Misattributions and Misinterpretations
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Thinking
- Sees and can explain the interactions of multiple factors and perspectives

Reflection
- Regularly examines own thoughts, feelings, strengths, and growth areas; discusses issues, concerns, actions to take with supervisor, consultants, or peers
- Remains open and curious
- Uses reflective practice throughout work with infants/very young children and families to understand own emotional response to infant/family work and recognize areas for professional and/or personal growth

Have you ever had the experience of meeting someone for the first time and feeling they were aloof or cold, only to discover, after getting to know them better, that they were really quite approachable and caring? What lead you to your initial impression? Was it related to the person’s behavior? It could have been that this individual had just received some distressing news on the day that you initially met them that could have affected their behavior (non-verbal communication), which was in turn misinterpreted. It could be that there was something about their physical appearance or mannerisms that reminded you of someone from your past who was aloof or cold. In both situations we would have been guilty of a misattribution or misinterpretation. Having opportunities to examine this very human tendency will help us in our work.

It is important for us to be aware that we are susceptible to making misattributions and misinterpretations when we observe parental behavior (as we work with families). A reflective supervisor can help the home visitor question reactions and assumptions that might be made by the home visitor regarding families. In this way we have a place where misattributions and misinterpretations can be explored and examined in a safe and supportive fashion.

And in the same way we make misattributions and misinterpretations regarding parents, parents sometimes make misattributions and misinterpretations regarding their infants and toddlers. One way the home visitor can assist families in this regard is to help them become reflective in their relationship with their child. The capacity for reflective functioning is a key indicator of parental sensitivity (Slade, 2002). Reflective functioning relates to a parents “capacity to understand that her own or another’s behavior is a
reflection of underlying, likely unobservable, changing, dynamic intentions and emotions”. Like in the example above, we want to help support a parents’ ability to consider the possible underlying motivators behind their baby’s behavior in order to read that behavior accurately and avoid misattributions and misinterpretations. For example, if a mother brings her 4 month old along with her as she runs errands all afternoon, and at some point the baby becomes fussy and begins to cry, if she has a high capacity for reflective functioning, we would hope she recognizes that the baby is fussy because she is tired and has missed her nap, rather than believing her baby is simply uncooperative or is misbehaving.

Going hand-in-hand with reflective functioning is a parent’s capacity to “keep the baby in mind” (Slade, 2002). This ability has to do with perspective taking and understanding a child’s needs. In taking the babies perspective, keeping the baby in mind has to do with an accurate perception of the needs of the baby, as opposed to making a misattribution or misinterpretation. “The mother who understands that her child is fussing because he is hungry or frightened, that her child’s distress has both a meaning and trajectory of its own, or simply that he is having a feeling that she doesn’t share or understand is by definition keeping her baby - his needs, his desires, and his feelings – in mind. And in so doing, she can respond to her child in ways that are sensitive, containing, and regulating” (Slade, 2002).

As can be seen above, reflection is a cornerstone in our work with families that helps us, and the parents we work with, explore and overcome misattributions and misconceptions so that relationships can develop with awareness and produce healthy, caring connections.

**Talking points for supervisors**
- As you provide reflective supervision with your staff, be ready to question a staff member’s assessment of a parent-child interaction and help them explore how they came to their perspective.
- Try setting up a role play scenario with staff to help them comfortably explore with a parent a parental assessment that may be a misattribution or misunderstanding.
- Be willing to entertain the possibility that you may be applying a misattribution or misunderstanding to a staff behavior.

**References/Additional Resources**