“Should I Tell or Ask Her to Pick the Baby Up?”:
Bridging “Best Practices” with Families’ Practices
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February 2016

NMAIMH Competencies addressed:

Area of Expertise: Theoretical Foundations
  • Family Relationships & dynamics
Area of Expertise: Working with others
  • Building and Maintaining Relationships

A baby sits in the middle of the floor. Her mom watches her from the kitchen. The baby looks expectantly at the mom. The baby “calls” to her mom. Mom continues to work in the kitchen. The baby begins to whimper. Mom continues working. The baby whimpers a little louder and notices that mom continues to work. The baby turns back to her toy.

This and similar scenarios are probably played out in homes across NM (and across the world!) at any given point in time. In each scenario, the baby, the home, and the culture are different. Additionally, the caregiver’s response varies. In some homes the caregiver will immediately focus her attention on each and every one of the infant’s snivels, while another caregiver will totally ignore her baby, who then screams cries and eventually sobs herself to sleep. Most caregivers probably have used each and every possible response because in the real world of babies and caregivers reactions to a baby’s whimpering will depend on a variety of caregiver perspectives about their own and their babies’ needs, their time, their energy restraints, etc. What we must additionally notice is that the caregiver’s response to the baby’s whimper depends on the beliefs and values of the family. Let’s explore two basic questions that emerge from these types of scenarios.

**Question #1: Should we tell the caregiver that he/she should pick up the baby right away when the baby cries?** Question 1 is related to our own knowledge base. As home visitors and Early Childhood professionals, we know that responding to babies helps babies learn that the world is a reasonably safe and interesting place to explore and they can expect that their needs will be met. We know that babies’ understanding
about the world is shaped by a number of things that include how their caregivers respond to them. Essentially, if a baby’s requests – whimpers, calls, cries – are immediately attended to, the baby learns that his/her adults are responsive. So, we get it, attending to babies is important. However, additionally when we look at the scenario above, more questions emerge. They include nuances about our relationships with families – especially if we are going to work with a baby’s family over a long period of time.

**Question #2: Should I wait to respond and ask more questions?** Question #2 is more nuanced. Question 2 challenges us to wait, watch, and notice some of the caregiver responses before charging ahead to tell, lecture, and/or share our knowledge with caregivers about how we think they should interact with their babies. It requires that we use our reflective practice of noticing, listening and learning. It requires that in scenes like the one described above, if the baby is not in immediate danger we actually pause, withhold our judgment and our advice, and notice (reflective practice) the positive things that caregivers are already doing (a strengths-based approach). Question #2 allows us to decide whether we have all the information we need to include the family in the process of shaping what their best next steps might be. It allows us to treat the caregivers as the experts by assuming they know their children, want to know their children, and want the best for their children. Question #2 is about collaborating with the baby’s family. It requires that we actually question ourselves in the following manner: “In this moment, should I rush in and ‘rescue’ the baby? Or, more importantly, do I have a genuine desire to explore and discover with the family? Is my role to help the caregivers learn how to respond to their babies?” Question #2 serves the families and us better in the process of developing our relationships and collaborations with families if we approach each interaction in a collaborative mode rather than from a top-down approach. Doing so emphasizes a strengths-based approach.

How we handle scenarios like the one above and other similar scenarios are almost always a delicate balancing act – a dance if you will – between what we know as Early Childhood Professionals and what we learn about families when we respectfully notice their beliefs and traditions. This discussion additionally suggests yet another wrinkle in this way of thinking. The success of our interfacing with families will depend on whether we are using reflective practice with the families that we collaborate with. Reflective collaboration dictates that we respectfully notice, pause and ask questions with an openness to discovery. We know that if there is a life-threatening situation with the baby that needs our immediate attention, we must act ethically and morally. However, if the baby is safe, the pause helps us listen to the family and acknowledge their own knowledge and expertise about their child. When we pause we create time and space to hear what caregivers and families say. If we keep strengths-based approaches, relationship-based approaches, and reflective practice central to our interactions with families, our interactions become a collaborative effort between ourselves and those families. Such collaborations are then opportunities for learning for families and for us!
Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- What part of this discussion do you agree with and why?
- What part of this discussion do you disagree with and why?
- What question(s) could I respectfully ask the caregiver about the situation?
- How does my relationship with the caregiver influence my response to this situation?
- What questions would help me clarify my own intention(s)? For example, who am I doing this for? Is it for myself and my own discomfort with a crying baby?

References/Additional Resources
