

Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) Toolkit

Strategies to improve family outcomes for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants



Welcome to the HMRF Toolkit!

This toolkit contains a collection of one-page resources designed to help: (1) TANF program staff engage with the families and couples they serve and (2) participants to communicate better at home and in the workplace.

Did You Know?

While technical skills can help someone *get* a job, soft skills help them *keep* it. Research shows the impact of skills for building healthy relationships on job readiness, employability, and positive relationship outcomes for TANF participants¹.

[Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. *Employment Coaching Information Hub*](#)

HMRF Connection to TANF Purposes²

1

Promote **child well-being** by teaching families how to solve disagreements in a healthy way

2

End **dependence on government benefits** as participants develop skills that translate to workplace readiness

3

Support participants by teaching decision-making skills that empower them to plan their futures and **reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies**

4

Encourage the **formation and maintenance of two-parent families** by giving couples the skills they need to build lasting partnerships

[Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance. *About TANF*](#)

Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) Toolkit

How to use the resources and flyers in daily services

What's Inside

Practitioner-Facing Resources

Tools that help practitioners navigate discussions with participants by modeling co-regulation and self-regulation skills.

Participant-Facing Flyers

Flyers that can be shared with TANF participants that highlight healthy communication skills to support daily interactions at work and at home.



Skills Definitions

Self-regulation: Managing thoughts and feelings to achieve goals and make healthy decisions in the moment and for the future

Co-regulation: The interactive process by which caring adults:

- 1) Provide warm supportive relationships,
- 2) Promote self-regulation through coaching, modeling, and feedback, and
- 3) Structure supportive environments

How to Use the Toolkit

1. **Print and Post** the practitioner-facing flyers in staff-only areas, like the break room or near the coffee machine
2. **Integrate into Services** as conversation starters during case management conversations
3. **Model with Participants** as they navigate conversations at home or in the workplace
4. **Use Your Judgment** when sharing resources with participants, keeping in mind their relationships and work situations.



Final Thought: Meaningful engagement starts with trust. These tools are designed to facilitate strong, collaborative relationships with families.

Modeling Healthy Communication Skills

Tools for helping couples and families build stronger, more resilient relationships at home and in the workplace

Establish your **Group Agreements**

1. Introduce values

Begin by asking "What do you need to feel safe and supported?"

2. Make a list together

As they share, write down their values. You can add one of your own to help get the conversation started

3. Keep the agreement visible

Keep the written list visible during your sessions. Remind them this is their tool to use and modify

Your Goal:

Help families create their own rules for talking to each other. This helps them feel safe and respected in their relationship.

Incorporate **Two-Part Verbal Praise**

1. Explain the formula for praise

Step 1: Name the specific action

Step 2: Explain the positive impact it had on the relationship

2. Provide clear examples

Model the technique using a real-life situation that they might face

3. Encourage practice

Encourage them to try this at home in their daily life

Your Goal:

Demonstrate a simple structure on how to give meaningful praise, which encourages positive behaviors.

De-escalate with **Breath to Focus**

1. Model the technique

Demonstrate the breathing exercise so they can mirror your technique

2. Demonstrate it in practice

Use the technique at the start of a session or during a difficult moment to show how it can help

3. Encourage practice

Frame breathing as a tool they can use when they feel overwhelmed

Your Goal:

Model how deep breathing can be used to manage stress and emotions, especially in emotionally charged situations.

How does this advance TANF purposes?

It equips parents with tools to manage stress and regulate emotions, directly promoting child well-being (Purpose 1) and provides the emotional foundation needed to encourage the maintenance of two-parent families (Purpose 4)

Building Trust Through Engagement

A framework for building trust and understanding in daily conversations at work and home



Acknowledge

- ✓ **Listen to understand, not just to reply**

Focus on their feelings and perspectives, not just facts

- ✓ **Offer reflective listening**

Repeat back what you heard to validate the other person, even if you disagree with what they said

- ✓ **Check your understanding**

Give them the chance to correct your interpretation

What it sounds like:

"If I'm hearing you correctly, your main concern is that you're not communicating as a team anymore when it comes to finances. Is that accurate?"



Explore

- ✓ **Be curious about the gaps**

Gently ask them to elaborate if something is unclear to you

- ✓ **Look beneath "hard feelings"**

Invite them to voice underlying emotions and feel safe to be vulnerable

- ✓ **Empathize with vulnerability**

Show compassion for "soft feelings" without necessarily agreeing with their views

What it sounds like:

"You mentioned that things 'just fell apart.' Can you tell me a little more about what you had hoped would happen instead?"



Affirm

- ✓ **Thank them for sharing with you**

Acknowledge the courage to be honest

- ✓ **Recognize positive intent and effort**

Identify where they demonstrated trying something that was challenging

- ✓ **Use "two-part affirmations"**

Combine gratitude with a specific strength or positive behavior

What it sounds like:

"Thank you for opening up about your fears with your son (Part 1). Your willingness to be vulnerable is a powerful sign of your strength and your love for him (Part 2)."

How does this advance TANF purposes?

These foundational engagement skills are used to build deep trust with participants, allowing you to effectively deliver services that stabilize homes (Purpose 1) and advance economic stability (Purpose 2)

Strong Connections Start with a Single Conversation

*Ever feel like you and your partner are speaking different languages? Try using the following strategies to learn to respond to each other in a way that builds **closeness and trust**.*



Your Guide to a Better Conversation

Notice the Good

Pay attention to a specific, positive thing your partner did, no matter how small.

Share the 'Why'

Tell them why it mattered and explain the impact their action had on you or your relationship.

Put It Into Practice

Instead of... *"Thanks for watching the kids."*

Try this... *"When you took the kids to the park, it gave me a much-needed moment of quiet to recharge. I really appreciate you for taking the time to do that."*

Your Turn!

Try this with your partner and see what happens

Building Strong Work Relationships, One Conversation at a Time

*Ever feel like conversations with your coworker get tense? Try using the following strategies to learn to respond to each other in a way that builds **rapport and teamwork**.*



Your Guide to a Better Conversation

Notice the Good

Pay attention to a specific, positive contribution for your coworker.

Share the 'Why'

Tell them why it mattered and explain the impact their action had on you.

Put It Into Practice

Instead of... *"Thanks for helping me solve that problem."*

Try this... *"When you took the time to listen and share your experience, it helped me feel more empowered and supported in my role."*

Your Turn!

Try this with your coworker and see what happens