On Change
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Theoretical Foundations
• attachment, separation, trauma & loss
Reflection
• emotional response

Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are.
Bertolt Brecht

Change, and the sense of loss that often accompanies change, seems to be a regular part of the human experience. People, objects, even our daily routines become familiar or comfortable through repeated experiences or contact with those people, objects or routines. We can become so comfortable with what is familiar that sometimes we even resist change that may be in our best interest. The unfamiliar and unknown, or the loss of the familiar, can activate our stress response system and cause us to become anxious and even fearful. And there are often a whole range of emotions or feelings that might be tied to a particular change, including a sense of loss.

Change that is out of our control and accompanied by a lack of information or uncertainty about what might come next can be extremely stressful. It is not surprising, then, that both individuals (children, parents, home visitors, managers) and systems (families, programs, agencies) often become dysregulated, emotionally and otherwise, in the face of change.

While we may not have much control over change in our lives, we can gain a better understanding of our response to change. As we become more aware of our likely response, that awareness or knowledge becomes a source of information that can reduce some of the stress associated with change. The less stressed or anxious we are, the more access we will have to our creativity and the possibility of seeing a clear path forward, or at least being able to get to the point that we can come to terms with change before us.
Here are some things that may be helpful when dealing with change, particularly when we can predict that a change is going to occur (a child is transitioning out of home visiting, a staff member is leaving the program, new policies and procedures are being introduced):

- include in the planning those who will be impacted by the change (decreases uncertainty and offers some measure of control)
- notice and acknowledge any feelings that may come up
- explore what meaning we or others might make of the change (meaning is often rooted in our early experience)
- to the extent possible, prepare yourself and others for what will come next (offer information which decreases uncertainty)
- offer opportunities to talk about the changes (but notice when sharing or discussion turns into complaining or blaming)
- create rituals or activities that offer opportunities to reflect, say good bye and/or acknowledge new beginnings
- be sensitive to timing; change is a process and it takes time to move through the different pieces
- recognize that each person has their own process and honor that each person responds differently to change

As much as change often leads to new opportunities and growth, not all change is welcome. Part of how we view change is related to what the change is as well as our past experiences with similar situations – some people will find it easier than others to reframe a loss of job, for example, as an opportunity.

Understanding how we react to change, exploring the meaning we attach to change and figuring what ways to take care of ourselves in the face of change, can help us learn to sit at least a bit more quietly as we experience and move through the changes that are so much a part of life.

Talking points for supervisors

- As a manager or supervisor, in what ways can you anticipate, and support staff around changes related to home visiting or some aspect of a home visitor’s job that has its root at a systems level (program, community, state or even federal)?
- In what ways does your program anticipate and support families around changes including developmental changes (Touchpoints™), changes in the family constellation (a new baby, a family member moving out), changing child care providers or transitioning a child out of the home visiting program?
- In what ways is your program prepared to support families (and staff) around sudden and unexpected changes such as the death of a family member or a move out of the home due to domestic violence?