The Relationship-based, Reflection Advantage
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Theoretical Foundations
- Infant/very young child and family-centered practice
Direct Service Skills
- Observation & listening
Working With Others
- Building & maintaining relationships
- Collaborating
- Empathy & compassion
Reflection
- Contemplation
- Self-awareness

In our society we all depend on service providers to support and assist us as we move through our lives. These service providers can include doctors, lawyers, dentists, plumbers, even “the cable guy.” Each one brings with them their respective technical skills, knowledge and expertise on which we rely to help us with our particular needs.

As service providers working within the New Mexico Home Visiting Program, we also bring our respective technical skills, knowledge and expertise to the families that we support. The type of service we provide within the New Mexico Home Visiting Program approach calls for expertise in many areas, with expertise in interpersonal skills and building relationships being foundational to all of our work. Our relationship-based approach requires us to use our interpersonal skills to build and maintain collaborative and respectful relationships with families. In addition, we also come prepared with knowledge in other areas such as child development, attachment, parent-child relationships and interactions, and community resources.

But our approach is not as the expert that simply imparts knowledge in a didactic fashion. It is as a partner that recognizes “mutual competence” between themselves and the caregivers; that each brings important knowledge and expertise to the collaborative process. Deborah Weatherston, PhD, the Executive Director of the
Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health once said in a training presentation that it is not that we never share what we know, it’s that we do not lead with what we know. Instead, we lead with reflective questions that invite caregivers to tell us what they know about their infants and toddlers. In a society where the expectation is for a service provider to rush in and deliver their expert knowledge or fix something, this approach sets up an entirely different dynamic. By starting with reflective questions we set the stage for a collaborative partnership where both partners use their combined knowledge to explore, learn, and grow.

We offer reflective opportunities to caregivers so they can explore their feelings, thoughts, past experiences, and reactions, with respect to how each might impact their interactions and relationship with their child. Through this process they can learn and grow in ways that benefit that relationship. But we also participate in reflection ourselves as home visitors. This gives us an advantage as service providers in that it helps us protect our communication and interactions with caregivers, filtering out judgment and reactivity that can be a function of our own lenses, which in turn could potentially damage relationships. Ultimately, this benefits our relationship with families in that we become aware of what we bring to the table, and as a result, we can maintain clear boundaries with them. Because of our own reflective practice we can be present for them, meeting them where they are at, and in the process develop a collaborative relationship that respects who they are and what they know.

I believe this advantage pays off in other ways as well. When we are recognized as collaborators and partners, when we nurture the relationship through respect, interest and acceptance, when we demonstrate our engagement and our caring, we help develop bonds that families want to maintain. The attention and effort put into relationships translates into retaining families in your program, which in turn allows families to experience all of the benefits your program has to offer.

And finally, the benefits of “holding” families, following their cues, and trying to understand their perspective, are translated directly to their infants and toddlers through the Parallel Process. Experiencing these things through your relationship with them increases their ability to provide the same for their children.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- Consider a family that you feel particularly connected with.
  - How long did they remain in your program?
  - What were the specific things that you did to help build and maintain a supportive and collaborative relationship with that family?
  - Are the things that worked well also things that you can do with each family that you work with?
- Think about a family where you felt there wasn’t a strong connection.
  - How long did they remain in your program?
  - What were the challenges that impacted the connection?
Are there things you now do differently as a result of your experience with that family?

References/Additional Resources