



Reflecting on Our Roots

Joe DeBonis, MA, LPCC, IMH-E (IV)

March 2020

NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Working with Others

- Building & maintaining relationships
- Supporting others/mentoring
- Empathy & compassion

Reflection

- Contemplation
- Self-awareness
- Professional/personal development

Throughout the growth of the New Mexico Home Visiting Program we have benefitted from the direct support of national infant mental health consultants such as Victor Bernstein, Ph.D., Mary Claire Heffron, Ph.D., and Deborah Weatherston, Ph.D. Each of these individuals has contributed at various times through the provision of reflective consultation to our home visiting support team, providing the initial “holding environment” at the top of the parallel process for our home visiting system. Their knowledge and wisdom continues to influence all of us as it has become part of our ongoing practice and home visiting culture. Each provided a multitude of ideas and guidance to help us grow in reflective practice and relationship based work, however there are some key points that each has shared that stand out in their ongoing impact on our home visiting system.

In our work we sometimes talk about slowing down the process in order to avoid acting reflexively. Mary Claire Heffron (1999) refers to this as “hydroplaning” or the “right away” fantasy. This can stem from our belief that we know the right answer for the family before adequately exploring and understanding their situation; wanting to jump in and “fix” things. Often this is a function of fear or anxiety that is aroused in us as we learn about or observe a family situation that causes us concern. Without taking the time to better understand the situation and what the family thinks about it, we may make a suggestion that is a mismatch for the family. This can lead to what we sometimes judgmentally label as “non-compliance” if they do not follow-through with our suggestion or families canceling future appointments with us. Using reflective questions to explore a situation provides us with a bigger picture and a deeper understanding of the area of concern. It is only after we have completed reflective exploration with a family that we can begin to consider possible solutions.

Heffron also talks about the “parental” fantasy, where a home visitor desires to take control and become the decision maker for the family when we believe that the parents lack the capacity to make good decisions (1999). With this mindset we fail to look for parental strengths

and exclusively focus on deficits. This can also manifest as a rescue fantasy, where a part of us may actually fantasize taking the child home with us! Using reflective supervision effectively can help home visitors explore these thoughts and feelings in order to re-focus on parental strengths and autonomy.

Victor Bernstein in 2002, takes us to the start of the reflective supervision relationship in order to focus on the importance of orientation to define expectations around reflective supervision. During the orientation discussion, the supervisor helps clarify the purpose of reflective supervision and the expectations of the home visitor which include coming prepared with experiences from their work to discuss and explore during the reflective supervision session. The supervisor also explains that reflective exploration draws on a mutual competence model, where both supervisor and home visitor explore the home visitor's experience collaboratively, remaining open and curious and avoiding evaluative comments or prematurely jumping to solutions. Evaluating the home visitor's performance, or giving administrative instruction, is something that happens outside of the reflective supervision session.

Orientation is equally important to families beginning home visiting. Defining expectations helps families anticipate what to expect from their home visitor and what the home visits will consist of. Information about screenings and tools, length and frequency of visits, curriculum, and goal setting are examples of important information to be shared in an orientation visit. Building trust begins with a mutual understanding so there are no surprises down the road which can cause disruption in the relationship with the family.

Deborah Weatherston reminds us to "Look, Listen, Wonder, and Respond" (2013) as a reflective approach to partnering with parents during home visits. We observe (*look*) parent and child interactions during our visit. We offer reflective questions and *listen* without interruption to the parent's responses in an accepting, non-judgmental fashion, allowing them to explore their thoughts, feelings, and actions. And together, the home visitor and parent *wonder* according to Weatherston in 2013:

- *What is the infants or toddler's experience of the parent and their relationship?*
- *What is the parent's experience of the infant?*
- *How able is the parent to understand the emotional needs of the infant?*
- *What does the baby bring to the relationship?*
- *What hopes and dream did the parent have before the baby was born?*
- *What accounts for the sorrow and moments of pleasure in this parent-infant pair?*
- *Where does the hopefulness lie?*

With a trusting relationship as the foundation of these reflective questions, the home visitor may *respond* by inviting the parent to explore in depth the range of emotions, questions, and past experiences that all influence the parent-child relationship. In this way the home visitor

journeys with the parent to discover and uncover the complexity of being a parent in order to be fully present for their child, anticipating their needs, and providing the loving support that enriches their relationship.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- How do you integrate newly acquired information regarding home visiting and supporting families into your practice? What works best for you?
 - What is your understanding of reflective supervision? How does it relate to your work with families?
 - In what ways do you explore emotions in your home visits with families? How do you explore emotions in reflective supervision? How comfortable are you with the topic?
-

References/Additional Resources

- Bernstein, V. (2002). Standing Firm Against The Forces of Risk: Supporting Home Visiting and Early Intervention Workers through Reflective Supervision. *IMPrint*, 35, 1-6.
- Weatherston, D. J. (2013). Reflective Practice Look, Listen, Wonder, and Respond. *ZERO TO THREE*, 62–64.
- Heffron, M. C. (1999). Balance in Jeopardy: Reflexive Reactions vs. Reflective Responses in Infant/Family Practice. *ZERO TO THREE*, 15–17.