In Support of Mutual Competence
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Theoretical Foundations
- Infant/very young child development and behavior
- Family relations and dynamics
Direct Service Skills
- Observation and listening
Working with Others
- Empathy and compassion
Reflection
- Curiosity

Infants are capable of remarkable social-emotional abilities such as attachment, self-soothing, vocalizing, facial expressions and more. As parents notice and respond to infant behavior (cues) they create a sense of trust and love, resulting in more positive interactions with the baby. These parent-child interactions lead to feelings of “mutual competence,” where the parent and child feel joy as a result of an interaction. Both the infant and the parent play an important role in developing positive parent-child interactions by learning about and understanding each other’s behavior.

Brazelton reminds us to, “Use the behavior of the child as your language,” (Brandt, 2014) and we understand that the baby’s behavior is a powerful way of communicating with parents and supporting self-confidence.

Imagine this home visiting scene:

Lia (mother) answers door looking harried and distracted. Her 8-month old, Ben is sitting on the floor, sucking his thumb and looking anxiously toward Lia and begins crawling towards her from the living room. Lia picks up Ben, settles on the sofa, takes a deep breath and visibly relaxes. Ben leans back into his mother occasionally glancing up at her face. Lia says, “Monday mornings are always chaos around here. My 5 year-daughter almost missed her bus and my workplace called to see if I could come in for a few hours. I hate to say no because I’m only part-time, and we need the money, but I didn’t want to miss our appointment.” Ben looks up at Lia and touches her face – he does this several
times until Lia looks at Ben and smiles. Ben smiles back, looks away, then looks back again and smiles. Lia covers her eyes with her hand, removes her hand and says “peek-a-boo”. They both smile at each other.

Do you see any opportunities to support the mutual competence in this brief interaction? What have you observed that supports the child’s development and increases the mother’s self-confidence? Now, imagine the scenario from the baby’s perspective:

Mom seems anxious today and keeps moving around; just as soon as I reach her feet, she is walking away again. I’ll suck my thumb; that will help me not be so anxious. Wait, she is going towards the door…is she leaving? Where is she going? She didn’t say good-bye…I better follow her. Oh…there’s that nice lady again. Mom always smiles and plays games with me when that nice lady visits. I like when mom picks me up and I can listen to her voice. I like to touch mom’s face; I want her to look at me and play with me. Yay, I got her attention! Yay again, Mom knew I wanted to play peek-a-boo!

Do you see any additional opportunities to support the mutual competence in both Lia and Ben?

When we describe the child’s behavior to a parent and leave space for the parent to comment on the behavior, we are exploring the parents' understanding of the behavior, their own response and the meaning this has for the parent. (Brandt, 2007). By joining a parent in looking at behavior together, we have an opportunity to actually watch and wonder with the parent about the child, we can point out specific behavior, and we can strengthen connections between the parent and the child by celebrating what is working. When we celebrate strengths, we increase parents’ confidence and we celebrate the child’s emerging social-emotional skills while we continuously support mutual competence.

Talking points:
- Can you think of anything else Ben may be experiencing?
- Ask, “What does this child’s behavior mean to parents?”
- Discuss the strengths you observe in the above scene. What did you see? What might you say to the mother? To the baby?
- What are some cultural considerations you might think about during this home visit?

References/Additional Resources