Boundaries in Home Visiting
Heidi Roibal, BS
August, 2013

NMAIMH competencies addressed

Law, Regulations, & Agency Policy
- Ethical practice and agency policy
Thinking
- Analyzing information
Reflection
- Professional/personal development

Imagine a home visit with the following scenarios:

1. As you sit down with a family you have been working with for 3 months, the mother tells you she is out of diapers and needs to run to the store. She asks you if you could watch her infant “for a few minutes.”

2. You are living in a small town and are the major professional support person for many of the families that you see. You frequently run into the families in the community. Many families have access to your personal phone numbers and home address. How do you set and maintain professional boundaries?

3. During a scheduled visit, you notice a parent with a black eye. What do you say to the parent? What are some considerations for your discussion?

4. A family that you have been working with for a year invites you to the child’s first birthday party. How do you respond?

“Professional boundaries,” in home visiting can be described as the distinct awareness of the differences between a professional relationship and a friendship. Our internal awareness may be called into action on a daily basis. One distinction we can make is that a professional relationship involves legal and ethical paperwork such as assessments and reports and these responsibilities are not typically a part of a friendship. Reflective supervision can help develop home visitors’ ability to recognize and discuss ethical dilemmas such as professional boundaries, which may trigger an emotional response and challenge our ability to honor these boundaries.

When we put into practice our capacity to understand our emotional responses to ethical dilemmas, we engage our internal ability to reflect and examine our thoughts, feelings and internal processes while striving to keep an open mind, stay curious and
take in the perspectives of others. Ethical dilemmas require a plan of action to protect professional boundaries and to protect the family and the home visitor. Role-playing the scenarios described above during a staff meeting can provide everyone the time to reflect; time to stop and think about what is happening, what has happened and what could happen next. Regular staff meetings can help facilitate discussions about best practices to support professional boundaries for all involved: the home visitor, the family and the infant.

Reviewing how home visitors establish boundaries with families early in the professional relationship and clear discussions with parents about boundaries at the first visit will help clarify your role as that of a professional. Parents will appreciate knowing that home visitors provide information and support in a professional role and it’s important to set clear boundaries everyone understands. As one experienced home visitor remarked, “I let the family know that I am there as a professional and I will not be able to accept family party invitations, Facebook friend invites or other invites because of our Code of Ethics and agency policies. I know that the family understands this and it prevents any misunderstandings or hurt feelings.”

Professional boundary discussions may also include clarifying and if necessary, reviewing/updating program policies and procedures about the use of cell phones and social media and how these technologies impact our work as home visitors. As emerging technologies develop, honoring boundaries can take on a new look as we work towards being responsive to families while maintaining boundaries in a world where instant messaging, texting and social media prevail as modes of communication.

Combining our understanding of program policies, along with our own personal values, beliefs and emotions can be helpful as we navigate through these territories. Home visiting involves legal and ethical responsibilities to our program, our families and ourselves. By using reflection to identify priorities, discuss concerns and formulate a plan of action for different situations, we can be confident of navigating both professional and personal boundaries as they arise.

Talking Points for Supervisors:
- What boundaries challenge your home visitors most?
- If one of your home visitors is working with a family that challenges professional boundaries, what do you need to assist them?
- What are some cultural considerations to think about?
- What is the home visitor’s primary role with this family?

References/Additional Resources

Luna County Parents as Teachers Home Visiting Program.