

# Response Strategies when Families Share Hard Things

Early interventionists often work with families and young children who are experiencing trauma or traumatic events. Sometimes when families of very young children share something upsetting or surprising, early interventionists are unsure how to respond. We might freeze or say something reactive rather than supportive. Having a few strategies ready for those moments that may catch you off guard can be really helpful. This tip sheet provides some in the moment response strategies to use when families share difficult or traumatic experiences. For more information on trauma-informed practices in early intervention, please refer to: [The Pyramid Model and Trauma-Informed Care: A Guide for Early Childhood Professionals to Support Young Children’s Resilience](#).

## During the visit



- ▶ Push your “Pause Button.”
- ▶ Take a deep breath.
- ▶ Think about what was said.

## Then you can...

- ▶ Acknowledge what was said—this validates the family and gives you time to process.
  - “I am so glad you told me that.”
  - I appreciate that you shared that with me.”
  - “What I hear you saying is...”
  - Write a way to validate and acknowledge what you heard in your own words here: \_\_\_\_\_



- ▶ Ask questions to clarify the next steps the family would like to take. Below are some reasons families might be sharing information with you:
  - Awareness—the family wants you to be aware of the situation.
  - Validation—the family wants to feel heard and their experience affirmed.
  - Informational support—the family is seeking information.
  - Connection to community resources—the family would like additional services or resources.





- ▶ Create a follow-up plan (Choose any of the following):
  - Agree to continue to check-in on the family’s well being.
  - Provide a referral to community services or additional resources.
  - Add another goal or service to the IFSP.
- ▶ Provide support to help the family talk to their child, or others in the family, if appropriate.
  - Role-play conversations.
  - Brainstorm ideas with the family about what they might say.

Conversations can help the child understand and talk about their feelings, regulate their emotions, build safety in attachment relationships, or create solutions.



## After the visit

- ▶ Sometimes responding effectively “in the moment” is not helpful or possible. If you missed the opportunity to respond during the visit, it is never too late to come back! On your next visit, you can say:
  - “I remember that you told me \_\_\_\_\_ on our last visit. I wanted to check in with you.”
  - “I was really thinking about what you told me last week.”
  - Write something in your own words to follow up with a family:

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- ▶ **ReFRAME and Reflect**
  - Conversations and experiences can feel uncomfortable, upsetting, or overwhelming.  
**REFRAME:** “This family felt comfortable sharing this information with me. I must be doing a great job building trust and safety in our partnership.”
  - Do I need to journal or connect with a colleague or supervisor to process this experience?
- ▶ Self-reflection prompts to consider:
  - What emotions or thoughts came up for me during this interaction?
  - What can I do to process or reframe them?
  - What can I do to offer support in the moment?
  - What can I say in the future if I need time to process next steps before supporting this family?
  - What went well in my interaction or conversation with this family?
  - What might I do differently or how might I expand upon this practice next time?