Being Held in Another’s Mind
David Belford, LISW
December 2010

NMAIMH competencies addressed

Direct Service Skills
- Establishes trusting relationship that supports the parent(s) and infant/young child in their relationship with each other, and that facilitates the needed change.

Working with Others
- Builds and maintains effective interpersonal relationships with families and professional colleagues by:
  - respecting and promoting the decision-making authority of families understanding and respecting the beliefs and practices of the family’s culture
  - following parents’ lead
  - following through consistently on commitments and promises
  - providing regular communications and updates.

Communicating
- Uses appropriate non-verbal behavior and correctly interprets others’ non-verbal behavior.

Reflection
- Remains open and curious.

The simple game of peek-a-boo that parents play with their infants is part of the process of understanding that others are there even when we don’t see them. This process starts as early as the moment the child is born and parents begin attending to their cues to be held, changed or fed. The acquisition of this understanding is so important in the life of an infant because it eventually helps the infant begin to separate from their primary caregiver(s) while knowing that even when they are not in sight, there presence is felt. Knowing that there is always someone thinking well of them and cheering them on allows the infant to feel safe and secure, and to attend to the tasks of development. For many parents this is a skill that seems to come naturally. It is an unconditional caring, though it does not preclude creating structure for their child as this also helps children feel safe. For other parents, it is a skill that needs to be fed and nurtured.

Feeling that the parent is still there and still cares about the infant even when they are not physically present is what Jeree Pawl calls “being held in another's mind”. The feeling of being held in another’s mind is at the core of providing an environment where we can grow and flourish as humans.
Parents who had limited experience of being held in another’s mind may have difficulty helping their children feel cared for in that regard. Home visitors are in a position to provide this holding environment for parents so that parents are better able to provide this for their children. Likewise, the home visitor will be more successful if they in turn feel that their supervisor cares for and thinks well about them. This is what we call parallel process or, in the words of Jeree Pawl, “do unto others as you would have others do unto others”.

Supervisors can provide this feeling of being held for those they supervise by cultivating a supportive and non-judgmental attitude. This can be challenging when a home visitor talks about working with a family and we think there might be a better way. But if we want home visitors to convey to parents that they are the experts when it comes to their children, supervisors need to convey to the home visitor that they are the experts on the families they work with.

Providing reflective supervision is also a wonderful tool for helping home visitors feel held in their supervisor’s mind. It creates a safe environment where supervisees can reflect on their work by looking at their relationships with parents, what parents bring to the relationship and what they (the home visitor) bring to the relationship. Setting aside a protected time, listening attentively and being present during supervision lets the home visitor know that they are cared for and valued.

An Idea To Try…
Think about the people you have known in your life that have been supportive, non-judgmental and genuinely interested in who you are and what you have to say. This might include a parent, grandparent, relative, teacher, a sports coach or others. What did they do that allowed you to feel “held” by them? What qualities did they possess? What can you take from those experiences that will help you provide a similar experience for the home visitors you supervise or the parents you work with?

References/Additional Readings