

Rationale & History

Science has proven that exposure to violence, trauma, and significant stress during childhood (known as Adverse Childhood Experiences) can seriously undermine children's ability to focus, behave appropriately, and learn. Without the support of caring adults, childhood adversity can lead to significant mental health difficulties, school failure, truancy, suspension/expulsion, dropping out, or involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Handle With Care is a nation-wide program developed to help prevent and/or mitigate the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences through school-community-first responder partnerships. The program was adopted in Ellensburg, Washington, November 2024, and is currently expanding to surrounding communities throughout Kittitas County, Washington.

How Are Schools Notified?

- When a student is present during a law enforcement action, the law enforcement officer notes a code for Handle With Care on the case report.
- A daily list is compiled by EPD using this code with only basic information identifying the student and the date of contact, which is then sent to the School District Security Officer and the School Resource Officer.
- The School Security Officer then disseminates the information to the schools with the name of the student and the simple message "Handle With Care."
- Each school has created its own Handle With Care protocol on how teachers are notified and whether additional school personnel are notified on a "need-to-know" basis.

How Should Schools Respond?

1. Maintain confidentiality and share on need-to-know basis only.
2. Refrain from drawing undue attention or questioning the student, as this could further traumatize the child or impede any possible ongoing investigation.
3. Check to see if the student arrived at school and assist if needed.
4. Meet basic needs, such as clothing, hygiene, food, a place to rest/sleep/self-regulate.
5. Postpone testing and homework without penalty when necessary.
6. Observe the student's mood and behavior and provide supportive care as needed.
7. Refer to a school counselor or school nurse if further assessment for mental health support is indicated.

Collaboration with CWU Community Clinic

- All student's who receive a Handle With Care notification will also receive an automatic referral to the CWU Community Clinic, providing no-cost mental health support through one-on-one counseling, group counseling, and/or family counseling, depending on the preference of the child.
- Referrals are made through a daily list compiled by EPD using only basic information identifying the child and information how to contact the child's parent/guardian.
- Information regarding whether a child declines or receives care is NOT shared with any other collaborating Handle With Care partner.

Support for Parents & Guardians

- Your child's well-being it paramount and all program partners want to provide you and your child with a caring support network during times of difficulty.
- Parents/Guardians may submit a Handle With Care notification directly to their child's school without involving any other program partner.
- At NO time are you obligated or mandated to participate in the Handle With Care Program.
- If you have concerns or questions, contact HWC@ci.ellensburg.wa.us.