



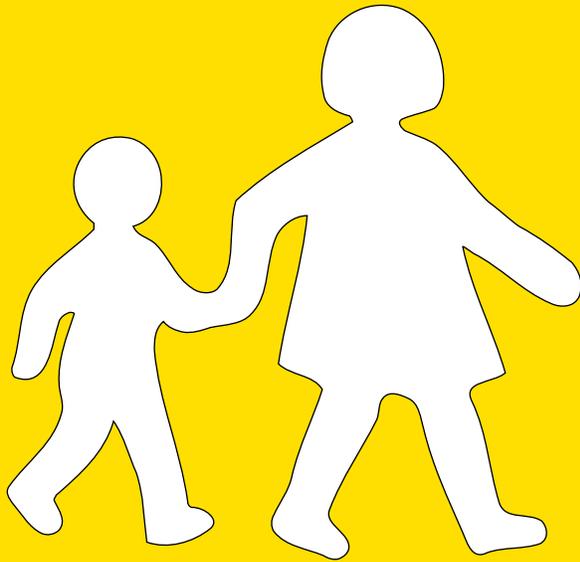
A
Gryphon
House
Book

THE CRISIS

M A N U A L

for Early Childhood Teachers

How to Handle
the Really Difficult
Problems



Karen Miller



child sexual
abuse

hospitalization

HIV / AIDS

domestic
violence

death

substance
abuse

divorce

child with
special needs

natural
disasters

television
violence

racism

community
violence

sexism

homelessness

The Crisis Manual

THE CRISIS

M A N U A L

for Early Childhood
Teachers

*How to Handle
the Really Difficult
Problems*

by Karen Miller

*photographs by Nancy Alexander
Illustrations by Rebecca Jones*



gryphon house

Lewisville, NC

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FOREWORD

The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers is an important and timely guide for teachers who must educate children faced with challenging situations.

The Crisis Manual is a valuable tool in helping teachers create a learning environment that acknowledges the various experiences and backgrounds of children while providing practical and insightful information. The environment in which children grow makes a substantial impact on how they respond and develop in the world. This guide can help caregivers and educators provide the environment that helps children be successful and well nurtured.

As an early childhood educator and advocate by profession, I want to thank Karen Miller for making this guide available. We must not only prepare our children to be the best they can possibly be, but also provide our educators with the necessary support and resources to help them with their critical task. It is obvious that a great deal of thought, research and personal experience have been invested in this guide.

BEA ROMER

First Lady of Colorado

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Gryphon House editorial assistant, Mary Duru, was extremely helpful in finding numerous additional adult resources.

Finally, I am grateful for the infinite skills of Editor-in-Chief, Kathy Charner, in the huge task of pulling everything together to create a book that is useful and usable.

INTRODUCTION

It feels strange to be writing a book that I hope you'll never need. Unfortunately, that is not likely to be the case. More and more teachers report the increasing incidence of crises in children's lives. These crises interfere with the children's ability to learn. As much as we might like to shield children from unpleasant events and emotions, we cannot do so.

One frustrated kindergarten teacher expressed the feelings of many when she said, "I resent having to spend so much time nurturing these children and dealing with difficult behaviors. I got into this field to educate children, and I'm finding I can't do that because children are having so many problems in their lives." Even though we might empathize with this teacher's feelings, we know that developmentally appropriate curriculum must respond to the issues that interest and concern children at the present time. If a child is experiencing crisis in her life, "lessons" that come only from the teacher's agenda will not connect with the child's life. Indeed, children who are experiencing extreme stress and trauma in their lives, whether from community violence, the death of a loved one, a serious illness in the family, homelessness, living with substance abusers or any of the other crises discussed in this book, are at high risk for developing emotional and developmental learning delays.

The young child has not yet learned to keep certain topics at home and others at school. For him, life and school are more integrated than for older children. We have always known that we must deal with the whole child—both the intellectual and the emotional parts. The challenge is how. Few people working in early childhood have specific training in addressing psychological traumas of young children. Teachers are hesitant to get involved or talk about certain situations, fearing that they may do more harm than good.

However, early childhood teachers and caregivers can do a lot to help a child and the child's family deal with a crisis. During difficult times, the child's teacher is often the one stable element in the child's life. The child care center or home can be a kind of haven for the child where she can express herself and where there are caring individuals who listen and help her sort out what is going on in her life. This adult has an important role to play in responding to the child in a helpful and supportive way, thus increasing the child's coping mechanisms. The teacher can also interpret the child to the parents and help them see things from the child's perspective. Another important role is to help the parents recognize when further help might be needed and to direct them to other professionals.

In this book, I have included resources that might be helpful in dealing with various crisis situations. It is not likely that you will sit down and read this book from cover to cover. More typically, you will turn to various chapters as the need arises.

This is a “start book”, a source book. I hope it gives you many points to think about as you approach a problem—a little background information, things to try, resources to help, numbers to call, people to talk to.

Each chapter has a few insights about child development. These are general statements about how a young child might perceive a situation. Principles cited in the chapters are summaries of information I found reflected in various resources for each topic.

As I pulled together the How to Respond section of each chapter, I found that I was repeating myself. Almost all crisis situations call for curriculum practices that allow the child to express himself, and most important, to be heard by caring, sensitive adults. Therefore, I created Chapter 23, Curriculum Ideas & Activities, which goes into greater detail by listing more specific activities that can be used in numerous situations.

Each crisis chapter offers a list of children’s books that relate to the topic. Books are a wonderful resource and may allow you to bring up a topic in a neutral, nonthreatening way. Some books are appropriate to read to the whole group, others are better read one-on-one with a child. You will have to make that decision yourself, depending on what you know and feel about the situation. Examine several of the books listed before selecting the one you feel is most appropriate for the particular child and situation. Consider the level of the book. You might be able to simplify vocabulary from time to time, but check to see that the child is comprehending what the book is trying to convey. Do not assume that the situation has been handled adequately just because the child doesn’t ask any questions when you’re finished reading the book. Books should be used to open doors of communication with the child and let the child know that he is not alone in what he is experiencing.

It would be impractical to list every single book and resource on any given topic. In searching through books, articles and video tapes, I tried to select ones I thought would be most useful to you in your situation as early childhood educators. I looked for resources that are concise and offer practical strategies. Many of the books have extensive bibliographies and reference sections, should you wish to do more in-depth study. The organizations and hot lines listed in each chapter can also be very helpful to you in finding resources.

New materials are always being developed. I would be very interested in hearing from you if you come across a resource not listed here that you find to be particularly helpful so that I might consider it for future editions. Please write to me, Karen Miller, at P.O. Box 97, Cowdrey, CO 80434, or contact the publisher, Gryphon House Inc., P.O. Box 207, Beltsville, MD-20704-0207. Also tell us about crises or difficult situations not covered in this book that you wish we would address.

One difficult thing about writing the book was dividing it into chapters, because rarely do crises happen in isolation. In addition, every individual child is different and every crisis is different. I encourage you to check related chapters. Ultimately, it is up to you to piece together the resources and the strategies that will work best in your situation.

Keep in mind that the best crisis management technique, no matter what the crisis, is to have a plan in place beforehand. Think about the eventuality. Do what you can to prevent it. But if a crisis occurs, act professionally and use the resources available to you in your community. Turn a crisis into an opportunity—to sharpen your skills, become more connected professionally, and add depth to your service. I am very conscious of the fact that many early childhood professionals already feel overwhelmed. You can't do it alone. Progress only happens in the context of society and within the support systems for you as a professional as well as for the families you serve. Chapter 1, *The Caregiver's Role* discusses ways to function effectively with others.

Finally, some of you might be asking, who is Karen Miller to be writing a book like this? I asked myself that question! I am not a social worker, a psychologist or a therapist. I have a Master's Degree in Human Development from Pacific Oaks College. My knowledge is not specialized, except in one area. I have visited over a thousand child care centers and family child care homes around the country and have talked to literally thousands of teachers and directors over the years. I know and have respect for the incredible complexity of your jobs. I believe I have a sense of what is useful to you. In reading through the piles of resources I assembled, I said to myself, "If I have trouble understanding or following this, so will an early childhood teacher," or, "If this makes sense to me, it will be helpful to others." So, in effect, I have attempted to accumulate and sift through the information available for you. I believe we should all continue stretching and growing, and working on this book has been a learning experience for me.

Everybody wishes there were some magic "right" words to say to help a child through a crisis. Of course, there are no perfect phrases. All we can do is our best. When a crisis is occurring in a child's life, an early childhood program can either add to the problem or help to alleviate it. The goal of this book is to increase the odds that a child will learn and grow, even in a crisis situation, because of the sensitive responses of caring adults. It is with abiding respect for the important work that you do that I offer you this book and hope that it is helpful to you.



Karen Miller

BLANK

THE CAREGIVER'S ROLE



How can we be helpful? When do we step in? How much can we help? In our field, we talk about the fact that on any given day, an early childhood teacher or director must be an educator, a janitor, a plumber, a cook, a nurse, a psychologist, an all-around “fixer.” More and more, we are finding that the job of social worker must be added to that list of assignments.

WHEN DOES A SITUATION BECOME A CRISIS

Early childhood teachers are generally accustomed to interacting with children, planning their activities, observing their play and helping them sort out social problems with others. However, we are often hesitant to intervene when it comes to situations involving the children and their families. We ask, “Is this my business? Should I be involved?” Sometimes it is difficult to decide if a situation has become a crisis and needs professional intervention. You might learn about a particular problem when the child is first enrolled or later, when the child or the child’s parent says something to you about it. **As a rule of thumb, when you feel the child’s physical or emotional development is in jeopardy, you have a responsibility to take further action.**

Generally speaking, if it concerns the child, it is your business. Children can’t learn and benefit from the program when distracted by traumatic events in their lives. When you help

a child with a problem, you become closer to the child. You can also help a child get on track mentally and emotionally while supporting and strengthening the family. You are the child's advocate.

Teachers say, "I don't want to make the situation worse by saying or doing the wrong thing." It is natural to worry about this. Here are a couple of things to keep in mind:

Realize that you don't have to be perfect. If you sense that you did the wrong thing, try again. Children respect honesty. You can say, "You know, I'd like to go back to what we said about.... I've had a few more thoughts about it."

Remember that you are not alone. When faced with a difficult or sensitive issue, always work as part of a team with other concerned individuals in your organization and community.

BE PART OF A TEAM

Synergism is an exciting concept. Basically, it is the idea that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. When people work together on a problem, exciting things can happen. With collaboration, you might accomplish things that no one could have accomplished working independently.

WORK WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR

It is important to work with your supervisor. Everyone involved with the family should be informed of the situation and what you think should be done. **If you work in a child care center, your program supervisor and director should always be consulted before you take any action. Never just go off on your own, because:**

Your director or supervisor might have more information that sheds new light on the situation and might be able to recommend helpful resources.

You need the support of the administration. You might need time and resources to deal with the problem, as well as encouragement and moral support. In order to stand behind you, your administrator needs to be fully informed about the situation—what led you to certain conclusions and what you plan to do.

Your director needs to be kept informed. Keep your director and/or program supervisor fully apprised of the situation. Let them know about any special approaches that you think should be used, such as reading special books to the child or encouraging the child to talk about a problem. Find out how they would like you to keep them informed—with written reports, verbal reports or forms.

There may be legal implications. Your administrator needs to be informed whenever there is the possibility of irate parents or loss of enrollment.

You should go through the proper channels. Work first with your immediate supervisor. You will accomplish much more in the long run if you avoid stepping on toes.

Respected colleagues can provide a second opinion. You might say, “I think I’m seeing this. What do you think?”

If you are a family child care provider, you probably work independently. **Seek information and support from your professional family child care association** or other professional groups you belong to in your community. Often the child care licensing office or local child care resource and referral agency can provide advice or information.

WORK WITH OTHER PROFESSIONALS

“A little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing.” Learn where your educational expertise ends and the specialized expertise of other professionals begins. As one early childhood teacher aptly stated, “I know what the norm looks like and when something seems unusual, but I don’t know how to pinpoint a problem.” Often parents will ask you for advice and referrals. In the Who Can Help section, we have listed the types of professionals to seek out for further assistance. Also check out the organizations and hot lines listed at the end of each chapter. Many national organizations are aware of local resources.

LEARN WHO’S OUT THERE

The first step in making a referral is knowing what each type of professional does and who is available in your community. Is this a problem for a pediatrician, a psychologist or a social worker?

Many families bring all problems to their child’s pediatrician or family practitioner. If the doctor knows the child and the family well, this may be a good place to start. However, sometimes pediatricians only look at the medical side of a situation and fail to take the social and emotional aspects of the problem into consideration.

The following are types of professionals in your community who may be helpful.

- ◆ Health professionals: pediatricians, family practitioners, nurse practitioners, pediatric dentists.
- ◆ Public safety professionals: law enforcement officers, firefighters.
- ◆ Mental health professionals: child psychologists, social workers, family therapists, grief counselors.
- ◆ Regulatory agencies: child care licensing agents, health department inspectors.

- ◆ Educational and special needs professionals: public school Child Find personnel, school psychologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, speech and hearing therapists.
- ◆ Local county or state social services agencies, child care licensing offices or child care resource and referral offices may be good starting points. Agency staff generally know of other services in the area and may also be able to provide specific information.

Compile a list of these professionals to have ready when needed.

FIND OUT FROM COMMUNITY PROFESSIONALS

- ◆ **The scope of their services**—who they serve and what problems they deal with.
- ◆ **Fees for various services** and whether financial assistance is available for families who need it.
- ◆ **Proper procedures** for contacting them. Must clients be referred by some other agency? In many cases the parent must make contact directly.
- ◆ **How you can be helpful** when working with them. What information do they need to know about the case? How can you be part of the follow-up or support team and carry out recommended activities or interventions?
- ◆ **What kinds of strategies, resources and consultation services** can they provide for parents and educators?

GET TO KNOW THEM

While creating a list of professionals in your area is a good start, it is advisable to get to know some of these individuals. Talk to other parents or early childhood professionals who have worked with these individuals to gather opinions.

Try to develop a pleasant and mutually respectful relationship with these individuals. That will make future working relationships much easier. Speak to them as one professional to another, exploring ways to work together to assure the welfare of children and families in the community. Here are a few ways to get acquainted:

- ◆ **Invite them to the center** to see your program and meet the children.
- ◆ **Invite them to present a program** at a staff meeting, inservice training or parent education program.

- ◆ **Invite them to attend professional meetings** of state and local early childhood professional associations, possibly presenting a workshop.

Many centers prefer to keep a list of professionals as a service for parents and don't necessarily recommend a particular individual. You might say, "Many of our parents use this dentist," or "We have worked with this person before and found her to be very helpful," but make it clear that the parents must choose the person they will feel most comfortable with.

USE GOOD PROBLEM SOLVING TECHNIQUES

Whether you and other staff members choose to work on a problem within your own organization or to involve professionals outside your organization, it helps to be systematic in your actions as you proceed. Here are some general problem solving strategies that work in most situations.

DEFINE THE PROBLEM

What is really concerning you? Try to get it down on paper in a succinct description. As you become more informed and insightful, you can go back and rewrite the description.

GATHER THE TEAM

Pull everyone together who is involved with the problem, including the lead teacher, any assistants, teachers from other classrooms who might be with the child for certain times of the day, the program supervisor or director, the parents and possibly other family members and any other professionals already dealing with the child.

GATHER INFORMATION

From the child's record and from other team members who are acquainted with the family, gather as much factual information about the situation as possible.

LEARN

Find out all you can about the topic or problem in general. Read and talk to other professionals. What does the research say? How do other children and families respond? What types of action have been successful for others?

SHARE INSIGHTS AND BRAINSTORM

Make sure you are all seeing the same thing. Does someone have a different viewpoint? List possible things to try. As you plan for possible activities and interventions see chapter 23 on curriculum and other chapters on specific crises. You will need to ask yourselves, "How can we help both this child and the other children in the group?"

DEVELOP A PLAN OF ACTION

From the list of options you developed while brainstorming, decide **what** you will try first, and **who** will do **what** and **when**.

KEEP OTHERS INFORMED

Decide how you will keep the people involved aware of any progress.

SET A TIME TO RECONVENE AND EVALUATE

If all goes well and the plan achieved the desired results, congratulate each other. If it didn't work as well as you had hoped, go back to the "drawing board" and decide together what to try next.

KEEP GOOD RECORDS

Document all of your meetings. Note the date and the people involved, decisions made, interventions tried and results obtained. This can be useful if future intervention is necessary, or if you ever need to explain what you did.

PRACTICE PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

When you are involved in children's lives you are often forced to make judgments about how to act. Sometimes the answers are not clear. You have responsibilities to your employer, to the child's family, to the other families served, to your funding sources, to the child and to yourself. Sometimes there are conflicting interests.

It is a great help if you have colleagues, such as your director or program supervisor, whom you trust and respect and with whom you can discuss the issue. It also helps if you have had opportunities to develop guidelines for responsible behavior ahead of time. The topic of ethics should be part of every early childhood teacher's education as well as job orientation.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children has developed a *Code of Ethical Conduct*, referenced at the end of this chapter, with input from early childhood professionals all over the country. These principles will help guide you as you decide what to do in any given circumstance.

Two major ethical considerations to keep in mind when you deal with children in crisis situations are:

The well-being of the child should come first in all considerations. The law requires that you report abuse or suspicion of abuse in any form. If you feel that the agencies that handle abuse cases do not do so adequately, you and your colleagues have an ethical responsibility to take steps to bring this to public attention so that the situation can be corrected.

Guard the privacy of the people involved. Confidentiality is critical. Only those directly involved with the problem should know the details. When others—such as substitute teachers or staff from other rooms in the center—are with the child, decide how much they need to know in order to interact appropriately. Do not pry into family affairs that do not pertain to the situation at hand. Only situations that affect the child directly or indirectly should be discussed. If other parents hear you gossiping, they are likely to conclude that you will also talk about them and might be hesitant to confide in you if they need help in the future.

There will be many times in your career when you will have to rely on your own personal and professional ethics to decide a course of action, such as when you and a parent disagree about discipline, when you question the actions of a colleague, when a child reveals that something illegal is going on at home, and when a parent uses you to unload personal problems.

WORK WITH THE FAMILY

You cannot help the child during a crisis without working with the family. An important aspect of the teacher's role is to help strengthen the bond between the parent and the child. Child care providers and teachers are temporary influences in children's lives. The family is there for keeps. Making families more effective is the best way to help children. Each chapter has specific suggestions for working with the parents. Here are some general principles:

DEVELOP A RAPPORT WITH THE PARENTS

Parents need to feel your respect before they can hear your suggestions and advice, starting with the very first meeting you have with them.

Take your time with the intake interview. Both the child's teacher and the director should be involved. Naturally, there will be forms to fill out and policies to go over, but take time to let parents tell you about themselves and their child. Every child is special. Ask them what is special about their child. Show your interest. Ask them what their goals are for their child and how they hope their child will benefit by attending the program. Use this opportunity to make them feel welcome in the facility. Discuss the ways you intend to communicate with them—daily notes, occasional phone calls, regularly scheduled parent conferences and special meetings whenever you or the parents feel the need.

Communicate the message that you consider this a team effort. Many early childhood teachers are surprised to learn that parents are often intimidated by them. Parents consider the teacher an expert on young children. They are in awe of their ability to get a whole group of children to cooperate when they can barely handle just one child. Some parents may know that they have real problems parenting this little human being and suspect that you see right through them. Communicate to them that while you know about child development in general and have training in handling groups of children, you feel they are the expert on this particular child. Together you can make good things happen for this child.

In addition to the intake interview, it is worth the time and effort it takes to get to know parents in relaxed social settings, such as picnics and spaghetti suppers. When adults have spent time together in friendly social surroundings it is easier to address problems when they arise.

HELP THE FAMILY WITH SEPARATION ISSUES

It is natural for parents and their children to have difficulty parting from each other, especially before they have an internalized reason to trust you. The adult can rationalize the separation and, of course, knows that it is temporary, but the child is losing his framework of trust and is entering a strange and exciting (but also frightening) new arena. If there has been a trauma in the family's life, separation can be particularly difficult, and the family will need sensitive support from you.

Encourage the parent to visit with the child and stay most of the morning. Some children eagerly join right in, but other children need a longer time to adjust. Most programs are now eager to work with parents as long as necessary, encouraging the parents to stay with the child for part of the day and gradually lengthen the times of separation until the child feels totally comfortable. While we naturally concentrate on the distress of the child, don't forget to offer empathy to the parent who may be better at masking emotions.

The Crisis Manual

for Early Childhood Teachers

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—Dr. Fran Roznowski, Early
Childhood Connections

The **Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers** is the only source book you'll need to help you face those really difficult issues in the classroom. Learn effective strategies that address the most challenging problems you may encounter as a teacher.

Chapters for each crisis include the following:

- Describing the problem
- Insights from child development
- When to seek help
- How to respond
- Who can help—suggestions of resources and organizations



Karen Miller, who has over 25 years experience in the early childhood field, is a popular keynote speaker and consultant. She has worked as a teacher for Head Start, as a national education director for Children's World Inc. and as a national training director for Mini-Skools Ltd.

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