Observation: What Is It and Why Is It So Hard...?
Mara Brenner, LPCC, IMH-III®
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Direct Service Skills
- Observation & listening
Reflection
- Contemplation
- Self-awareness
- Curiosity

Observation is a key component to our work as home visitors and is often one of the most difficult ones. I think many of us feel confident that we are seeing what’s before us, noting an interaction between a parent and baby, and even picking up on an exchange between parents or other family members … yet, are we really seeing what’s happening?

Let’s start with what observation is … and what it is not. Observation is a factual description of what is occurring; an objective list of behaviors: baby coos, mother turns head and smiles, mother touches babies cheek, baby turns head to left. What it is not is a subjective perspective that explains people’s intentions or motivations: baby wants mom’s attention and mom responds by loving her baby – which may not be an accurate interpretation anyway. It is important to distinguish among the facts, our feelings about what we see and our interpretations of what we see. All of those components are valuable pieces – the feelings that come up for us from watching an interaction give us a lot of information about ourselves, as does our interpretation of what is occurring - yet both can actually blur what it is that we are witnessing. The facts are vital in giving us a part of the picture and understanding what really happened!

What is the value of observation? It is an opportunity to get an accurate picture of behavior and help us to better understand a child or a parent/child relationship. It is free from our biases and perspectives. The information gained through observation can help us to support a family in seeing what is working, shed some light on where they are interested in focusing their attention and goals they might be interested in developing. Observation helps us notice the cues an infant/child is giving to her caregiver, how attuned a caregiver is to those cues and a child’s ongoing development over time. It is
not where we make meaning of what we see; it’s just what we are seeing. As home visitors, we use our observations as part of our ongoing conversations with parents/caregivers. We are curious with them about what we have seen; we are wondering with them how they knew to do what they just did; and we pose questions about the meaning they make out of what just happened to help develop awareness around their *internal working model*. (The 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 and directs how we respond).

But why is it so hard to do? Have you noticed how difficult it is to code the PICCOLO? The directions are to make note if a behavior is observed yet do you struggle to do that with families you know well because you already feel that ‘they are good parents’? Do you assume what a behavior means? Do you feel protective if certain behaviors are not observed and want to defend some parents? So, one thing to keep in mind about observation is that it is just one piece of the bigger puzzle. It is a factual snapshot of a relationship in that moment – it is not the whole picture – yet, without it, we may be missing some very important pieces. It is also worth noting that observation is neither good nor bad – it is what it is. The reality is, we are observing constantly from the moment we walk into someone’s home until the moment we get into our car. We are observing the environment, how people interact with each other, how an infant/child interacts within their world (which includes their environment and all relationships), and we are observing ourselves… noticing how we are within the context of each and every home visit. We do this largely unconsciously and what would be helpful is to make it more and more conscious.

Hmmmmm, no wonder observation is so hard…. 😊

**Talking points for supervisors**

- During reflective supervision, ask questions that support your home visitors to reflect on their own behavior during a home visit which strengthens not only their reflective capacity, it strengthens their observational skills.
  - “What did you do when that happened”?
  - “What were you doing when they were playing on the floor”?

- When meeting with your staff to work on being reliable on the PICCOLO, spend time talking about what comes up for them when a behavior is or isn’t observed. What meaning does the home visitor make out of this?

- In conversation with your staff, ask them to be specific and describe what they saw. Break down interactions into different segments… “…and then what did she do? And then what did the baby do? And how did the mom respond? What did you do after that?”