Consistency, Predictability & Brain Development

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NMAIMH competencies addressed

Theoretical Foundations
• infant & young child development and behavior
• family relationships & dynamics
Direct Service Skills
• observation & listening
Working with Others
• empathy & compassion

Imagine that while relaxing on your couch under a cozy blanket, that you are inexplicably transported to a foreign country (minus the cozy blanket and the couch). In this country, let’s call it Caosilvania, you find that you don’t understand the language. In addition, after spending some time there, you find that there is not much you can count on. Some days the morning bus arrives at 7:45 a.m., other days at 9:22 a.m., and on some days it just doesn’t show up at all. You never know if you’ll have cell phone service or not. When you go to the grocery store, a gallon of milk might cost $3 one day, or it might cost you as much as $7 on another day. Living in Caosilvania would be frustrating and anxiety provoking, to say the least.

Now imagine what it must be like for a new born baby to enter this world, not speaking the language, not knowing what to expect. One of the most important things they will need in this strange new world is consistency and predictability (not Caosilvania!). They will need to count on having their needs being met, that when they cry there will be a nurturing, caring response, and that the environment in which they live is consistently safe and appropriate.

As we now understand, based on brain research, consistently loving and nurturing interactions with primary caregivers is necessary for every infant in order to maximize brain development. The brain develops most rapidly between the third trimester of pregnancy to age three (Stafford, Nagle, Zeanah, & Rice, 2005). 90% of brain growth occurs within the first three years of life! Knowing this, home visitors are in a particularly strategic position to positively impact infants through their work with the parents.

When we talk about the effects of caregiving and the environment on brain development, simply put, “Normal experience…supports normal brain development, and
abnormal experience...can cause abnormal neural and behavioral development” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Much of the research concerning environmental effects on the brain has been around the impact of negative experiences such as trauma, stress, and neglect. This includes the effects of stress within the caregiver environment on the mother, such as maternal depression and domestic violence (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

During the this crucial period of brain development, it is especially important that the infant not only avoids stressful and traumatic events, but receives what we might consider the opposite of this. Predictable and consistent nurturing responses and interactions from parents help developing brains grow, and help infants regulate stress, which is another important competency that will support future health and well-being.

Talking points for supervisors

- When meeting with home visitors during reflective supervision, ask them if they can determine the degree they feel a particular family is consistent and predictable with their baby.
- Brainstorm with home visitors ways to discuss and illustrate to caregivers the importance of consistency and predictability.
- As a supervisor, consider how your staff might perceive you along a continuum of being consistent and predictable?

References/Additional Resources
