

Shelter From the Storm: Caring for Families With Very Young Children

- Families with very young children are coping with the event just like the other people at the shelter, but they have the added stressor of meeting the physical and emotional needs of their young children.
- This added stressor may make them feel extra-protective or overwhelmed.
- Helping to care for the parents of very young children nurtures them so they can care for and comfort their children.
- Remember: Your approach with a family sets the tone for how receptive they are to receiving help. This will become more comfortable with time. Below are some tips for talking to parents of very young children in shelters to find out their specific needs and offer them comfort.

TIPS for Talking to Parents

- Approach gently. Ask if it is an OK time to talk, and maintain a respectful distance from their personal space. Respect that parents are feeling protective of themselves and their children. Begin by offering something tangible (e.g., water, blanket).
- Pay attention to the parents' cues. If they seem hesitant, try again later. Listen—nod your head and use body language to let the parents know you are engaged. This is not the best time to share your own similar experiences.
- Know what resources you have for very young children (e.g., material items, places to change or feed a young child, toys).
- Ask them how you can help. Be honest and realistic about what you can offer.
- Avoid judgment. If you find yourself making a judgment turn it into a statement that begins with "I wonder..." . Remember: Your goal is to meet their needs so they can meet their children's needs. For example, if you find yourself becoming judgmental about a family's hygiene, you might say, "I wonder if a warm shower might help you to relieve some stress." Or, if you are feeling judgmental about how loud a family is becoming, you might say, "I wonder if you want a place where you can talk and get things off your chest."

Working with the Child

- ✓ Introduce yourself to the child. Give your name and who you are in the shelter.
- ✓ Talk directly to the child as you play about how different it is to be in this shelter with all these new faces.
- ✓ Speak calmly and gently while smiling and not getting too close to the child at first.
- ✓ If you can, get on their eye level.
- ✓ Ask if you can make a picture /play with a doll/ truck (adjust activity depending on resources). Be prepared that they may climb in your lap once they feel safe.
- ✓ If they ask you to take them to the bathroom, have the parents do it to give them some control.
- ✓ Ask the parents first before doing anything. For example, ask "Is it ok if I offer your child crayons? Is it ok to give her an apple? Can I sit by your family for a moment?"
- ✓ If the children do not want to talk or play, check back with them later and accept their limits. If they want to play, but not talk, don't continue to ask questions. Color next to them.

- If they seem receptive you might introduce them to other parents of young children.
- Be available, but don't hover. Let the parents know where they can find you and how often you will try to check in with them. This approach allows them to know you are available but are not trying to take over.
- If the parents look exhausted, ask if it is OK if you stay by them and make a picture with their child or read a book to the child.
- If the parents are arguing, ask if you could take the child to the play area. Always stay in sight of the parents. If they seem resistant, stay close to them and ask if you could read to, or make a picture with, the child.
- Gently ask if you can play with the child instead of commenting on the fact that they are not meeting their needs.