Exploring Our Rescue Fantasies
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Theoretical Foundations
• Supports and reinforces each parent’s strengths, emerging parenting competencies, and positive parent-infant/young child interactions and relationships.

Law, Regulation & Agency Policy
• Maintains appropriate personal boundaries with infants/young children and families served, as established by the employing agency.
• Promptly and appropriately reports harm or threatened harm to a child’s health or welfare to Protective Services.

Direct Service Skills
• Effectively implements relationship-based, therapeutic parent-infant/young child interventions that enhance the capacities of parents and infants/young children.

Reflection
• Uses reflective practice throughout work with infants/young children and families to understand own emotional response to infant/family work and to recognize areas for professional and/or personal development.

Most of us who have worked with infants, toddlers and their families have experienced the desire to rescue a child from their predicament at some point in our careers. Rescue fantasies often arise out of a desire for a child or children to have a better outcome than the one they may be currently facing. Sometimes the rescue fantasy may be related to a sense of hopelessness or an unmet need of the therapist, home visitor or service provider. Whatever the reason, when we experience these feelings of wanting to rescue an infant or toddler from their predicament, this is usually a good time to check in with our supervisor and reflect on what might be going on.

When we have thoughts about rescuing or saving children and those thoughts are at an unconscious level and/or we don’t pay attention to them, this is part of what Mary Claire Heffron refers to as one of the threats to balancing the needs between parents and children. And if we are having difficulty balancing the needs of parents and their children, this interferes with our capacity to focus on the relationship. As an example, if I am feeling that an infant is not receiving enough attention and I’m feeling like I could give that infant what they need, I may miss opportunities to notice even a brief positive connection between the parent and her infant.
If unchecked, our feelings will also interfere with our ability to support parents in a non-judgmental, strength-based manner that enhances the capacities of parents. Strong feelings of wanting to protect a child mean that we are forming judgments about the capacities of that parent. And since it is unlikely that we are going to be able to give the child a new family, assuming that is even in the child’s best interest, we need to take a closer look at how our feelings are affecting our ability to be present for this parent.

Rescue fantasies are not always as dramatic as a desire to take a child home. They can appear in many different forms and degrees (see Heffron article referenced below). Any situation where we feel compelled to pick up a child or provide some type of attention that a parent is not providing, for example, is also a rescue fantasy on a smaller scale. These feelings inevitably arise in this work and it is important to understand that the urges and feelings themselves aren’t as important as what we do with them. Refraining from acting on them is an important first step, but if we stop there and just ignore them, they don’t just go away and we’ve lost a wonderful opportunity to learn more about ourselves in the context of the work we do.

What can we do when we experience rescue fantasies? First, we need to become aware of the urge to act or fix it. If there are concerns for the safety of a child, then these should be discussed with a supervisor and a decision about whether the family needs to be reported to CYFD can be made.

If the safety of the child is not at stake, we can use these urges as opportunities to take a step back, explore and reflect on what we are feeling about this situation. It can also be helpful to try and understand what it is like for this parent, how they experience their child, and how we can use this understanding to nurture the relationship between a parent and their child. Reflective supervision is the ideal place to do this because it provides a safe, non-judgmental environment. It is in this type of atmosphere that we can look at our frustrations, fears and other feelings this work can bring up, make connections to our values and beliefs and notice how these affect our work with families. All of which will ultimately help us grow professionally.

An Idea To Try...
When you are making home visits, begin to notice times when you feel an urge to say or do something. At the same time, try to notice what the feeling is behind the urge. Are you feeling frustrated, empathy for the child, hopeless about a situation? After the visit, jot down a couple of thoughts and reminders of your observations including who said or did what and the feelings that accompanied those observations. Bring these thoughts and feelings to supervision so that you can discuss them in a safe and supportive environment.

References/Additional Resources