



STRENGTHENING FAMILIES: COLLABORATING WITH FAMILIES OF YOUNG CHILDREN IN ASSESSMENT AND SAFETY PLANNING LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

DECEMBER 2025
MENTAL HEALTH OF CAREGIVERS
AND UTILIZING A SUPPORT NETWORK

CPS professionals play a critical role in bridging families to mental health resources that promote stability and resilience. By approaching mental health concerns in a collaborative, nonjudgmental way, CPS professionals help parents access the support they need to create a safer home environment and foster positive outcomes for their children.

Assessing a parent's mental health challenge is essential, especially in circumstances when there are children between birth and five years old, because those children are uniquely vulnerable due to age and dependency on their caregivers for safety, supervision, and emotional regulation. Infants and toddlers cannot communicate their needs clearly, protect themselves, or seek help, so their well-being is directly tied to their caregiver's ability to stay alert, responsive, and consistent.

It is also equally important to recognize that many parents with mental health challenges care for their children safely every day. Thoughtful assessment helps distinguish when symptoms are well-managed and when additional support is needed to protect the child. By understanding how a parent's mental health affects caregiving tasks, stress tolerance, and the ability to respond to a young child's needs, CPS can better identify strengths, mobilize supports, and develop safety plans that stabilize the family. Ultimately, assessing mental health challenges is not about labeling parents – it is about ensuring that the youngest, most dependent children have attentive, consistent care they require to thrive.

Step-by-Step Conversation Framework for Assessment

1. **Start with Purpose and Transparency.** Parents engage best when they know why you're asking. "I'd like to ask a few questions about how things are going for you. The goal is to understand what supports you might need when you're having a tough day".
2. **Begin with Strengths.** Acknowledge what the parent is doing well. "You've kept going with a lot on your plate," or "You've been working so hard to stay connected to your child despite how you're feeling." This reduces defensiveness and opens the door to honest conversation.



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Step-by-Step Conversation Framework for Assessment Continued

3. **Normalize Stress.** Create permission to talk. “With everything you’ve been carrying, a lot of people would feel stressed or down.” Normalizing helps parents to feel less judged. Use trauma-informed language. Avoid words like “non-compliant” and instead consider “overwhelmed” or “dysregulated”.
4. **Ask About Functioning, Not Diagnosis.** Stay in everyday language. “How has your sleep been lately? Are there days when it’s hard to get going and take care of the children? How has your mood been affecting parenting or your connection with your child? What are the hardest moments with your child, and how are you coping?” This identifies potential danger without triggering fear of a label.
5. **Gently Explore Symptoms if Needed.** If you suspect depression, PTSD, or another mental health condition, use careful, non-stigmatizing questions.
 - Depression: Have you been feeling down or losing interest in things you usually enjoy?
 - Anxiety: Do you feel yourself worrying a lot or feeling on edge?
 - Trauma/PTSD: Sometimes past experiences can show up as nightmares, feeling jumpy, or avoiding things that remind you of what happened. Have you noticed anything like that?
 - It is not the role of CPS to identify or name the possible mental health diagnosis, but it can be used to engage in a conversation about seeking outside supports or professional assessments.
6. **Connect the Dots without Blame.** Explain how parental well-being affects young children, but do so in a supportive way. “When parents are under extreme stress, it can make it harder for little ones to feel calm or understand routines. Getting you in a place where you can regain energy to parent helps your child thrive.”



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Step-by-Step Conversation Framework for Assessment Continued

7. **Ask Permission before Sharing Info or Referring.** Give parents control within CPS constraints. “Would it be okay if I shared some options that have helped other parents? Would you like to hear about community resources that don’t require insurance?” If a referral is mandatory/court-ordered: “Because safety is our top priority, we need to get more support in place. I’ll walk you through the steps.” It’s important that if you suspect a mental health disorder is impeding the parent’s ability to provide care, you collaborate with mental health professionals as quickly as possible.
8. **End with Hope and Next Steps.** Parents must know the conversation leads to support, not punishment. “Let’s make a plan that helps you feel better and strengthens your relationship with your child.” Managing mental health challenges is often a lifelong journey. The more connections CPS can help parents make with their community and utilize informal networks, the more likely it is that a challenge won’t become a crisis.





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Reflection on Content

How have you been able to engage parents about their mental health in a collaborative, non-judgmental, and supportive way?

Action Item

How can you integrate functional-impact questions into every assessment? Pay attention to the potential focus on the diagnosis or potential diagnosis. What questions focus your inquiry on how the symptoms affect daily caregiving (supervision, routines, safety, emotional availability)?