way before concerns come up.



Building on Family Strengths

Focusing on strengths can help you build good relationships with families. This shows families that you respect them. Every family has strengths! Help them notice and build on their strengths. For example, you might say, “It’s wonderful how you are patient and gentle when your child is feeling sad at drop-off. You’re good at helping him feel secure and loved.”



Modeling Behaviors That Support Child and Family Well-being

Reminding families of their strengths helps build positive relationships. When you see a family member doing something well, you might say, “I see how hard you’re working. It’s clear you’re very committed to your child!” These kind words are powerful for someone struggling with substance use issues or other hardships. It also shows how they can communicate with their children in positive ways.



Including Substance Use in General Safety Conversations

Talking about substance use doesn’t need to be different from any other safety discussion. You can use your safe child care environment as a model for families. You can tell families, “We keep anything that could be harmful to children stored where children can’t reach it. It’s important to do the same at home.”

You can also use motivational interviewing techniques to help you feel more confident when talking about sensitive topics.

Recognizing Behavioral Concerns

When you know that a family member is struggling with substance use, consider whether the child has any behavioral concerns. Does the child seem sadder than usual? Are they acting out troubling situations during playtime? Or does the child seem fine? Substance use doesn't always mean a child is unsafe, so let the child's behavior help guide next steps.

You can support families affected by substance use by:



Talking to the family. You might say, "I noticed your child seems more upset than usual this week. Is there something going on at home that we should be aware of so that we can better support her and your family?"



Asking the family if they'd like to learn about local services, mental health providers, or substance use treatment



Giving the child extra attention and emotional support while in your care

Reviewing, Updating, and Sharing Policies

Write clear policies on substance use and share them with all staff and families. This prevents confusion and makes sure people who are struggling with substance use won't feel singled out. Make sure your policy is specific, such as what happens if a family member seems to be under the influence of substances at drop-off or pickup.

Share this information with families in a nonjudgmental way. You might say, "This is something we share with all families, so they know how we keep children safe." Remind families that you won't release a child to a family member who seems to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol.



Conversation Guide for Professionals on Substance Use, Children, and Families

Illuminate Colorado offers national trainings on how to have strengths-based conversations with families. The online training and resources focus on helping professionals talk about substance use, safe and engaged caregiving, and ways to promote child and family well-being.

<http://illuminatecolorado.org>