Mutual Competence
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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
  • building & maintaining relationships
Reflection
  • curiosity

Victor Bernstein has taught us a great deal about this concept of ‘mutual competence’. Bernstein writes:

“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 parents’ sense of self confidence in being a parent. The experience of mutual competence is good for the intellectual, emotional, and/or spiritual development of both individuals. In our work, mutually competent relationships must exist at all levels of the parallel process - parent and child; parent and home visitor; home visitor and supervisor. Mutually competent relationships are an essential foundation for success; indeed they are the agent of change in doing this work.” (V. Bernstein, Ordinary Miracles).

Relationships, again, are the key - the relationship is the agent of change. Have you ever had that moment of connection with another person where it just “clicks”, where the experience of interacting just “feels inspiring”? For some of us, those moments happen in conversation with someone where we develop some insight together; for others they happen in the context of thinking through a work project together, and yet for others, they may occur while doing art or hiking with a friend. The options for that type of interchange are endless. How do those “clicks” or “feels inspiring” interactions impact you? Do they make you feel understood and valued? Or competent and good about
yourself? Or do they make you feel happy? Those are the exchanges that relate to mutual competence. What exchanges contribute to YOU feeling secure, valued, successful or happy? How do you think those interactions made the other person feel? Happy, successful and/or valued as well?

Now that you can identify this concept for yourself, how do you know if you see it in the families you work with? This concept of mutual competence provides a lens for observing parent-child interactions. In this context, we are looking for interactions that support the child’s development and interactions that increase the parents’ self-confidence. Through observation, inquiry and commenting, we begin to acknowledge this process with families. Here are some examples of ways to support this process:

- “I noticed a big smile on Cathy’s face when you sang to her. Have you seen that before?”
- “It looks like that works well when Sam sits in your lap with you - did you notice how things changed for him?”
- “What made you decide to pick that toy to play with Mary? She started laughing as soon as you showed it to her.”
- “Did you see what Marc just did? Is that something new?”
- “How did that feel when Susan immediately stopped crying when you started rocking her?”

By observing and commenting on interactions that feel good to both the baby and caregiver, you are supporting mutual competence.

Talking points for supervisors

- What have you noticed between you and your supervisee that supports mutual competence?
- What type of communication is being used between home visitor and caregiver that support the caregiver in developing the best possible relationship with their baby?
- How do you support mutual competence in families where those interchanges rarely exist, if at all?

References/Additional Resources
