

# Introduction to Workshops for Families

**T**ell Me A Story (TMAS) is a literacy-based emotional expressiveness program designed to help preschoolers, their parents, and teachers discuss difficult emotions associated with challenging situations. TMAS was originally developed as part of Family Connections, a program that supports early childhood programs in their mental health outreach to families who are facing adversities, particularly parental depression. Through generous support from the A. L. Mailman Family Foundation, we were able to develop and produce materials for teachers in early-childhood programs that now include the following component specifically aimed at training staff to work with families.



Helping families is both the motivation for and the goal of the Tell Me A Story (TMAS) program. By helping staff more effectively reach out to parents who may be facing difficulties, TMAS assumes that parent engagement is an important part of a child's learning and development. The Family Connections model includes a variety of services, for example, one-on-one conversations with parents, educational workshops, and parent support groups. While each of these approaches looks different, each is meant to engage parents in an early childhood center and, ultimately, in their children's growth.

We recognize that children come from a variety of family constellations, so in our work and in this module, we use the term "parent" or "family" to mean the primary caretaker/caretaking unit of a child. This person may be a biological parent or another significant adult in a child's life. We want to stress the importance of engaging adults who invest in the care, education, and nurturing of a child, regardless of the relationship to the child.

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## Engagement

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Parental engagement is central to Family Connections. We envision a parent's role as less than one of *doing* things that a professional encourages them to do and more of one *engaging*<sup>1</sup> in practices that support a child's growth, learning and healthy emotional attachment to their caregivers. A deeply involved parent is part of an ongoing and dynamic relationship with both a child and other people involved in the child's learning and development.

Research tells us that children's academic, social, and emotional outcomes are better when their parents are engaged in their growth and development. The early childhood stage (zero to five years) has important effects on later development<sup>2</sup>. When parents engage in activities and play with their children during their children's early years, children tend to have better skills that prepare them for kindergarten<sup>3</sup>. As infants develop into toddlers, their relationships with their parents and important adults help them develop their self-esteem and understanding of others.

For babies and preschool aged children who attend daycare or preschool programs, research also suggests that a strong family-school relationship helps a child do well in the childcare setting and later in kindergarten. Some research shows that when parents keep in regular contact with their children's early teachers, the children interact well with their peers and other adults<sup>4</sup>.

When a child is part of a nurturing and warm parent-child relationship, that child may have more success in his or her early social and emotional development<sup>5</sup>. Besides the positive influence that parent engagement can have for children, it can also be important for parents themselves. By engaging in education, parents can learn more about their own children's development. They can also increase their confidence in their ability to have a positive influence on their children.

Research tells us that most parents want to see their children do well, and they want to be involved in their children's education<sup>6</sup>. One barrier to engagement, however, is depression. For parents struggling with depression and related difficulties, it may be hard to connect and to believe in their ability to make a difference in their children's lives. Another barrier to engagement can have its roots in cultural experience. Parents who were themselves raised outside of the United States, in a different part of the country, or during "a different time" may have varying expectations of a parent's role in his or her child's schooling based on his or her own experience. Through supporting parents in different ways and extending explicit invitations to participate in activities, a center can help parents manage stress and engage with their children in ways that meet their own parenting goals.

In the following three trainings, *Ways to Engage Families by Using TMAS in Your Classroom*, *Ways to Engage Families by Using TMAS in Your Center*, and *Teachers and Parents Working Together: Delivering a Tell Me A Story Workshop to Parents*, you will find materials to help you reflect on, plan and implement TMAS parent engagement programs at your center. The information in this module is based on our own experiences as mental health consultants and evaluators for Family Connections during the demonstration project of Family Connections and on research related to parent support and engagement.

Our work was conducted across six urban Early Head Start/Head Start centers in a major northeast city. For this reason, we have approached these materials with Early Head Start/Head Start staff members in mind. We also recognize that the makeup and needs of Head Start families vary. We believe that our strategies for engaging families would be relevant to teachers or administrators working with other populations, too. All parents at one time or another will experience challenges and joys in parenting, a desire for information about child behavior, or concerns for their children's well-being. We hope this module will be useful to any teacher or administrator doing family engagement work in early childhood. We have found that successful parent work is grounded in a good understanding of the needs and capacities of parents, and we hope that you will be able to adapt these resources to your own needs, as well.

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Leading a series of workshops with early childhood professionals can be both an interesting opportunity and a significant challenge. Because the Tell Me A Story (TMAS) workshops emphasize consideration of personal and professional experiences in order to make meaning of suggested strategies, these workshops have been written to not only provide steps through the training exercises, but to provide preparation, guidance, strategies, ideas, and topics of reflection to support to both participants and the Workshop Leader.

The workshops are designed to build skills by first allowing participants to gain understanding of key concepts, and then provide the opportunity to reflect on what those concepts bring to the participants' own program and work. The workshops are presented in an order that allows for each session to build on what has been previously learned. Therefore, we recommend that these workshops be delivered in the order they are presented. You can do these trainings each in their entirety or in sections as it suits the needs of your individual program.

Tell Me A Story was originally developed as part of Family Connections. The first module of TMAS contains some material directly from the Family Connections program.

<sup>1</sup>Calabrese Barton, C., Drake, C., Perez, J.G., St. Louis, K., George, M. (2004). Ecologies of Parental Engagement in Urban Education. *Educational Researcher*, 25.

<sup>2</sup>Shonkoff, J.P. & Phillips, D.A. (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

<sup>3</sup>Brooks-Gunn, J.G., Fuligni, A.S., & Berlin, L.J. (Eds.). (2003). *Early Child Development in the 21st Century: Profiles of Current Research Initiatives*. New York: Teachers College Press.

<sup>4</sup>McWayne, C., Hampton, V., Fantuzzo, J., Cohen, H.L., & Sekino, Y. (2004). A multi-variate examination of parent involvement and the social and academic competencies of urban kindergarten children. *Psychology in the Schools*, 41(3), 363-377.

<sup>5</sup>. Lamb-Parker, F., Boak, A. Y., Griffin, K. W., Ripple, C., & Peay, L. (1999). Parent infant/toddler relationship, home learning environment, and school readiness. *School Psychology Review*, 28, 413-425.

<sup>6</sup>Mapp, K. L. (2002). Having their say: Parents describe why and how they are involved in their children's educations. Paper Presented at the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, April 1-5, 2002. 20 pp.

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# Welcome Workshop Leader!

In the Family Connections materials, we describe overall readiness to begin trainings and engagement, and we suggest that the director of the center select a workshop leader, usually a mental health professional. That person undergoes training and then can deliver the workshops to the staff. This is described more fully on page 3 of Training Modules in the Family Connections materials. Later, we mention the specific Needs Assessment (the Family Connections Readiness Guide) but that is more or less after the decision has been made to go forward with Family Connections/ TMAS program.

## Description of the Workshop Materials:

### Each Workshop Description Provides

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#### **AN INITIAL SECTION DEDICATED TO WORKSHOP LEADER PREPARATION**

This section is intended as an orientation to the materials and the training set-up, including:

**Introduction:** Gives an introduction to the training topic

**Goals:** Lists specific goals for the training

**Objectives:** Lists specific participant objectives

**Methods and Content:** Lists and summarizes each exercise in the training

**Getting Started** section includes

**What you Need:** Lists the materials, space, and time needed

**Preparing the Workshop Space:** Provides suggestions for set-up

#### **A SECTION DEDICATED TO IMPLEMENTATION**

This section is intended to guide the Workshop Leader as s/he delivers the workshop content. It includes:

**Workshop Leader Preparation:** Throughout the trainings, we have included specific suggestions for being thoroughly prepared for the content and process of the training.

**Workshop Leader Strategies:** Throughout the trainings, we have included specific strategies related to a particular topic or exercise. For example, you may want some ideas about how to set up the group most effectively or get the group focused on the topic at hand.

**Individual Exercise instruction:** For each exercise, there are guidelines about content and delivery.

**Transitions from one exercise to the next:** Since moving from one exercise to the next can be challenging, we have given suggestions about how you can summarize what was learned and build a bridge to the next topic.

**Tables of sample responses:** In many exercises, participants will share their ideas in a large group and record them on paper. To help the Workshop Leader facilitate this process successfully, we have provided tables that include examples of potential responses to the exercises, as well as suggestions of themes the Workshop Leader can introduce to the discussion. The themes listed are not meant to restrict you but instead to give you a jumping off point for where to focus the group's attention.

**Handouts for participants** (including Workshop Evaluation form): To be distributed at the beginning of each workshop.

**Suggestions for Concluding the Training - Wrapping up:** At the end of each training, it is important to allot some time to recognize the group's efforts, highlight the key elements discussed and look forward to the next training. Suggestions for how to do this effectively are included.

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### **A FINAL SECTION DEVOTED TO FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES**

This section is provided in order to encourage Workshop Leader reflection while suggesting ways in which the training experience can continue through supporting the transformation of skills.

**Extended Learning and Supporting New Skills:** A crucial part of successful professional development and program change is follow-up. If the new skills learned in the trainings are not revisited, this neglect may serve to disempower the staff. As part of the training preparation, it is essential that you commit to follow-up. Suggestions about how to do this are included for each training.

**Workshop Leader Reflection:** Self-reflection is a crucial part of what we are trying to encourage through all of the Tell Me A Story materials. Therefore it is important that Workshop Leaders also engage in this opportunity to recognize successes and challenges in order to improve skills and plan how to make positive changes for the future. It is recommended that you consider the questions included in this section shortly after the workshop is complete.

## Starting the Tell Me A Story Workshop Series

These workshops include instructions for carrying out each segment of training as a place to begin, with specific guidelines written for each exercise. However, you can expect that the training in your setting will be influenced by multiple factors and some strategies and suggestions may work better than others. Factors such as group and Workshop Leader characteristics, the training environment, program morale, comfort level with the materials, longevity of the program, and the status of existing mental health services will all contribute to a unique experience for your setting.

## General Guidelines for Effective Training

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When planning your agenda for each workshop, there are some general guidelines and strategies you may want to consider in order to help you create a training that is well-received and successful.

**NEEDS ASSESSMENT** A needs assessment of participants recognizes the fact that people come to trainings with different experiences and expectations. You can conduct an informal needs assessment while preparing to present the first workshop through conversations with a variety of staff members. Or, you may choose to implement a more systematic approach, such as *The Family Connections Readiness Guide*, with program administrators and staff. In any case, asking questions about the training group's range of experience, education, and language needs will provide you with an important tool to anticipate the strengths and challenges of your workshop participants.

**HOSPITALITY** Making participants feel welcome during workshops is essential. Small gestures and comforts mean a great deal to participants. People should be well cared for during the training. If the program has the resources to provide food and/or beverages, the group will be grateful. Provide seating that is the most comfortable available in the program.

**OWNERSHIP** In order to conduct any workshop you need to understand the material and make sense of it for yourself. Before getting up in front of a group, become familiar with the content, find ways to describe it in your own words, and question if it fits with what you already know about work with children and families. If possible, preparation is best done with other people (e.g., mental health providers, other staff involved as trainers or administrators). Try the language out with each other, experiment with the exercises, and imagine how some training participants might interpret and/or respond to the material.

The materials are designed to support the expertise of everyone who participates. In this sense, we want the teachers eventually to own the material and make it part of their repertoire of skills. Most of the knowledge generated in the modules will, in fact, come from the participants, not the Workshop Leaders.

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**MANAGING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS** Avoid getting into the position of answering questions that you truly don't have the answer to. It is perfectly acceptable to say, "That's a great question, but I don't think I know the answer." Let the group know that you will identify a resource and get back to them, and make sure to follow through. Another way to manage a difficult or controversial question is to turn it back to the group. Ask them what they think about the question. Often, the group will come up with a collective "answer" that is far more satisfying than giving just one person's opinion.

**CONFIDENTIALITY** When sharing reflections during workshops, confidentiality must always be maintained. This doesn't simply mean the names of families are withheld in discussions. It also means that when family or staff issues are discussed during training, they are "kept in the room" – or, in other words, not discussed outside of the training. Participants should be reminded that many of the issues discussed in training can be emotional and personal. The only way to deal with them is with respect for people's privacy. The purpose of sharing experiences in training, whether they be personal or involve others, is to help participants learn how to do a better job with children and families. Therefore, by paying special attention to issues of confidentiality, every workshop participant can feel secure in speaking honestly about their own concerns, emotions, and learning process.

A major threat to confidentiality is that staff may have personal relationships with each other, often talking about work outside of work and turning to each other for support during challenging times. This is both good and natural. However, it also creates opportunities to violate the confidentiality of families and other staff. It is important to understand the relationships among workshop participants ahead of time so that you can anticipate the boundaries of the group and reinforce the need for discretion.

**LISTENING, AND LISTENING CAREFULLY** As a facilitator of the workshops, it is your job to listen to participants. Most of the training exercises involve individual or small group activities that are then discussed with the whole group. Knowledge and understanding are attained by a shared group effort. Therefore, it is far more important that you listen and find openings to provide encouragement for further conversation. This means finding a balance between providing workshop content and allowing for a short period of silence after you ask a question or listen to a response. It can be a strong temptation to fill up silences with your own ideas. Therefore it is important to stay focused on your job as a facilitator of discussion. Set a pattern for the group by modeling thoughtful listening yourself. Help the group refrain from interruptions or talking over each other.

At the same time, listening does not mean being passive. You'll want to show you are an active listener. Gestures such as nodding your head and eye contact are very effective. Sometimes, even when you listen carefully, you don't quite understand the meaning of the message. Or you may feel that others in the group didn't understand. At these times, it can be useful to ask a participant to restate what they said or repeat back what they said. For example, "I want to make sure I understand. It sounds like you are saying this...." Using these strategies demonstrates that you are listening and that you care about everyone's understanding.

**CHALLENGES** One of the most difficult challenges for a Workshop Leader is when participants reject, dislike or challenge what is offered in training. There can be many reasons for this:

- Being overwhelmed by the emotional connection to the topic,
- finding the material too challenging or not challenging enough,
- belief in another way of doing things,
- stress outside the workplace,
- avoidance because of strong personal identification with the topic,
- self-doubt and insecurity of communication skill or intelligence,
- fatigue at the end of a long day,
- simply not being ready to learn something new.

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As a Workshop Leader, it is natural to feel anger, confrontation, or self-doubt. But, if you know where the difficulty stems from, then it becomes easier to make sense of it and deal with it. Acknowledging and respecting participants' opinions can be a strategy for building collaboration and breaking down barriers. It can also be helpful to trust the material and yourself. Focus on the fact that all participants desire a common goal – to do the best for children and families. If necessary, take a minute to verbally remind the group that you are all there for a common goal. Another strategy is to remind the participants that they have the opportunity to improve the trainings by providing their constructive feedback on the Workshop Evaluation, provided at the end of each training experience. Use these evaluations as a way to learn more about what your group needs.

Occasionally, someone interferes with training in a way that simply must be addressed. This should be done privately, during a break, and with the goal of making the training successful for the entire group. Stating this goal to a difficult participant often helps resolve the behavior.

**ORGANIZATION** Every group needs a general structure and every facilitator needs some tools to help provide that structure. When the workshop is well-organized and participants know what to expect, training will always be more successful. Here are some strategies to consider.

**Provide a general orientation of the workshop** – and timing, when breaks will be, how to set up the agenda, and suggestions for making the room more comfortable (heat, seating, snacks, etc.) A welcoming attitude is very helpful. Showing that you care for the physical well-being of participants is essential.

**Establish a “Parking Lot” for Ideas** – When a group comes together to discuss a topic, there are likely to be many ideas that surface. Some of these ideas will directly relate to the topic while others may get the group off topic. On the one hand, it is important that all participants feel like their input is valued, and on the other hand, you want to respect the goals and focus of the training. If a participant asks a question or has a comment that does not directly relate to the topic but merits further discussion, you can list it on the Parking Lot for Ideas. Let the participants know that you will do your best to revisit the topic at the end of the training, if time allows. If not, agree on another time and place to follow up on the question or comment.

**Reinforce Training Ground Rules** – All groups need a common understanding of group expectations for participation. The Training Ground Rules will provide a structure for these expectations. The Workshop Leader should review the ground rules at the beginning of the training and ask the group to agree to them. If the Workshop Leader or a participant notices the group is not respecting the rules, it's important to take a few minutes to review the rules again and get the group back on track.

**Have a plan for breaking into small groups** – Sometimes you may want to count off for random groups; at other times you may want people to work in their natural teams. Consider what group size is appropriate for a particular activity. In addition, establish what the Workshop Leaders will do during the small group time (note-taking, observing the groups, facilitation, etc.).

**Manage time** – Workshop Leaders will want to have a general sense of flow, rhythm, suggested time, etc., for each exercise. Information about timing can be helpful to participants. For instance, “We will be taking fifteen minutes for this small group discussion.”

**Be prepared for each module** – Read through all the materials provided for each workshop before presenting. Know your content, what you are going to do, how much time it will take to conduct the exercises, and what you hope to accomplish.

**Know your workshop participants** – Who are they (culture, experience, education)? What do they do (job roles, informal roles in the agency)? Which members may need more help to feel part of the group? Which may have authority over others, and need to be tempered? Be cautious not to create bias, but be ready to address the unique needs of the group.

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## Learning Environment

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All of the guidelines and strategies described thus far contribute to a positive workshop learning environment. Ownership of and enthusiasm for the material, assurance of confidentiality, listening to and respecting the group, effectively managing resistance, and clear organization make it possible for a group to work well together. Despite all of this, there may be situations that can affect the workshop climate – situations such as:

- Conflicting cultural perspectives on child-rearing
- Differing views on how to work with a particular child or family
- Strong expressions of anger, frustration, or sadness
- Expressed dissatisfaction with the agency or others in the service system
- Disrespectful interactions between participants

When encountering these situations it is best to make sure that you maintain control. Your investment in the success of the training may seem at risk, but challenges like these are to be expected, particularly in trainings that involve strong personal feelings and beliefs. Showing respect for differing opinions, even those that may seem outrageous at the time, is essential. Showing empathy for people who are experiencing difficult emotions is always helpful and reassuring to participants. At these times, it may be best to slow down the process, remind people that this is difficult work that can bring up differences and/or emotions. Perhaps, remind people of the Training Ground Rules. Only occasionally does a Workshop Leader need to confront a participant who displays difficult behavior. If this happens, it should be done calmly, respectfully, and in private.

The Tell Me A Story Workshops are designed to be stimulating and satisfying experiences. Following the above guidelines during each of the workshops will help staff become more competent at working with families and acknowledging mental health issues. You will also learn a great deal about your work and yourself. This is one of the joys of being a Workshop Leader – learning is never one-sided. When people recognize that you are excited about learning and are open to learning with them they are far more likely to fully participate.

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