What is Reflective Functioning?
How do we encourage and build reflective capacity?

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NMAIMH Competencies addressed
Reflection
- Regularly examines own thoughts, feelings, strengths, and growth areas; discusses issues, concerns, actions to take with supervisor, consultants or peers
- Remains open and curious
- Uses reflective practice throughout work with infants/young children and families to understand own emotional response to infant/family work and to recognize areas for professional and/or personal development

Theoretical Foundations
- Supports and reinforces each parent’s strengths, emerging parenting competencies, and positive parent-infant/young child interactions and relationships

Systems Expertise
- Actively listens; asks questions for clarification

Reflective functioning does not come naturally for everyone. For many, it is a skill that needs to be nurtured and developed. In our positions as reflective supervisors and home visitors we can encourage reflection in those we supervise and with families.

In keeping with the philosophy of a parallel process, we must begin by developing the capacity for reflection within ourselves as a first step in encouraging it in others. Rebecca Parlakian (2001) states “Reflection means stepping back from the immediate, intense experience of hands-on work and taking the time to wonder what the experience really means”. To wonder, in this context, means to not assume we already know. We bring to every experience our own set of preconceived notions based on our past experiences, relationships, family of origin, cultural background, and even where we were raised. To be willing to wonder about the experience before us, and remain open and curious to what it might mean, we need to inhibit our automatic reactions and responses, based on our preconceived ideas about the world. This is not to say that our ideas about the world and past experiences are without value in this process. Indeed, it will be our past experiences that we will
examine, in reflection, when the experience before us activates feelings within us. So as we experience a situation we need to not let our past experiences prevent us from understanding this present experience more deeply, simply because we look no further than our initial reaction.

The same is true when we are helping others build their reflective capacities. Instead of beginning by sharing what we know or think about a situation, instead, we start by asking the other person what they think and what they are feeling. Inquiry becomes the tool we use to encourage others to explore their experiences and reflect on why they might have reacted in a certain way. We help the other person move forward with our questions (and silently nurse our well bitten tongue). We try not to derail the other person’s process by interjecting our opinions, thoughts, and reactions. “When offered an ear instead of advice, parents’ own knowledge and capacity is reinforced” Parlakian (2001).

Another way we encourage reflection in others is to provide an environment that is safe. When we speak of safety in this situation we mean an environment free of judgment, criticism, or intolerance. In order to be willing to reflect, one must be willing to allow themselves to be vulnerable to a certain extent. This can be true for a home visitor with their supervisor, or a parent with a home visitor. Exploring our reactions, feelings, and thoughts in the presence of another can be threatening, or may leave us feeling over-exposed. For this reason, we must develop a relationship based on trust and respect in order to support reflection in others.

**An Idea To Try…**

The next time you are with a home visitor or a parent (if you are a home visitor), try to ask questions and listen for at least 10 minutes without making a statement or sharing an opinion. Afterwards, reflect on the rich and in-depth information you have gained. Compare your initial reactions to the perspective you have developed as the result of listening for 10 minutes. Are they the same or did your perspective change based on what you learned? What are some things you are glad you did not say initially? How hard was it to not share your opinion?

**References/Additional Resources**
