The Good Enough Parent
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NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Theoretical Foundations
- Supports and reinforces each parent’s strengths, emerging parenting competencies, and positive parent-infant/very young child interactions and relationships

Direct Services Skills
- Establishes trusting relationship that supports the parent(s) and infant/very young child in their relationship with each other, and that facilitates needed change
- Formally and informally observes the parent(s) or caregiver(s) and infant/very young child to understand the nature of their relationship, developmental strengths and capacities for change

What does it take to raise a happy, healthy child? Much has been written about parenting and the ideal qualities, attributes, and interactions that go into effective parenting. As a society we have access to information, suggestions, and research about parenting in magazines, books, television programs, and syndicated columns. We can interpret this to mean that we recognize the crucial role that parents play in the healthy development of their children.

However, with all the information and opinions we are exposed to about parenting, we may also come to the conclusion that there is a perfect parenting formula, which if followed to the letter, will produce the most intelligent, well adjusted, and happiest children. And if we buy into this belief, we may also become critical of parents who do not seem to be parenting at this “advanced level” of performance. This can become a challenge for home visitors as we develop relationships with the families we serve if we approach our work from this evaluative position. The question we need to ask ourselves is what yard stick are we using to measure the level of effectiveness of the parents we are working with? And if a parent is not “measuring up” in our minds, is our yard stick a fair one, and could our judgments interfere with the relationship we are trying to establish with that parent?

Winnicott talks about the “good-enough mother” and describes this concept as “…one who makes adaption(s) to the infant’s needs…success in infant care depends on the fact of devotion, not on cleverness or intellectual enlightenment” (Winnicott, 1958). The
idea of making adaptations translates into the ability to read a child’s cues and to respond appropriately and consistently. We can think about devotion as a fundamental element related to parental motivation and connectedness within the parent-child relationship. If we think about there being these foundational elements to effective parenting, as mentioned by Winnicott, then we can look for these qualities in the parents we work with. Starting with these elements we can then help parents build on their strengths to enhance their parenting abilities.

Looking for those qualities that describe good enough parenting stands in stark contrast with our natural tendency to attend to those things that may not be, in our opinion, top-notch parenting. If we start by banishing the belief that parenting is about exhibiting some level of perfection, then perhaps we can instead begin to explore those elements of parenting that are foundational, and when intact, represent good enough parenting. Not “good enough” in the sense of it being somehow minimal parenting, or “not so great, but we can live with it” kind of parenting, but parenting that achieves the threshold of effectiveness.

Thinking in these terms we can also bring in the concept of “mutual competence” as an indicator of good enough parenting. As mentioned by Victor Bernstein, “The premise of ‘mutual competence’ is that any interchange that contributes to the parent and child feeling secure, valued, successful, happy, or enjoying learning together is good for the development of the child as well as for the parent’s sense of self-confidence in being a parent” (Bernstein, 2002-03). Are we observing these types of interchanges between parent and child? And as we observe them, are we commenting on them, bringing parental attention to what is working and increasing the likelihood of these interactions happening more frequently?

As we meet parents and spend time with them, we can think about them in terms of meeting that threshold of parental effectiveness. This involves extrapolating information from what we are observing that describes those essential aspects of parenting that help us to trust their abilities. As we recognize and identify good enough parenting we bring a fundamental respect to the abilities of the parents we are working with and refrain from losing confidence in them when we observe and identify areas of growth. In this way we can toss the hyper-critical “perfect parenting” yard stick out the window and focus instead on the foundational qualities that define good enough parenting.

**Talking points for supervisors**

Here are some questions for the home visitors you supervise to think about during reflective supervision:

- As you observe parent-child interactions, are you commenting on those times when things are working (perhaps when you are observing mutual competence in action)?
When observing actions or interactions that may not reflect what might be considered perfect parenting, how is that observation impacting your observation of parental strengths?

- What are some examples of this parent making adaptations based on infant needs?
- What are you observing in the parent-child interactions that help you identify parental devotion?
- What is your perception of this parent’s abilities? What are their strengths?

References/Additional Readings
