

Safety when Working with Families who use Substances

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NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Theoretical Foundations:

- Relationship-focused practice

Law, Regulation, & Agency Policy

- Government, Law, & Regulation
- Agency Policy

Systems Expertise:

- Service delivery systems
- Community resources

Direct Service Skills:

- Observing & listening
- Safety

Reflection:

- Self-awareness
- Emotional Response

Thinking:

- Exercising Sound Judgment

Home visits with families are wonderful experiences. Many home visiting programs are back to conducting in-person home visits which is a welcome change after only seeing families on a screen through virtual home visits.

While on a home visit in the family home, you may walk into unfamiliar territory, and when working with a family where substance use is present, there is an additional layer of the unknown. If you feel a little uneasy or underprepared to work with a family where substance use is present, you are not alone. “Studies have found that many home visitors don’t feel they have the capacity to assist families with substance use issues” (Dauber et al., 2017). Talk to your supervisor, reflective supervisor, or mental health consultant to discuss any concerns you have related to substance use and family support. The more comfortable, safe, and supported that you feel, the more productive the home visit will be.

When you work with a family where substance use is a concern, there are a number of precautions you may want to consider to help ensure your safety. It is important to keep safety for you and the family a top priority. Be aware of your surroundings, whether it is your first visit or your 50th visit with a family.

Prior to your home visit, gather as much information about the family as you can. If possible, speak with your referral source to get more information about the family. This might be, information about the neighborhood, how many people are typically in the home if substances are being used now, what those substances are, and what substances may have been used in the past. It is important to have this background knowledge since each substance is unique and may have different effects on individuals. A detailed Drug Fact Sheet may be found at <https://www.dea.gov/factsheets>. If you are aware of what substance/s are being used or were used in the past, you can inform yourself on what to look for in the home environment that might be a sign of drug use.

Take a drive to the family's home a couple of days before your scheduled visit so you know where you will meet the family, where there is a safe place to park, and to see if you observe any hazards or concerns outside the home.

Some environmental things to be aware of outside of the home may include but are not limited to: covered or boarded up windows, strange smells (like ammonia, ether, cat urine, or rotten eggs), open windows when it is cold outside, "keep out" signs, guard dogs, security cameras, baby monitors placed outside, excessive trash or unusual trash such as torn apart lithium batteries, empty containers with holes and tubes, excessive foot traffic to and from the house, and people loitering around the house. (Arizona Early Intervention, 2018; State of Nevada, 2021).

Things to look for while you are inside the home may include but are not limited to: Unusual smells, drug paraphernalia (pipes, needles, oil vaporizers, baggies, tin foil, short straws, mirrors with razor blades, burnt spoons), deodorizers or incense to cover up smells, trash accumulating inside, rooms blocked off, and an excessive amount of empty alcohol beverage containers (Arizona Early Intervention, 2018; The Summit Wellness Group, 2021).

If you arrive at a home and someone in the household is under the influence, the best practice would be to reschedule the visit and leave immediately. If the child(ren) or adults in the home are in danger, call 911 and contact your supervisor. Some signs of being under the influence include but are not limited to: lack of motor coordination, dilated or constricted pupils, red eyes, slurred speech, confused behavior, drowsiness, or hyperactivity (DEA, 2020).

First and foremost, if you have a bad feeling, leave the situation. Trust your instincts! Your safety as a home visitor is essential. In your day-to-day work, it is easy to forget. When we board an airplane, we are always instructed "Please place the mask over your own mouth and nose before assisting others". Without taking care of your safety first, you cannot support others to the best of your ability.

The information in this article is meant as guidance only. Please refer to your agency's safety procedures for clarification on your agency's protocols.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection.

1. How do you prepare yourself for the first visit with a family where substance use is present?
2. What are some of your concerns when working with a family where substance use is present and do you have someone you can freely discuss your concerns with?
3. What biases, if any, do you have about a family or family member that uses substances?

References

- Arizona Early Intervention Program. (2018) Home Visitor Safety. <https://des.az.gov/sites/default/files/media/Home-Visitor-Safety-Guidelines.pdf>
- Dauber, S., Ferayorni, F., Henderson, C., Hogue, A., Nugent, J. and Alcantara, J. (2017), Substance use and depression in home visiting clients: Home visitor perspectives on addressing clients' needs. *J. Community Psychol.*, 45: 396-412. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.21855>
- Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). (2020) Drugs of Abuse

https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Drugs%20of%20Abuse%202020-Web%20Version-508%20compliant-4-24-20_0.pdf

State of Nevada. (2021) Recognizing a Meth House/Structure.

https://ag.nv.gov/Hot_Topics/Issue/Meth_House/

The Summit Wellness Group. (2021) Know The Signs of Drug Abuse

<https://thesummitwellnessgroup.com/resources/signs-of-addiction-to-drugs/>

Resources

Cannabis use in Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

<https://www.nmhealth.org/publication/view/general/7447/>

Drug Basics

<https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/basics/>

Fact sheets about pregnancy and breastfeeding exposures

<https://mothertobaby.org/fact-sheets/>

Good Samaritan Laws

https://drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/DPA_Fact%20Sheet_911%20Good%20Samaritan%20Laws%28Feb.%202016%29.pdf

How to Identify Drug Paraphernalia

<https://www.getsmartaboutdrugs.gov/content/how-identify-drug-paraphernalia>

Keeping Marijuana Safely at Home

<https://www.childrenscolorado.org/conditions-and-advice/parenting/parenting-articles/safety/>

NM Poison & Drug Information Center

<https://hsc.unm.edu/poison/>

Pregnancy and Opioid Pain Medications

https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/pregnancy_opioid_pain_factsheet-a.pdf

Safely storing your cannabis

<https://www.nmhealth.org/publication/view/rules/7437/>

SAMHSA database of treatment locations in the U.S.

<http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>

Syringe exchange programs in NM

https://nmhivguide.org/search_results.php?city=&county=®ions=null&harm_red=on&submit=go#results

Terms to use, terms to avoid, and why when talking about drug addiction

<https://nida.nih.gov/drug-topics/addiction-science/words-matter-preferred-language-talking-about-addiction#table>