Family Engagement
January 2014
Mara Brenner, LPCC, IMH-E (III)

NMAIMH competencies addressed
Theoretical Foundations
• Infant/very young child & family-centered practice
Law, Regulation, & Agency Policy
• Ethical practice
Working With Others
• Building & maintaining relationships
• Empathy & compassion

“God grant me the serenity to accept the people I cannot change, the courage to change the one I can, and the wisdom to know that it’s me”.
~ Serenity Prayer from Head Start Workers

When you think about the issue of family engagement and retention, where do you focus your attention? How do you make sense out of the numbers of families who are no shows, refuse services or who you are unable to contact? There are many reasons why families may leave the program, especially here in New Mexico. We have a transient population that impacts many families’ ability to remain in our program for long periods of time. Ongoing staff turnover also impacts family engagement and retention - as a relationship-based program, starting over with new home visitors can impact a family’s willingness to stay and ultimately engage. There are families who may only need our services for a short period of time - their needs are met by their home visitor and the program and are able to move forward, confidently, without our services. And then there are the other families – the ones who have refused services, who don’t answer the door when we knock on it, who never return our calls or messages. For some families, based on past experiences, there could be a fear of what will happen if they let you in, who have difficulty connecting to or trusting professionals. There are also other issues that might be impacting their interest in letting us in that we can actually do something about.

So, to look at the part that we may be able to do something about, let’s start by asking the question “why do people stay” in our program (which refers to retention)? People
often stay because they feel cared for, heard/listened to, and successful. They also know what to expect from the program and what is expected from them. Engagement and retention is about connection. As a relationship-based program, the key is the relationship, the connection, and that begins on day one when you present your program to a family. As Jeree Pawl has said, “How you are is as important as what you do”. HOW are you presenting your program? What are you bringing to this new, potential relationship? Are you bringing excitement, warmth, interest? Are you setting the stage for this family to have an experience of feeling cared for, seen and heard or does it feel like you are just another person who is telling them what to do? Do they know the benefits of being in your home visiting program? Do they see that this program may help them achieve some of what they want for their child or family? Do they feel that the goals they have for themselves will be valued by you? Can they rely on you to be consistent and to be available? These are the pieces of family engagement and retention that we can actually do something about.

As a practice in addressing family engagement and retention, we, as a program, can consistently check in with ourselves and our staff to see how we are doing. Is there something we each need to think of doing differently to be able to provide an opportunity for a family to connect with a caring, nurturing home visitor? How am I being supported so that I can acknowledge and accept my judgments without putting those expectations on my families? How can I shift my state of mind to be open to and accepting of the variety of families I come into contact with? Where can my concerns and fears “be held” so that I am available to “be with” others’ concerns and fears? What is my part of the dynamic in this family’s engagement?

When parents can articulate the specific benefits of being in a home visiting program, when they can see that this service can help them get certain needs met, they stay engaged. And, people stay in a program largely because they think the program is changing them in a direction and manner that they are happy with. This connects to goal development – are families working on and accomplishing things that have meaning for them and in a way that they feel successful. What part am I playing in this happening?

There is so much in life, in our relationships, that is beyond our control – how can I address the aspects that are in my control. How can I make a difference in this relationship? How can I make this person/family feel valued, heard and cared for…?

There are always going to be situations where things don’t work out, so what is in our control? Only ourselves… (…”and the wisdom to know that it is me”).

Talking points for supervisors

- As a regular practice, have conversations with staff about how home visitors are orienting families to the program. What is working and what is not working in how people are approaching this initial conversation?
- During a reflective supervision session, supervisors can ask home visitors to describe their relationship with a family and how they may be setting the stage for that parent to feel cared for, seen and heard.
- Present the quote “How you are is as important and what you do” at a staff meeting and have a discussion of how home visitors incorporate this thought into their work with families.

References/Additional Resources

US Dept. of Health and Human Services - Division of Home Visiting and Early Childhood Systems at the Maternal Child Health Bureau at Health Resources and Services Administration.