How Do We Keep the Parent-Child Relationship at the Center of the Work?

Mara Brenner, LPCC, IMH-E® (III)
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Theoretical Foundations
• Infant/very young child & family-centered practice
Working with Others
• Building & maintaining relationships
• Empathy & compassion

“There’s no such thing as a baby. There’s a baby AND someone.”
~ Donald Winnicott

Many of us come to this work with a desire to make a difference in the lives of the families in our communities. We engage in a relationship-based approach because we understand that “…nobody cares how much we know, until they know how much we care” ~ Theodore Roosevelt. As a home visiting community that is committed to infant mental health principles, we use a variety of program models and curricula to guide us in our work with families. Where does our program curriculum fit when we are focusing on the parent-child relationship? If we agree that parents are the most important people in their baby’s lives, how do we use our curriculum to join with parents as opposed to just educating them? Where is our port of entry?

If we bring our skills in observation and listening to our work, we are not only beginning the process of joining with a family, we are taking in information that tells us the story of each family. We are seeing how parents are with their babies; we are hearing what their concerns are and we are taking note of what is working within this family system. In this experience of being listened to, significant shifts can happen for people. They not only begin to regulate, they begin to feel trust. Many are entering into a relationship different from any they have ever experienced. If we lead with our curriculum or lesson, we are imposing our agenda on the family (which is what many other people in their lives do) versus allowing the family to share themselves with us and to lead with their concerns and desires.
When thinking about keeping the parent-child relationship at the center of the work and creating goals with families, here, too, observation and listening is key. What are parents (primary caregivers) saying about the experience of parenting their child? What behaviors are parents wanting to understand or change? These can be ports of entry for home visitors.

When we listen carefully, parents are telling us what they want and need. It is not uncommon that many families are interested in goals related to furthering their education, getting work or other services for their families. There is nothing wrong with these goals, but where is the parent-child relationship? Case management is a piece of what we do – an important piece – yet this program has, at its core, the focus on the parent-child relationship. Being involved in our program means families are offered a different type of support, a support that we know is vital to the future health and well-being of their baby.

So, how do you hold all of these pieces? How do you follow your home visiting model, use your curriculum and keep the focus on the parent-child relationship?

- Observe and listen!
- Ask questions more than you give information.
- Be curious.
- Be present.
- When you find yourself telling a family what to do, slow down and check in with yourself. Ask yourself what is motivating me to move into teaching mode at this moment?
- Take note of when you begin to feel overwhelmed. Why am I rushing into problem solving? What is my desire to “fix it” about?
- Check in to see if you think this family/parent is feeling cared for by you. How would they know that you care?
- How would they know that this home visiting program is focusing on the parent-child relationship? Do they know…?

Building relationships with families takes time and it’s important to, whenever possible, slow down. Each family is unique and each relationship is different and it is valuable to reflect, on a regular basis (with your supervisor, colleagues and on your own), about our own agenda/lesson superseding the family’s desires, wishes, goals.

In the Circle of Security™, in relation to the parent and child, they say “whenever possible, follow the child’s need.” Can’t the same be true for our work with parents? Whenever possible, follow the parent’s need….

And when feeling overwhelmed, confused and/or lost, always remember to ask yourself “where is the baby”?
Talking points for supervisors

- In what ways can you support your staff in their skills of observation and listening?
- During staff meetings, what would it be like to have conversations about how to use your curriculum to support your work instead of guiding your work?
- As a team, discuss how you present your home visiting program to families as one that supports the parent-child relationship.
- When parents are talking to home visitors, what are the ports of entry that can bring the focus back to the baby?