Focus and Self Control
Joe DeBonis, MA, LPCC, IMH-E (IV)
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NMAIMH competencies addressed:
Direct Service Skills
- Observation & listening
Working with Others
- Building & maintaining relationships
Communicating
- Listening
Thinking
- Analyzing information
Reflection
- Contemplation

In Ellen Galinsky’s book, Mind in the Making, she discusses the “seven essential life skills every child needs.” Based on neurological, psychological and developmental research, Galinsky makes a strong case for promoting these life skills in young children in order to optimize success in school and in life. These life skills are essential beyond childhood; they are foundational for adult success as well, and their importance can be explored in our work as home visitors and supervisors.

The first of these skills has to do with focus and self-control. Galinsky states that focus and self-control may be just as important as I.Q. in predicting success in school. She sites research conducted by Jeanne Brooks-Gunn of Columbia University around the predictors of school success in math and reading. She found that those children at ages four and six who had three particular skills were more likely to do well in math and reading. The first two skills had to do with being good at math and reading when they started school. However, the third skill did not directly have to do with their math or reading abilities. The third predictor of success was attention skills. “Attention (skills) allow children to focus on something in a way that maximizes the information they get out of it.” In order to enhance learning a child must have self-control in order to focus on, and attend to, a learning task.

One can see a parallel in the recommended practices found in the reflective supervision process. Reflective supervision sessions are structured to encourage focus within the reflective supervision session. Having a regular, consistent meeting time for reflective supervision, where efforts are made to avoid interruptions, lays the foundation for a focused reflective process. Deconstructing examples from the work through the
reflective supervision process provides a structured learning opportunity that leads to professional growth and development. In this way, the reflective supervision structure supports and promotes focus and self-control within the supervisee during reflective supervision.

Another skill that influences focus and self-control is inhibitory control. Inhibitory control can be thought of as the ability to override competing impulses to stray from the task at hand or become distracted. Focusing involves the ability to remain on-task and preventing one's attention from drifting. As a component of one of the seven essential skills, inhibitory control plays an important role in our interactions with others. Effective listening involves attending to what someone is saying through eye contact, appropriate body language (ex. occasional head nods, positioning our bodies to face the other person), and attempting to understand the other person's perspective. In order to listen effectively we must also inhibit our desire to interject our thoughts, feelings or suggestions prematurely, which would effectively derail the other person rather than encourage them to continue. Inhibitory control helps us to be a good listener.

Inhibitory control is also a skill used by home visitors in the field. When faced with a situation that could lead to a reflexive, judgmental response, inhibitory control enables the home visitor to “slow down the process” by holding back any reflexive responses. Instead being reactive, the home visitor remains open and curious, listening, and asking questions to get a clearer understanding of the situation and the parents’ perspective.

Galinsky’s fourth essential life skill, “Making Connections”, describes how inhibitory control can also lead to openness to new ideas and possibilities, “finding unusual connections, often by being able to inhibit an automatic response, by reflecting, and by selecting something that is connected in a different way.” This describes the fundamental purpose of reflective supervision and reflective practice. In order to push passed our preconceived ideas and assumptions we must foster our ability to see other possibilities and make new connections. By remaining open and curious during our time with families, and then reflecting on what we have experienced, we embrace the possibility of making new connections and expanding our understanding.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- As a reflective supervisor what are some of the strategies that you use to help yourself focus in a reflective supervision session? What are some of the things you do to help a supervisee optimize their ability to focus in a reflective supervision session?

- As a reflective supervisor, in your last reflective supervision session can you recall when you used inhibitory control? What was happening in the session at the time? What were some of your initial thoughts and feelings?
References/Additional Resources
