

Strategies for Dealing with Unexpected, Immediate Needs or Crises

An unexpected, immediate need can take a service coordinator off the intended path during a meeting, home visit, or telephone call. Some of these unexpected, immediate needs may take us off course but be relatively minor in nature. The unexpected, immediate need may take the form of a child who isn't feeling well, a neighbor dropping in during a home visit, a sick animal vomiting on papers brought for a parent signature, or a long-awaited doctor's appointment scheduled at the time of your visit. Having an agenda for meeting with a family is critical to its success. Equally important is the ability to set the agenda aside when more urgent or unexpected issues arise for the family.

Some unexpected, immediate needs can be perceived as a crisis. When faced with a crisis, each service coordinators might think through the following questions.

What is the nature of the crisis?

A crisis can stem from a variety of sources. Some potential sources include:

- Health (illness of child or family member; mental health issues)
- Financial (job, money, insurance, housing)
- Death (family member, friend)
- Relationship (marital discord, divorce, dissatisfaction with providers)
- Accidents (injury) Issues with alcohol and other drugs (AODA) Abuse or neglect

Understanding the nature of the crisis will assist the service coordinator in knowing what resources might assist the family, what referrals might be appropriate, and whether other team members might be called upon in the situation.

Is the family asking for my support in this crisis?
The service coordinator may see a family struggling with a situation and yet not be asked for assistance by the family. The service coordinator needs to sort out whether the family wants this assistance or not. Asking for help is not easy for many people. To determine whether there is need to involved in the situation, the service coordinator may comment on what has been observed and ask whether there is any way to be helpful. Opening up the topic to discussion and naming the apparent difficulty may enable the family member to ask for assistance. On the other hand, the family may not want or need your help. The service coordinator needs to respect the family's decision.

Sometimes, family members may want the service coordinator to just listen or be a sounding board while they figure out the best course of action. At other times, the family may want your help. Depending on the nature of the crisis, the service coordinator may call upon the same skills used when acting as a "trouble shooter" to assist the family in thinking through options and possible solutions when a proposed course of action is not working, when conflicts arise, or when priorities for the child and family have shifted since the IFSP was implemented. The service coordinator often uses conflict managing skills in these situations to help the family: (1) identify and clarify the issue, problem, or challenge; (2) collect and sort through the information and feelings related to the issue; (3) develop a plan of action for resolving the issue; (4) implement the new plan; and (5) review and evaluate the plan as it is being implemented to ensure that the chosen path is working. This process does not have to be time intensive and may incorporate these decision-making steps:

- Acknowledge the person's problem by reflecting what you hear him say. This avoids the pitfall of you taking on the problem.

- Instead of offering advice or trying to solve the problem for the person, you might ask him how he thinks the problem might be solved.
- You can use a decision-making process with the person, asking relevant questions to stimulate him to identify the nature of the crisis. “So what do you see as the problem?”, you might ask. If the person is struggling, you can ask, “If the problem was solved, what would you like the outcome to look like?” After the person has identified the problem, move to the second part by restating, “You have identified the problem as, what do you see as some possible solutions?” Here the person generates solutions; the next step is initiated by asking, “Which of these solutions or combination of solutions best meets the criteria for a successful outcome?” You might next point out that the person has come up with a solution.
- Determine if there are barriers to carrying out their plan. After possible barriers and potential solutions and strategies are discussed, a course of action is decided upon.
- The service coordinator may ask if and how she might be of use in carrying out the plan. Here the service coordinator’s knowledge of services, resources, and supports can be invaluable. Ask the family if there are activities they want you to pursue and discuss a time to check back to see if the plan has been successful. If the plan is working, fine; if it isn’t working, the service coordinator and family return to the process and try to determine where the process is breaking down.

Can I address the crisis with the family or am I in over my head? As the family relates the nature of the crisis, the service coordinator needs to determine whether he feels competent to address the family’s crisis or whether there are more appropriate people to act as a resource to the family. It is important for the service coordinator to make a referral to draw upon his knowledge of community resources to assist the family.

Do I need support and where do I get it? Dealing with crisis is stressful even if the service coordinator has strategies to apply in the situation. The service coordinator may experience less burn out if she knows her sources of support and how to best use them. The service coordinator can get support from within the early intervention program. Early intervention programs often have guidelines and procedures related to handling certain types of crises. This takes some pressure off the individual service coordinator to figure out how she should proceed in some situations. Program support can occur through training and the provision of information on potential crisis situations that might face service coordinators.

Service coordinators might look for support from key people within the early intervention program, which ideally, has mentor and peer support systems. In a mentor relationship, the service coordinator is paired with a staff person who has greater experience, while in a peer support relationship, both people may have equal experience. This support person can assist the service coordinator in difficult situations by listening as she reflects on her options. The support person may provide ideas based on his experience.

Depending on the nature of the crisis and the supports available in the community, the service coordinator draws upon all of his resources to find appropriate sources of support for the family. Support for the service coordinator from

outside the program could take the form of a friend, spouse, significant other, or family member who is willing to listen.

Section III of the guide offers many ideas and strategies for service coordinators and families confronted with unexpected, immediate needs or crisis. Those personal skills, in conjunction with the resources you may have to offer, will be critical when in this phase of the IFSP process