



Withholding Judgement

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NMAIMH competencies addressed

Theoretical Foundations

- Infant/very young child and family-centered practice

Working with Others

- Building & maintaining relationships
- Collaborating
- Empathy & compassion

Reflection

- Contemplation
- Self-awareness

How many times in a given day do we find ourselves engaged in judgmental thinking? We pull into the line at the drive-up window at Starbucks and find that things are moving slowly. “Why does every order have to turn into a lengthy conversation?” Our 10-year-old comes home from school on Friday and announces that his science project is due on Monday. “Why can’t these teachers give us a little bit more warning about these things?” We are trying out a new restaurant and feel we have been waiting an unreasonable amount of time for our food to arrive. “This is the last time I come to this place, they must have had to send a runner all the way to Hatch for the green chile!” Judgment is what we sometimes do when the world, or a person, does not meet our expectations.

So what role does judgment play in home visiting? A foundational element of the New Mexico Home Visiting Program has to do with a focus on relationships. Section 3.1 of the New Mexico Home Visiting Program Standards reads:

“Program procedures and practices ensure that home visitors are trained and supported to view relationships as the focus of the work...”

As we saw in the examples above, involvement with other humans sometimes provokes judgement. A home visitor enters a family’s home and finds it hard to hold a conversation with a parent while the TV is on in the background. A home visitor arrives

at a family's home for a scheduled visit and no one is answering the door. A home visitor wonders how long it will take for a mom to go over and comfort her two-year-old who is crying because she wants a snack. Chances are each of these situations could elicit some degree of judgement. Judgmental thoughts often enter our heads unbidden. What we do after those thoughts appear is where choice comes in. And as section 3.1 reminds us above, relationships are a focus of our work, and our choices should be made with this in mind.

A few years ago I attended a presentation by Sherryl Scott Heller, co-editor of the book, "A Practical Guide to Reflective Supervision." What she shared about judgment and the role it plays in early childhood services was a real "ah-ha" moment for me. She said we should not expect people to be non-judgmental. Judgment is part of the human experience and it is to be expected. Instead, we should ask service providers to *withhold* judgement. The difference that she is making is that it might be unreasonable to expect people not to have judgmental thoughts, but instead we should ask service providers not to turn those judgmental thoughts into judgmental statements or actions. "You really shouldn't have the TV on all the time." "It was really inconsiderate of you to miss our scheduled appointment." "It's important to respond to your child's needs."

I don't imagine that any of our home visitors would respond like this to a parent, but the examples do point out the need to use reflection *in action*, and recognize judgmental thoughts, which often lead to powerful feelings, and refrain from responding reflexively. Judgmental statements can negatively impact the collaborative, supportive relationships that we work so hard to develop with parents and caregivers.

This is not to say that we never address issues that incite judgement in us. As Deborah Harris has said, we can turn our emotional activation (resulting from our judgmental thoughts) into exploration. Rather than leading with a judgmental statement, we withhold judgment, give the other person the benefit of the doubt, and ask a question in order to get more information and a better understanding of their perspective. We really do not know why that parent has the TV on while we are there for a home visit. We can't assume it is always on. We don't know why the parent was not home when we showed up for the last scheduled visit. Maybe the father was feeling anxious about the visit because the visitor was scheduled to do an ASQ and he was worried his child might have a developmental delay. And we really don't know why the mom was not responding to her crying child. It could be that she is dealing with undiagnosed depression and does not have the energy or emotional reserves to respond.

In order to preserve quality relationships, it helps if we challenge our assumptions and slow down the process when we are presented with what we perceive to be a questionable situation. Remaining open and curious and asking questions, rather than reacting with a judgmental statement, is an important part of what focusing on relationships is about.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection...

- You might be very good at withholding judgment when working with parents. But how about in other relationships within the work setting? Relationships with the staff that you supervise? Relationships with your supervisor? Relationships with colleagues or other service partners? When we think about relationship-based work, all of these relationships should also be part of our focus.
 - Choose a day of the week to focus on judgmental thoughts and make a brief note each time you notice a judgmental thought. At the end of the day think about how your behavior and feelings were affected as a result of these thoughts.
 - As you think about each family on your caseload, notice if you have more judgmental thoughts about some families compared to others. Why do you think certain families bring up more judgment for you?
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References/Additional Resources

Gilkerson, L. (2009). *A Practical Guide To Reflective Supervision* (S. S. Heller, Ed.). Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.

CYFD New Mexico home visiting program standards. (2016, October). (n.p.). Retrieved from https://cyfd.org/docs/Home_Visiting_Level_I_and_Level_II_Program_Standards_Updated_10-2016.pdf