

# Risk Management for Direct Support Professionals

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## 1 Learning Outcomes

The topic of today's lesson is risk management for Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). By the end of this lesson, you should do the following:

1. List the principles of risk management.
2. Identify common risks to the health and safety of individuals.
3. Identify ways to prevent or mitigate risks.
4. Use risk assessment tools.

## 2 Introduction

Hello! My name is Dr. Ben Theisen. I am a professor and behavioral consultant for community care facilities here in Southern California. You may know me from the Direct Support Professional (DSP) Certification workshops, as I teach Year 1 and Year 2 for the Department of Developmental Services. Some of today's lesson comes from those certification manuals. I hope you find the following information useful. Today's topic is Risk Management for Direct Support Professionals.

### 2.1 Opening Statement

Please allow me to thank you for starting to read this document. Thank you for being the kind of person who chose to work as a professional DSP. It is very important and difficult work. You have my respect as a colleague for what you do. It takes focus, patience, and cleverness to make it as a DSP. You have to be smart. Sometimes, the work is very frustrating.

Today's topic is the story of two best friends: Risk Management and Incident Reporting. Milo had Otis, Tango had Cash, and Harry Potter had the owl... In the story of today's lesson, Risk Management has Incident Reporting. These two have faced many challenges over the years. The story of these two is long, so we will approach the topic in two lessons. The first lesson covers risk management. You are seeing that lesson now. The second lesson covers incident reporting. You will see that lesson separately. If you are following the typical inservice schedule, it will be the next lesson.

How do we begin with risk management? At any job, increasing one's job knowledge helps the worker succeed. When thinking about a "difficult day" for an office worker, what comes to mind? We might think of many phone calls and emails, long meetings, and deadline pressure. Workers and customers may be short-tempered, sometimes raising their voices to the point of escalation. This is rare at most job sites. On the tough days, the risk of physical harm is relatively low.

Let's compare that picture to the typical working conditions of a DSP. For the DSP, a difficult day of caring for individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities involves more risk than one would find in a typical office job. What can go wrong?

There are three sources of risk at any given time: environment, individuals, and DSPs. A difficult day for a DSP means one or more of these sources jeopardizes health and safety. As a DSP, you know individuals may hurt themselves, others, or damage property without warning.

DSPs learn quickly that a residence is a dangerous place. Hazards include fire, electricity, water, slippery surfaces, etc. When a home-related incident occurs, reporting requirements need to be shared with regional centers and licensing. We will look at these requirements in today's lesson.

Being a DSP is a serious job. Risk is around the DSP throughout each day. Reportable incidents must be reported following the steps we will outline in this training. Given that mandated reporters are subject to criminal charges for failing to report abuse, DSPs who engage in abuse against individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities may find it difficult to convince others to keep their secret. The truth will out. It always does. If you suspect abuse, report it.

Please allow me to thank you for being the kind of person who chose this profession. I have worked in this field since 2006. The stories I could tell, the things I have seen... All of it has been an inspiration. It is an honor and a privilege to help others who have difficulty helping themselves. I hope you continue to enjoy the many benefits, personally and professionally, of helping individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities to lead more meaningful lives. It's a wonderful profession unlike any other.

Friends and colleagues, I now present you Risk Management for Direct Support Professionals.

## **2.2 Key Idea**

What is required of you as a DSP? Zero tolerance is mandatory of any vendor of the regional center serving individuals with intellectual/developmental disabilities. As a DSP you are required to report to the appropriate entities any incident or allegation of suspected abuse or neglect. A DSP must take immediate action to ensure the health and safety of all involved individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities who receive services from a regional center vendored facility.

## **2.3 Key Words**

1. Incident Reporting: By law and regulation, the DSP is required to report certain events to regional centers, Community Care Licensing, and/ or protective services agencies.

2. **Mandated Reporter:** Any person, paid or unpaid, who has assumed full- or part- time responsibility for the care or custody of a child, an elder, or dependent adult. DSPs are mandated reporters. A mandated reporter must report any abuse, abandonment, abduction, isolation, or neglect they have seen, been told about, or suspect to the police and/or the protective services agency.
3. **Mitigate:** To lessen the effects of risks.
4. **Risk Management:** The process of looking for, thinking about and lessening the chance of harm to individuals.
5. **Zero Tolerance:** Requires all regional center vendors to have a policy for reporting ALL instances of abuse and neglect.

### **3 Risk Management**

The following section addresses risk management for DSPs. We begin with a scenario.

#### **3.1 Opening Scenario**

Maddy is a 24-year-old woman. When she was 8 years old her mother died of breast cancer. Maddy does not see her father often since he lives in another state. She does not speak, but uses gestures and shakes her head for “no” and “yes.” Maddy is artistic and loves to dance. She is very aware of her appearance and takes time to look her best. Maddy is a friendly young woman and likes to meet new people. While this is a positive trait, it also has caused some problems; for example, at times she has given her money to strangers. Maddy had a serious accident when she was younger and is usually very cautious in everything she does. She has a history of seizures, especially when she gets hot. She loves to walk in her neighborhood and rides public transit, but occasionally needs support to remember routes. Kim has supported Maddy for two years. Kim believes strongly in facilitating Maddy’s independence and supporting her personal choices, but also worries that Maddy might be at risk while out in the community.

#### **3.2 Risk Management: Prevention is Priority #1**

Risk management is something you do every day. For example, when you get in a car, you put on your safety belt because you know that this will reduce your risk of injury or death in case of an accident. The role of the DSP in risk management is to look for possible risks to individuals you support and think of ways to prevent or reduce the risk. The following principles are basic to your practice of risk management.

1. Prevention of serious incidents is the number one priority. The best risk management strategy is to be aware of potential risks and do something to keep them from happening. As a DSP, your first priority is to prevent injury or harm to individuals you support and to protect them from abuse, neglect, and exploitation.
2. Creation and maintenance of safe environments is everyone's responsibility. We are all responsible for looking out for risks and making environments safer. If you see a rake left where someone could trip over it, put it away. If there is water on the floor that might cause someone to slip, wipe it up. Again, you need to anticipate risks and prevent accidents from happening.
3. Open communication is key to prevention. Open communication and sharing of information is key to identifying risks and ensuring safety. Everyone, the individual, family, and all members of the planning team, including the DSP, may have important information about risks and how to address them.
4. Everyone who works with individuals with intellectual/ developmental disabilities, including DSPs, is required to report and document incidents, in a timely and accurate manner. DSPs are mandated reporters and must report incidents accurately and in a timely manner. There is a zero tolerance policy for abuse and neglect and it is the DSP's responsibility to take immediate action. In this session, you will learn what to report, how to report it, to whom, and by when it must be reported.
5. Ongoing identification, assessment, and planning for both risks and actual occurrences are essential to the development of sound, person-centered strategies to prevent or mitigate serious incidents. Risk management is a never-ending process of identification, assessment, planning, implementation and evaluation of results.
6. Safety starts with those who work most closely with individuals receiving support and services. In your role as a DSP, you work day-to-day, hour-to-hour, minute-to-minute with individuals with intellectual/ developmental disabilities. You see things first and are in a position to identify risks early, before an accident or injury occurs. You have a unique responsibility in supporting quality of life for individuals and ensuring their health and safety. Remember: Prevention is the Number One Priority!

### 3.3 Identifying Risk

Risk is a normal part of our lives. Risk is a thing, place, or activity that may cause harm, loss or injury to an individual. Many situations involve a certain amount of risk; for example, deciding whether or not to bring an umbrella in the morning because if it rains, you might get wet. You can't do anything about the weather, but you can anticipate it and protect yourself. In deciding, you could watch the TV weather report, read the paper, or go on the Internet to find out weather predictions for the day. Based on this information, you could decide whether or not you need to carry an umbrella. The fact is, we already practice risk management in our own lives. Let's talk about the types of risks the individuals we support face every day.

- **Health Risks:** If you were told you had diabetes, you would want to learn about the condition and its treatment and do the things necessary to lessen the effects or risks of the disease. You would follow your doctor's orders, which might include checking your blood sugar regularly, and watching what you eat. In this example, you learned about a health risk and then took actions to mitigate that risk. To "mitigate" risk means to lessen its effects. You may not be able to totally prevent a risk, but you can lessen its effects and improve an individual's quality of life. The individual's planning team is a good resource for planning ways to prevent or mitigate health-related risks.
- **Daily Living:** An individual may be at more risk if they have limited daily living skills. For example, an individual may be at more risk because they have a hard time swallowing, moving around, getting in or out of a wheelchair, or doing common activities. Once again, the individual's planning team is a good resource for planning risk prevention and mitigation strategies to protect the individual.
- **Behavior Challenges:** An individual might be at more risk because of aggressive behavior where he or she might hurt themselves or others.
- **Environmental Risks:** Places where individuals live and work—their environments—may have unsafe areas, objects, or activities. For example, if your home has unsafe electrical wiring and the circuit breakers are turning off daily, it should be repaired immediately. If the smoke detector has been disconnected because it sounds every time you cook, it must be reconnected or relocated immediately. Icy walks, broken seat belts, lack of handrails, and other environmental risks may be prevented or mitigated with risk management.
- **Risks Resulting from Lifestyle Choices:** The way that an individual chooses to live—their lifestyle—may increase or decrease their risk. Practicing unsafe sex carries a high health risk. Alcohol and drug

abuse are other examples of lifestyle choices that increase an individual's risk. Once again, risks associated with these activities may be either prevented or mitigated through risk management.

### **3.4 Supporting Individuals in the Exercise and Rights of Responsibility**

As a DSP you may sometimes have to balance competing priorities. You have just learned that "Prevention is the Number One Priority!" You have also learned that individuals have a right to make choices about their lives. So what do you do when an individual wants to do something that you think is risky? As a DSP, you must find a way to support independence and choices while mitigating risk and providing for individual safety. This is a challenging task, and one that you should not do alone. When an individual's lifestyle choices may create risks in his or her life, the planning team for that individual should meet and develop a plan for you to follow. Smoking is a good example of a lifestyle choice that creates a risk for the individual. An individual you support wants to start smoking. You know that smoking causes lung cancer and many other illnesses, but you also know that part of your job is to support individual choice. In this situation, you can assist the individual by giving him or her information about the risks of smoking. You should also ask the IPP planning team for the individual to meet and assist in making his or her decision. Situations such as this are best resolved with the help of others' sharing their thoughts and ideas. A decision to smoke creates environmental risks as well. Second-hand smoke creates a health risk for others and smoking can increase the risk of fire. Part of your role will be to help the individual understand the responsibilities that come with his or her choice; for example, keeping the smoke away from those who do not wish to breathe it and smoking in a way that reduces the risk of fire. Remember, the role of the DSP in risk management is to actively promote practices that will keep individuals safe. Whenever possible, you want to anticipate risks and prevent them from happening. In the above situation, if the individual chooses to smoke, you will not be able to prevent the risk, but you can work with the individual and his or her planning team to mitigate, or lessen, risk to the individual and others. In this way you have respected both priorities—you have supported an individual's choice while reducing the risk of harm.

### **3.5 Risk Assessment and Planning**

Once you have identified a risk, the next step is to get more information about that risk and make a plan to mitigate the risk. This is called risk assessment and planning.

Risk identification, assessment, and planning are all components of risk



management that you do every day. When something happens and you ask yourself, “What happened?” “Why did it happen?” “Has it happened before?” “How often?” “Who was involved?” “What did others observe or do?” you are doing risk assessment.

When you start to think about the future and how to prevent something from happening again, you are doing risk management planning. You might ask, “What can I do to prevent it from happening again?” or if it has happened before, “What did I do last time and did it work?” “Who else do I need to get help from?” “Is this something that the planning team needs to help with?” This last question is important, especially for those individuals who are at risk because of health problems or who have behaviors that put themselves or others at risk. And lastly, “What is my next step?”

The process of risk assessment includes the following activities:

- Think about and list potential risks.
- Decide who else needs to be involved in helping to assess the risks—often the planning team.
- Get more information about risks.
- Plan interventions to mitigate the risks.

An intervention is an action taken to improve something. Interventions should be discussed with everyone involved in supporting the individual and they should also be written down or documented. Interventions may involve one or more steps, be immediate, or be implemented over time.

When assessing the risk, DSPs should consider such things as:

- Noticeable changes in the general health or behavior of the individual.
- Health conditions.
- Behaviors that have resulted in injury or pose a threat of injury.
- Change in weight or eating habits.
- Changes in the environment.

### **3.5.1 Example of Risk Identification, Assessment, and Planning**

John loves to go on outings to places like the Farmer’s Market or local festivals. However, he may get lost if he is in large crowds such as those at fairgrounds or arenas. Staff reports that when John feels stressed, he often bangs his forehead hard enough to hurt himself. They feel that getting lost would be very stressful for him. At his last physician visit, the doctor said that if John bangs his forehead many more times, he could risk serious injury or harm to his general health.

Identification of Risks

Description of Risk	Plans to Manage Risk

- John may get lost in large crowds. This would cause stress for John.
- John bangs his forehead when he is stressed.
- John may seriously hurt himself if he bangs his forehead many more times.

The planning team, including John, the staff from his home, and other people important to John developed the following risk mitigation plan:

1. Over the next four weeks, staff will teach John to use a cell phone to call for help.
2. Staff will make sure he takes a cell phone on outings.
3. One staff person will be with John at all times at crowded events.
4. Staff will make sure that he wears his **lime green fluorescent jacket** with an information card in his pocket that lists who to call if he is lost.

Remember to think about the individual's health, behavior, daily living skills, environment, and lifestyle choices.

The worksheet can be used to:

- List and describe possible risks.
- Provide information important for the planning team.
- Plan intervention to prevent or mitigate risk.
- Identify the need for an evaluation by a specialist.
- Identify the need for special equipment or changes to the environment.
- Identify additional services and supports that may be needed.
- Document the plan.
- Monitor the results.

## 4 Conclusion

Congratulations! You made it to the end of this lesson. Thank you again for being the kind of person who chooses to work as a professional DSP. It is very important and difficult work. You have my respect as a colleague for all that you do. It takes focus, patience, and cleverness to make it as a DSP. You have to be smart. Sometimes, the work is very frustrating and a DSP may want to give up. There are many jobs in the community but many are not professions. There is nothing quite like being a professional DSP. I hope you continue to enjoy the many benefits, personally and professionally, of helping individuals with developmental disabilities lead more meaningful lives.

### 4.1 Contact

To discuss this recommendation further, please contact me by phone at 424-744-0264 or by email at [benjamin.t68@gmail.com](mailto:benjamin.t68@gmail.com).