Discovering Feelings
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NMAIMH competencies addressed

Reflection
- Regularly examines own thoughts, feelings, strengths, and growth areas; discusses issues, concerns, actions to take with supervisor, consultants or peers
- 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

Working With Others
- Provides emotional support to parents/caregivers and children when sad, distressed, etc.

There is more to “Feelings” than the song written by Morris Albert in the 70’s. In the relationship-based home visiting work that we are involved in, feelings and emotions are an underlying force that we all experience and need to be aware of. However, depending on a host of different factors, we may not always recognize what we are feeling or why certain feelings have arisen within us.

One of the reasons we engage in reflection is to understand what we are feeling in response to a situation that we are presented with. This ability to recognize and understand feelings is an important skill for everyone involved in the home visiting program since emotions are part of the process at all levels. For example, for a first time parent with a newborn infant, the feeling may be one of irritation, or desperation, when a colicky baby cannot be soothed. For the home visitor, it may be the growing anxiety they experience being in the presence of this first time parent with the colicky baby who cannot be soothed. And for the supervisor, it may be the building frustration they feel as they listen to that home visitor speak in judgmental tones about that parent who was unable to soothe her newborn infant.

Feelings are not right or wrong, good or bad. Having judgment about our feelings, or if we have experienced outside judgment about our feelings, may make it more difficult to identify our emotions clearly. This speaks to the need to create an environment where the other person feels safe in sharing their feelings so they will be more likely to explore them openly. If a parent or home visitor
feels like they will be judged for expressing their feelings, they will be less likely to discuss them in your presence.

It is important to be aware of our feelings because they can move us to action. Mary Claire Heffron talks about learning to inhibit actions. As mentioned earlier, feelings can be thought of as an underlying force; a force that can lead us to act. There are certainly times in our life when acting on our feelings is very beneficial, for instance, speaking out about an injustice done to us. However, in our work there will be times we need to refrain from acting. Certainly in an emergency situation or if we witness something that is “unacceptable”, we would need to act. However in other situations our actions, based on feelings, may undermine a relationship. In this way, we must help home visitors learn when to inhibit their actions with parents; just like they will help parents reflect on and inhibit certain actions when confronted with intense feelings with their child.

Asking questions about feelings is one way to help others identify their feelings and uncover their source. This process can lead to growth and development for that person as they decide if the emotions truly relate to the situation in front of them, or if they relate to a past experience that may be coloring their perception of the present. This is a crucial skill for supervisors, home visitors and for parents. If the home visitor can help the parent understand the strong emotions that may arise as they take on one of the greatest and most important tasks of their lives, being a parent, then we increase the likelihood they will be successful in their role as nurturing protector of their child.

**An Idea To Try…**
Spend a day recognizing and recording when emotions arise for you. Have a note pad with you so you can record what feelings came up, what provoked the feelings, and how you responded. Also note if the situation was work related or not and if that impacted whether you acted on the feeling.

**References/Additional Resources**