Circle of Security™ and the Supervisory Relationship
Mara Brenner, MA, LPCC, IMH®-III
May 2014

NMAIMH competencies addressed

Direct Service Skills
- Observation & listening
- Responding with empathy

Working with Others
- Building and maintaining relationships
- Empathy & compassion

If you attended a Circle of Security training with Kent Hoffman, he quotes a phrase from Robert Frost that speaks to the heart of relationships. He says, we each have within us the “irresistible desire to be irresistibly desired.”

As stated in the previous article, the concepts used in the Circle of Security™ can be easily imbedded into our work as home visitors. We hold families as they go out and explore their lives as parents and welcome them back as they need nurturance, reassurance and to get their emotional “cup filled”. We hold families in this manner as we hope they will hold their children, allowing their child to be wherever they need to be on the circle. How can we continue this COS framework to extend to our roles as managers and supervisors? Is there a place for the COS framework at this level of the parallel process? Absolutely!

Circle of Security™ is a framework on attachment, another way to look at relationships. There are parallels between the parent-child relationship, the home visitor-parent relationship and the supervisor-home visitor relationship. We, as managers and supervisors, are the hands – the secure base - from which home visitors can go into the field and “be with” families. We delight in the connections they make, the questions they ask and the strong relationships they create with their families. We watch over them as they talk about their first PICOLLO, focus on what’s working in a parent-child relationship and work together with a family to create goals that make sense for a family. We are also the safe haven to come back to when they are overwhelmed by the domestic violence in a home, an assessment tool indicates depression and they don’t know how to handle the emotional state of the mom, their triggers or reactions (what COS calls shark music) are operating full blast or they put their foot in their mouth with a family and are worried how it might impact the relationship. We hold them, filling
up their emotional cup, as we ask reflective questions, validate their feelings and are with them in a way that helps them experience being seen and heard and accepted. We create a “holding environment” that allows our home visitors to be anywhere they need to be on the circle and we accept them where they are… responding to their cues accordingly.

The COS says that at the heart of developing a secure attachment is the knowledge that a caregiver is emotionally available to “be with” their child during times of need. Being with is a state of mind, not a technique. This is at the heart of a supervisory relationship in our home visiting program, too. We, as supervisors, are working towards being emotionally available to be with our home visitors during their times of need. We work to follow their need, not always their lead. A home visitor may articulate their desire for answers, solutions and/or direction yet what we do in our reflective supervision is to listen to their story, ask clarifying questions, and/or help them to manage their feelings. We may, at times, need to set limits, as well. We do so by holding our staff within the limits and scope of their job, training and expertise. We are with our staff the way in which we are asking parents to be with their children…creating a secure attachment.

If we are able to look at our supervisory relationships with this lens on attachment, we have a circular map to guide us, terms to use to name/label an experience, a definition to articulate our roles and responsibilities and a path that leads to true connection, an experience of being seen, heard and valued. As Kent Hoffman has said, this approach on attachment sends the message “You matter. You matter completely”.

At this level of using the COS, it is vital for a supervisor/manager to be able to assess, for themselves, their own emotional availability to be with their home visitors. Are you able to welcome your staff back to get their cup filled? Is there a place on the circle where you feel more comfortable? Is your shark music interfering with your ability to respond to your home visitors need? And, in true parallel process, it is important to ask you, as supervisors and managers: who is holding you…?

Talking points for supervisors

- While doing case presentations during staff meeting, what would it be like to have a piece of the conversation focus not only on where the child is on the circle and the comfort level of the parent but on where the home visitor is in relation to their movement on the circle and/or their comfort in being the “hands” for the parent.
- In what way can you support your staff to identify their triggers/reactions (shark music) in their work with families?

References/Additional Resources

Circle of Security™
http://circleofsecurity.net/