Within the CYFD Home Visiting Program, gathering Social History information begins once we meet with a family. It is part of the intake process and continues to be gathered over time (within the first six months). Yet, what is the importance of gathering this information? What value does this history have? How does this fit with all other aspects of our work? The purpose of gathering social history of the parent/caregiver is to develop an understanding of their internal working model. An internal working model is how we view/what we believe about ourselves, others and the world. It influences what we expect of and from ourselves, others and the world in general. It is the mental representation that guides future social and emotional behavior. Our earliest relationships help form the template from which these representations are made. So, what does this have to do with anything? Well, primary caregivers act as a prototype for future relationships via the internal working model. Children who have attachment figures who are readily available, responsive and reliable are assumed to develop a representation of the self as acceptable and worthwhile. Those who have inconsistent or unresponsive attachment figures are assumed to develop a view of self as unacceptable and unworthy (Cassidy, 2000). So, when we meet a family and begin to develop a relationship with the primary caregiver, understanding their “social history” helps us get a picture of how he/she makes meaning of their relationships, and their relationship with their baby, in particular. The social history questions are created to get a picture of caregivers’ early experiences which, as has been stated, make up this internal working model. Understanding how their parents dealt with conflict, what their friendships were like, if they witnessed violence growing up, if drugs/alcohol were part of their life growing up, what significant losses they experienced and how those were handled, how they felt about their family, their living situation, etc. helps to make sense of how they approach their life and relationships now.
Working models are also assumed to involve processes that influence what information individuals attend to, how they interpret events in their world and what they remember (Bowlby, 1980). Knowing the answer to the social history questions allows us to understand the “template” that a parent/caregiver has constructed which informs us about their expectations and the meaning they begin to make of their child’s expectations, behavior and/or needs. And herein lies our work as home visitors....

Information gathered through these ongoing conversations about parents’ past experiences help us to understand their current behavior, develop an appreciation for a families experience and strengthen our empathy towards them. Once we know where a certain behavior/outlook/reaction comes from, we can better work with it. These conversations can also help to guide the goals we create together. As we begin to get to know parents/caregivers and how they make meaning of their baby’s behavior, we can begin to wonder together about how this baby may be seeing the world in a different way and/or may need something different than what we are projecting onto them.

Talking points for supervisors

- How comfortable are your home visitors in having conversations with families about their Social History? What meaning are they making based on their own internal working models?
- In what ways is the information gathered in these ongoing conversations with families used in your home visitor’s ongoing work?
- What goals can be created together with a family based on information gathered via social history?
- In reflective supervision, how can you support a home visitor to better understand a family based on social history information gathered?

References/Additional Resources