Support for Families Experiencing Perinatal Depression
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Direct Service Skills
• observation and listening
• safety
Working with Others
• supporting others
• crisis management

“Home visitors are skilled at and trained for building warm and supportive relationships which help engage mothers with depression.” – The Urban Institute

“What do you need to get through today?” can be perhaps one of the most profound question home visitors can ask families. Parent responses can range from, “I just need to take a shower,” to, “I am worried that I might hurt myself or my baby.” When we encounter a “red flag” response, it can be common for many thoughts to run through our head simultaneously. Our minds can jump to, “Is this family safe? Did I miss something? How do I respond to this?”

Once we can be reasonably sure of family safety, we might begin to wonder about what we can do next. During the “Perinatal Depression” regional workshops, a tool-kit based on the materials from Family Connections (2012) was introduced. The questions are not meant to be used as a checklist. Rather, the questions can be used interchangeably with families based on their individual needs. It may be that one or two questions are all you need with a particular family that may result in a transformative conversation. Some of the questions from the tool-kit that home visitors can ask families are:

• What do you need to get through today? This week?
• Was there a time when you felt better?
• What do you remember about a time when you felt better?
• What would you like to look different for you?
• What do you think might help?
• Who do you know who might help?
• What are some things you have used in the past that have helped?
• How do you think your mood is affecting your parenting?
• What do you think this may be like for your child?

These questions were adapted from and are explored in detail in a free downloadable resource: https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/mental-health/adult-mental-health/FamilyConnection.html.

Family Connections addresses topics such as, “Parenting Through Tough Times,” “Building Resilience in You and Your Child,” “Understanding Depression Across Cultures,” and much more. Supporting parents and children whose families experience depression help us address our state’s home visiting Long-Term Outcomes, specifically, “Children are nurtured by their caregivers,” “Children are physically and mentally healthy,” and “Children and families are safe.”

One approach for working with families experiencing perinatal depression may be based on the idea that parents can be best reached by helping them be more effective parents with the awareness that depression can negatively affect parenting (Beardslee, 2003). Many New Mexico families with young children can often be in difficult situations, including poverty, exposure to violence and social isolation and depression may be common in such challenging situations. Asking for more information using a strengths-based approach can help develop the capacity of home visitors. Helping parents make meaning of their children’s behavior in response to family adversity can develop the capacity of parental perspective taking and ultimately may increase positive parent-child interactions.

Perinatal depression may prevent individuals from accessing the very resources that could provide some help and the tool-kit questions may be one strategy home visitors can use to provide support and resources using a strengths-based approach. Home visitors have the unique skills and opportunity to reach out, help and walk alongside families who experience perinatal depression using the above tool-kit.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- How can you engage staff and parents in exercises that challenge them to connect training themes with the real-life situations they encounter in their work and home?
- Develop monthly staff meetings with regular opportunities to talk about using the tool-kit ideas…what worked and why?
- What strategies can you use to enhance perspective taking that will support positive parent-child interactions?

References/Additional Resources

Brazelton Touchpoints Center [https://www.brazelontouchpoints.org/]

[https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/health/mental-health/adult-mental-health/FamilyConnection.html]
