



Reflective Supervision:

A Tool for Relationship-Based EHS Services



Prepared by

Early Head Start National Resource Center @
ZERO TO THREE

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Ashante knocked on the door for the third time. She could see Nancy and Franklin peeking out from behind the window curtain. For the third week in a row, they were not going to let her in for her Early Head Start home visit. Ashante felt bewildered and a little angry at this repeated rejection.

Leticia was welcoming the babies and their families as they arrived for child care when a stricken-looking Matia arrived with her baby. Matia started sobbing when Leticia asked if she was all right. Over the next half hour, sitting together in the director's office, Matia told a heartbreaking story of how her mother had died the night before—only months after they had reunited. Matia's childhood had consisted of a series of foster homes, broken relationships, and abuse from the time she was 4 years old. Her story left Leticia with an overwhelming sense of despair.

Sam could hardly control his anger as Angela had several helpings of food at the socialization dinner while ignoring her son Charlie's clear cues of hunger. There was plenty of food for everyone, but Angela asserted that her little boy was not hungry.

The work of nurturing babies and supporting families always revolves around relationships: the relationships of the teacher or home visitor with the infant, toddler, and family, and the relationships within the family or within the staff. Baker and Manfred-Petitt (2004) wrote, "Relationship-based programs support the view that every interaction counts" (p. 10). They further described a "family model" of quality child care like the "loving web of relationships that surrounds a child in a well-functioning extended family ... a community of people who care about the child and about one another" (p. 13).

However, in the process of supporting families, program staff may find it difficult to form a relationship with a family. Sometimes staff hear painful stories of the parent's current or early experiences in relationships, whereas other times staff witness family members' behavior that may anger or distress them. In addition, long forgotten memories of one's own experience as an infant—being loved and cared for or being alone and unattended—may suddenly surface for a parent or a teacher. Watching a parent and child in an attuned, mutual interaction may warm the heart of a home visitor. Listening to a parent complain about how manipulative their two-month-old baby is may be chilling.

When adults care for infants and toddlers, strong feelings about vulnerability, dependence, closeness, and autonomy may emerge. Some programs use a process called *reflective supervision* to help teachers, home visitors, and family service workers learn from and manage their own feelings as they do this, sometimes, highly emotional work.

WHAT ARE RELATIONSHIP-BASED SERVICES FOR INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND FAMILIES IN EARLY HEAD START PROGRAMS?

The main purpose of Early Head Start (EHS) is to provide “family-centered services for low-income families with very young children designed to promote the development of the children, and to enable their parents to fulfill their roles as parents” (Head Start Act, 2007, Sec. 645A. [42 U.S.C. 9840A] (a)).

EHS and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start services emphasize the importance of relationships for infants and toddlers. Very young children use their relationships with adults to help them understand themselves and the world (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2004). Their most important relationships are with their families. Programs often develop systems that support these important relationships on all levels: family members, staff members, and the community.

In addition to the parent–child relationship, a nesting of relationships surrounds the EHS child. Figure 1 illustrates the circle of relationships that supports the child’s own healthy relationships. A supervisor provides a supportive environment, guidance, and reflective supervision sustaining staff members’ relationships with children, families, and each other. Staff members develop meaningful relationships with children and families while supporting the relationship between the families and their children. Staff members also provide knowledge and support to each other through their relationships.

The staff member creates a relationship with each infant or toddler and each family member. In center-based settings, the teacher spends her days providing the intimate care of feeding, diapering, calming, and talking and playing with infants and toddlers. At the beginning and end of every day, she finds opportunities to tell the family about her experiences with the child. In home-based programs, the home visitor combines

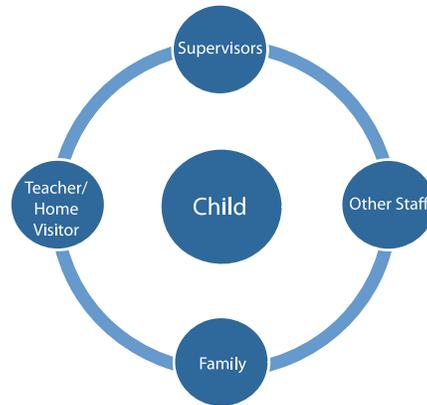


Figure 1. The Relationships That Surround The Child

planned experiences to promote child development with interactions more directly focused on the parent–child relationship. These interactions—like the sharing of a new accomplishment or a funny story—are usually pleasant and positive. However, this intimate work with infants, toddlers, and families can also put the staff member in the position of witnessing or hearing about painful and overwhelming events in the lives of families. As Leticia listened to Matia’s story of a lifetime of abuse and loss, she found Matia’s pain almost too much to bear.

Reflective supervision is a technique used to support staff in building and maintaining relationships. It provides an opportunity to explore the many emotions and experiences that occur in a relationship as they take place. A survey of EHS programs noted that 80 percent of EHS programs reported using reflective supervision with primary caregivers and home visitors. Two-thirds of those programs use outside training or assistance (Vogel et al. 2006). Leticia shares the experience of listening to Matia with her supervisor. Through the process of sharing and being listened to, Leticia feels that her own pain is somehow lessened. In time, they are able to think together about how devastated Matia is feeling and how her feelings may affect her relationship with her own child. What if the situation were further complicated by Leticia having recently lost her own mother?

What if Matia’s story overwhelms Leticia with her own feelings of sadness? A nesting of relationships, from the director or supervisor to the staff member to the family to the child, provides a circle of safety and acceptance within which each of the adults is able to explore and manage his or her own feelings with the support of caring relationships.

WHAT IS REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION?

“Reflective supervision is a relationship for learning.” (Fenichel 1992; Shahmoon Shanok 2007)

“The process of examining, with someone else, the thoughts, feelings, actions, and reactions evoked in the course of working closely with young children and their families” (Eggebeer, Mann, and Seibel 2008).

Reflective supervision is a tool for relationship-based services. Supervisors use reflective supervision to help staff think about, understand, and put in perspective the information shared by families, the emotions experienced from that sharing, and the feelings generated from their own life experiences. It is very different from the traditional supervisory relationship. It provides opportunities for the following:

- Understanding the personal experiences and cultural beliefs brought by each family.
- Understanding the beliefs and experiences the staff member is bringing to interactions with children and families.
- Using new knowledge from these understandings to increase skills in working with children and families through a shared partnership with the supervisor.

In reflective supervision, the supervisor meets regularly with the teacher, home visitor, or family

service worker, referred to as “staff member” hereafter. The staff member recounts an experience she had with a child or family member. It may be a distressing event or a joyous one.

The goal of reflection is to help the staff member think about the experience of the child and family—and for the supervisor to understand the experience of the staff member, the child, and the family. This understanding can lead to strategies that deepen and strengthen the relationships of everyone involved. The process is one of wondering together about what history, feelings, and expectations each person might bring to the event. If new understandings or strategies are found, they are found through mutual exploration. It is not the supervisor’s job to provide solutions to problems. The shared respect between the supervisor and the staff member creates a space where they can, hopefully, find alternative possibilities together.

In this way, reflective supervision sets a model for how the staff member would most effectively work with children and families. Jeree Pawl, a leading infant/parent psychologist, called this the platinum rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto others” (1995). As staff experience being heard and respected, they are prepared to offer that same ear and respect to families.

Parallel Process

The idea that a new experience in relationships at any level could translate into changes in other relationships is called a “parallel process.” In relationship-based services, the term describes the way the positive effects of relationships can impact other relationships. For example, by calmly listening to Leticia, the supervisor is helping her manage her feelings as well as modeling how to be a supportive partner in a relationship. Leticia can bring this model to further conversations with Matia.

A New Model of Relationships

Many EHS families have a history of positive relationships that is evident in their ability to express fully their love and to support their children. Even so, as programs strive to serve families in greatest need, there is a determined effort to include families that struggle with issues that threaten healthy relationships such as mental illness, substance abuse, teen parenting, and histories of abusive or disrupted relationships.

One of the most effective tools EHS programs have in serving these families is presenting them with a new model of relationships. In presenting a new model of relationships, program staff work with the family members by (a) listening respectfully, (b) offering warmth and concern for their well-being, (c) giving empathy rather than blame, and (d) being consistent and responsible. The presentation of a different kind of relationship can be surprising to someone with a long history of being disappointed or hurt by other people.

By behaving within a relationship differently—and more compassionately—than what is expected, a staff member may help a family

member actually experience a different way of being with others that may translate into a more compassionate and responsive way of being with his or her own child. For example, Nancy and Franklin may have had a lifetime of being disappointed by people in relationships. Neither can let Ashante become important to them because they believe that people always leave you. By returning week after week, Ashante withstands their rejections and continues to demonstrate her interest in them. Even if Nancy and Franklin never open their door, they will have a new model of relationship in their minds that may help them be more available to their child. If they do open the door, the possibilities for better relationships are endless.

A LOOK AT REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION

Supervisors set the tone for reflection by the kind of questions they ask the staff member. In addition to engaging the staff member in reflection, the questions provide models that could also be used with families. Instead of questions that have “right or wrong” answers, the supervisor invites the staff member to “wonder” about the

MADISON COUNTY COMMUNITY ACTION PROGRAM EARLY HEAD START

The Madison County Early Head Start (EHS) program began 12 years ago as a Healthy Families America program with a mandate and training for reflective supervision. Reflective supervision was then included as part of the EHS model when the program was awarded a grant in 2001. The program's policies and procedures state that every employee is entitled to ongoing supervision. Every home visitor gets 90 minutes of reflective supervision each week; the rest of her schedule is arranged around supervision. The program staff has also developed systems for streamlining and tracking paperwork to ensure that it is completed in less time-consuming ways. Supervisors receive training in strengths-based, supportive reflective supervision. The supervisors also meet monthly with a mental health consultant for reflective supervision.

Madison County EHS program supervisors are committed to working with families and staff over time. For example, when a home visitor expressed doubts about her ability to help a mother who was hostile to her visit after visit, the supervisor pointed out that the parent calls her every time she moves and always opens the door to her. Another home visitor expressed frustration over her inability to get a mother to focus on her child's experiences. For months of visits, the home visitor heard stories about the mother's own troubled childhood. Her supervisor supported her maintaining the visits by saying, “If we can't support the mother's needs, how can we meet the child's needs?” Then, one day, the mother asked, “What can we do with Jamie today?” From that point on, the visits included more of a child development focus.

events or interactions she is describing. Invitations to share information are open-ended. They might include the following:

- Tell me what happened ...
- How did you feel when ...
- What was the baby doing while this happened ...
- What did you say? What would you like to say, if he/she were here right now?
- If you could wave a magic wand and change things, what would be different?
- What could you do differently, if anything, to change how this relationship is going?
- It sounds like you were ...
- I wonder ...
- What do you think was successful?

For example, Sam might bring his distress about the socialization dinner to his supervisor during a reflective supervision session.

Supervisor: Tell me what happened.

Sam: It was unbelievable. Angela kept filling her plate and eating. She had at least three servings. That was fine, but Charlie was really hungry. She gave him a cracker but never really gave him dinner.

Supervisor: What was that like for you?

Sam: I was so uncomfortable and mad. She just ignored him. I didn't know what to do.

Supervisor: What did you do?

Sam: At first I said, "Angela, how about Charlie's dinner?" She said he wasn't hungry. But he was! He was reaching for the food on the table and signing "eat." After awhile I said, "You're pretty busy, how about if I feed Charlie?" but she insisted he wasn't hungry. I said, "I think

he's reaching for the food. And he's making the sign for eating. Maybe I could just offer him a little bit and see if he wants it." Angela just snapped at me then. She said, "I'm his mother and I will feed him when I decide to." I was so embarrassed. The families were all looking at us. I just didn't know what to do."

Supervisor: It sounds very upsetting—on many levels. You were worried about Charlie. You tried to change the situation but couldn't figure out how. You were angry and embarrassed. You wondered what the other families thought about you. It sounds like a tough place to be.

Sam: I don't get it. Normally I would have put a few finger foods together and given them to Angela to give to Charlie. I would have found some way to give him food without getting Angela so mad. But I was mad. I couldn't stand her ignoring him.

Supervisor: She was ignoring you too.

In this brief interaction, the supervisor opens the conversation by asking for a brief description of what happened. As she listens to Sam, she reflects on her own experience. Sam is sharing so much, it is difficult for her to know where to focus or how to respond. She recognizes that this is an example of the parallel process; her experience in this moment mirrors how Sam felt at the socialization dinner. She lists the many moments of concern she heard. Her response is empathic, and Sam does not feel criticized. He feels understood. This gives Sam a moment of comfort in which he begins to wonder about his own reaction. Why did he feel so powerless with Angela?

Sam and his supervisor explore ways in which Sam's experience seemed similar to Charlie's. Angela didn't seem to acknowledge either of them. The supervisor asked if this interaction was typical for Angela and Charlie. Sam thought for a moment before responding.

Sam: Yes and no. I think Angela is not very aware of him, of what he wants. But Charlie is usually quiet, kind of passive. I've never seen him trying so hard to let her know what he wants.

Supervisor: So Charlie changed the situation for you?

Sam: Yes. I've always been concerned about their relationship. Charlie is so quiet. It made sense to me that Angela missed his signals. I've been trying to help her understand him, but Charlie didn't seem to care. Last night he was trying so hard. I just felt his frustration and all the frustration I've been feeling all these months of her ignoring me too. She doesn't seem to see the people around her.

Supervisor: Maybe that's why Charlie is so quiet. How do you think Angela felt during dinner last night?

As Sam becomes calm, he is able to reflect on the events of last night in the context of what he knows about Charlie and Angela from many months of working together. He is able to move

past his own strong feelings and wonder how Angela felt at the dinner and how Angela feels all the time when she is with Charlie. Maybe it is difficult for Angela to meet her own needs. Maybe she cannot meet Charlie's needs until she can feel satisfied.

Sam: So, how can I help Angela feel cared for the way we want her to care for Charlie?

Supervisor: Let's consider some ideas and make a plan for how we can help meet Angela's needs and help her meet Charlie's needs.

WHAT ARE THE NECESSARY ELEMENTS OF REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION?

Reflective supervision must occur consistently, frequently, and over a period of time (Shahmoon Shanok 2007). The supervisor and staff member need to embody a working partnership, using the skill of reflection, with the goal of improving and deepening the relationships that surround an infant or toddler. Finally, the supervisor and staff member appreciate the uniqueness of each

EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE EARLY HEAD START

The Educational Alliance Early Head Start (EHS) education coordinator provides reflective supervision to each of the four lead teachers from 8:00 a.m. to 8:45 a.m., every other week. She meets with each teaching team every other week as well. The teachers work from 8:00 a.m. to 4 p.m. The children attend the program from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.

The education coordinator trained at Bank Street College, an institution known for reflective practice. She has had additional training with several experts in the field. Through reflective supervision, the education coordinator has helped teachers develop empathy for teen parents and create new strategies for helping aggressive children. Sometimes the conversations have more of a mental health emphasis, exploring how a teacher's own history might make her more sensitive to certain issues. Most of the time, however, the focus is on the classroom, helping the teacher reflect on what is—or is not—working.

The center-based program faces some challenges in providing reflective supervision. Because the program has cubicles instead of offices, finding places for private conversations is difficult. Beginning at 8:30 a.m., the teachers must keep an eye on ratios in the classrooms and may need to cut the supervision short. After describing highly emotional, ongoing work with a teacher, the education coordinator reflected on why she sometimes enters into highly charged territory.

Why would I allow it to happen if I can't contain it? Because it's there. It's like having parents stop and say goodbye to their baby. He's going to be sad and cry whether the mom says goodbye or sneaks out. The feelings are there. We need to show that we can tolerate and manage strong feelings.

situation, of each person's experience, in their consideration of an event. There is never an assumption of one "right" way to address every situation.

The supervisor must be able to protect this reflective supervision time from interruptions. The supervision is scheduled into the work of the staff member. As situations arise that confuse, trouble, or delight the staff member, she knows she will have time and support for understanding their meaning. The consistent availability of the supervisor is then paralleled in the staff member's availability to the child and family. A private space where the conversation will not be overheard is essential (Eggbeer et al., 2008). Information shared by families must be kept confidential between the staff member and the supervisor.

The Attitude of Reflective Supervision

It is impossible to forget that an administrator has more power than a staff member in supervision. However, in reflective supervision, that power difference is set aside while two adults struggle together to understand the meaning of an event to the people involved. No one enters the meeting with solutions to the problems. The process is one of respectfully, mutually exploring an event.

Supervisor and staff members may each share their emotional responses as well as their reflections. Any reaction is seen as information about the event. Each event offers opportunities for learning about the staff member's, family's, or child's experience. The staff member will not be punished for having made a poor decision within the reported interaction. Instead, she may develop new strategies or identify new resources for her work.

One warning applies here. If the staff member describes an activity on her part that is illegal or against the rules of the program, the supervisor will have to take action. For example, if the staff

member admits that she skipped some home visits and took a nap in her car, the supervisor would have to take disciplinary steps. Similarly, staff members are required to take steps to report child abuse and neglect. Families are routinely advised of this one exception to confidentiality during enrollment processes. Staff members should be aware of exceptions, as well, in the beginning of reflective supervision.

The Uniqueness of Each Situation

In many ways, the traditional study of child development has been a study of what is the same about children; that is, the predictable stages and order of development. Development is assessed by comparing the development of one child to the standardized accomplishments of thousands of children the same age.

Reflective supervision helps the program provide truly individualized planning, taking into account child development information. However, it also asks the staff member to appreciate that each event is occurring in the life of this particular child and family. Reflective supervision has a meaning to them that is theirs alone. For example, after Sam and his supervisor talked about Sam's feelings during the socialization dinner and how to meet Angela's needs, they might have turned back to the child development aspect of the situation.

Supervisor: Tell me a little about how Charlie is with food.

Sam: He's not a big eater. He likes to hold a spoon and eats some finger foods. Mostly he sits and waits for the next spoonful.

Supervisor: At ten months, we'd like to see him doing a fair amount of self-feeding. What do you think about approaching this as something we'd be helping him learn now? How do you think Angela would feel

if you introduced the idea of helping Charlie to learn some self-feeding skills?

Sam: Angela does want to support his learning. She likes seeing him get more independent. I think that could help Charlie feel like he can help himself and maybe Angela wouldn't feel like he's taking something away from her. I'd like to try.

COMMON THEMES IN REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION

In addition to the themes of *new models of relationships* and *parallel process*, there are several ideas that often appear in reflective supervision. These ideas include (a) *containment*, (b) *holding in another's mind*, (c) *not having control*, and (d) *using one's inner experience to understand another's experience*. These are not traditional concepts for early childhood development staff.

Containment

Experiencing strong emotions can be upsetting. Some supervisors worry about unleashing a staff member's strong feelings of anger at a parent or deep feelings of sadness or loss. In fact, reflective supervision provides a relationship that helps to contain those feelings in a safe place. The supervisor is able to hear the expression of strong feelings. Her calm presence can make those feelings less frightening. When the supervisor is able to provide insight, she helps the staff member see how these feelings may provide clues to the experience of the child or the family. The staff member is not left wallowing in these strong feelings. She is able to use these feelings to guide her thinking.

In turn, in a parallel process, the staff member will be better able to witness the strong feelings of families and children. She can help the family experience these feelings without becoming overwhelmed. The staff member does not provide psychotherapy in this instance. She provides her calm, reassuring presence. By not becoming

overwhelmed by the emotional outburst, she helps the family and children contain the feelings of loss, helplessness, or anger and make them less frightening.

Holding In Another's Mind

Another powerful experience of reflective supervision occurs when the supervisor remembers and recalls the staff member's feelings, thoughts, and experiences. Jeree Pawl called this concept of being remembered by another, "Being held in another's mind" (Pawl 1995). Having someone hold you in their mind is a vital point of connection between human beings. As the staff member experiences being held in another's mind over time, she will feel increased trust in the relationship. She will feel important to the supervisor. In turn, she will provide the experience of being held in another's mind to the child and family. How lovely for a baby to be greeted on Monday morning by a teacher who says, "Hey, Mikey! I missed you!" And for the father to be asked, "How was your softball game?" following up on a conversation they had on Friday. It is comforting, and perhaps validating, to be remembered by another person—to know you are being thought of even when you are not together.

Control

Relationships can be a complex business. There are so many meanings, so many feelings, and so many surprises. Supervisors and staff members who want to provide immediate solutions or want to fix a situation may find relationship-based services challenging. In reflective supervision, the supervisor accepts that she does not have the answers. She will not control the flow of thought or conversation. She will also not control the actions of the staff members.

In turn, the staff member understands that family members make their own decisions about their feelings and actions. Staff members may be very

STARPOINT EARLY HEAD START

Throughout its EHS and Family Center, Starpoint utilizes reflective supervision for its supervisors and is re-instituting these supervisory practices in its child care program following a reorganization of program staff. Other needs, such as CDA training and creating professional development plans, take provider time.

Starpoint's education coordinator credits reflective supervision with better staff retention. The programs offering consistent reflective supervision have the lowest turnover. "It gives people the opportunity to work through problems before they get big."

helpful to families, but they do not control the family member's decisions. Accepting one's lack of control over another person's actions can be very difficult when their decisions seem like poor choices. Reflective supervision provides opportunities to explore and accept the limits of one's control over any situation.

Using One's Inner Experience

Child development has traditionally promoted a scientific, objective observation of children. Early childhood teachers are taught not to interpret a child's intentions but to simply record what can be directly observed. Reflective supervisors, drawing on a mental health background, ask early childhood staff members to pay attention to their own experiences in the moment as a way of understanding the experiences of others. For example:

- If Ashante feels rejected by Nancy and Franklin, does their baby also feel as though he is being held at arm's length, with them refusing to let him into their lives? Do Nancy and Franklin have a history of relationships in which they were each rejected?
- If Leticia was overwhelmed by Matia's grief, does Matia's baby also feel frightened and overwhelmed by her mother's sadness? How is Matia dealing with this enormous loss?

Can she experience the loss of her mother and still be emotionally available to her baby?

- If Sam feels like Angela is ignoring him, does Charlie also feel as though he cannot be heard by his mother? Does Angela ever feel as though anyone hears her or does she feel as though she must fight for everything she needs?

What does reflecting on her own feelings tell the staff member about the child's or the family member's feelings? By experiencing and examining her own feelings, the staff member may find important clues to how the family or child is reacting to events.

CHALLENGES TO PROVIDING REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION

EHS programs identify a number of difficulties in implementing reflective supervision: These include (a) scheduling and protecting time, (b) the skills and training needed to conduct and participate in reflective work, (c) concerns about professional boundaries between providing supervision and psychotherapy, and (d) conflicts with other supervisory responsibilities.

Scheduling and Protecting Time

Scheduling weekly, every other week, or even monthly meetings for every staff member requires a huge time commitment from supervisors and significant efforts to provide qualified coverage. This important element of reflective supervision is often the most challenging for center-based programs. These programs must maintain required ratios of teachers to children at all times. Because infants and toddlers nap as they need to, it is rare that all of the children would be napping at the same time.

Some center-based programs offer six or seven hours of care a day and can schedule supervision before or after the children are there. Whereas

other programs schedule a regular substitute teacher to cover supervision sessions. Home visiting programs are usually able to schedule supervision within the regular work week.

Skills and Training

EHS directors or supervisors may wonder if they need special skills and training to provide reflective supervision. They may also wonder whether the staff members have the skills of reflection.

As the old saying goes, there is nothing like experience! It may be possible to find a colleague such as another director or supervisor, a college teacher, or a mental health professional who could provide reflective supervision to the director or supervisor. They might discuss general issues of working with staff and families, the director's or supervisor's own experiences in offering reflective supervision, and "specific supervisory dilemmas that come up" (Shahmoon Shanok 2007). Some professional organizations offer workshops on reflective supervision at national conferences. In addition, a number of resources listed at the end of this article will be helpful for a director or supervisor who wants to deepen her understanding of reflective supervision.

Staff members can be given opportunities to practice reflection as well. Part of each group staff meeting could be used to review and reflect on an article or even a videotape clip. Or perhaps the group could reflect on what they have learned about—or from—the children in the last week. Each of these activities demonstrates the values of being a continuous learner and learning within a group while deemphasizing the value of "having all the answers."

It may be helpful for a supervisor to think about the ability to reflect as developing in stages as described by King and Kitchener (1994), who

proposed that when people are in a particular situation and are unsure about how to proceed, they respond according to their ability to reflect in their thinking. The authors described three stages of reflective thinking: (a) prereflective thinking, (b) quasi-reflective thinking, and (c) reflective thinking. If a staff member is in one of the stages of prereflective or quasi-reflective thinking, the supervisor can structure the sessions to further that person's development with the suggestions that follow.

Prereflective Thinking

Facts and opinions are of equal value in making decisions, as in the statement, "I know what I have seen." Experts are sources of truth, as in the assertion, "If it is on the news, it has to be true." Or, absolute solutions may exist but are not immediately evident. In the meantime, personal beliefs are just as valid, as in the conclusion, "I don't have evidence but based on my experience as a home visitor I know Nancy and Franklin are hiding something illegal, like drugs. Otherwise they would let me in."

Listed below are learning strategies for prereflective thinking:

- Help the staff member recognize that there are legitimate differences of opinion about some topics. For example, "Maybe Nancy and Franklin are hiding something, but can you think of any other reason they might not open the door?"
- Acknowledge that decisions are more difficult to make when there are no right or wrong solutions. For example, "It is hard to know whether you should keep going to their home in the hopes it will be helpful to them after awhile, or if you should take on a new family that wants to participate. There are good reasons to do either one."

- Learn to use evidence to guide a decision. For example, “We have to consider what it means that they are always home, watching you at the door.”
- Learn that one’s own experience is one source of information but not the only source. For example, “I wonder if Nancy and Franklin are keeping up with well-child visits and WIC [Women, Infants, and Children].”

Quasi-reflective Thinking

There is an understanding that some situations are really problematic, and the available evidence does not present a clear direction for action, as in the assertion, “The evidence is conflicting. I will go with my ‘gut feeling.’” Evidence is then found to support one’s judgment about an issue, as in the statement, “I think Angela is selfish because she ate a lot of food but she didn’t feed Charlie.”

Listed below are learning strategies for quasi-reflective thinking:

- Ask the staff member what he saw or heard that makes him have that “gut feeling,” as in the question, “What was it you saw that made you think Angela was taking the food because of selfishness rather than another reason?”
- Look together for other interpretations of the evidence. Consider together how you can evaluate the facts of an event. For example, “Right now you’re thinking Angela was being selfish. Can we think of any other possible reasons for her behavior?”
- Understand that uncertainty is part of working with people and we need to accept that there may not be clear, simple answers. For example, “It’s hard to decide what to do support to Angela and Charlie’s relationships when we can’t really know why she doesn’t seem to see his hunger.”

Reflective Thinking

There is an understanding that while the absolute truth of a situation may never be known, some views may be more probable than others: “It is difficult to be sure why Angela isn’t feeding Charlie. We may never know. However, it is likely she has some strong needs herself.” Decisions are made through reasoning and considering different interpretations such as: “We’ve considered ways that Charlie contributes to the situation and possibilities for Angela’s actions, but we keep coming back to the idea that she has always had a hard time being heard and nourished.”

Listed below is a learning strategy for reflective thinking:

- Understand that one’s point of view can be legitimate but still be open to revision. For example, “I saw Angela as selfish, but I can see she has basic needs that have never been met. That would make it hard for her to hear Charlie’s needs.”

Maintaining Professional Boundaries

EHS program staff and supervisors sometimes struggle with establishing boundaries for their relationships with families. The work, which involves either visiting in the family’s home or sharing the care of the child, promotes the development of very close relationships among staff and families. It is common for EHS staff members to be from the community they serve, oftentimes having been served by the program themselves. One EHS program had a teacher who had originally been a parent in the program. She found it very upsetting to hear the staff discuss families in meetings. Although staff members were respectful in their comments, it had never occurred to her that the teachers might talk about the families. Reflective supervision helped her sort out her feelings about the staff members’ need to discuss in a professional context the families and share information.

Given the friendly nature of the work, it is not surprising that sometimes conversations may become very personal. To make it even more confusing, it is not always clear at what point a professional boundary is being crossed. For example, when Matia shared her story about her mother, it was painful for Leticia to hear. However, it was certainly fair for Matia to bring her grief to her daughter's teacher. On the other hand, it would not be appropriate for a home visitor to come into a family's home and complain about her own husband or mother-in-law.

Supervisors may be concerned that by focusing on the parent-child relationship, they risk implying that program staff should be doing the work of trained mental health professionals. Instead of analyzing the family member's own early experiences, the reflective supervisor can plan for how to help the parent understand the child developmentally and as an individual. Supervisors also worry about crossing similar boundaries between themselves and their staff in reflective supervision. Some supervisors are concerned that strong feelings of anger or sadness about the staff member's own life may emerge because of a situation with a family. Whereas others worry that conflicts will arise when staff members are released from the traditional top-down relationship between supervisors and employees and that it will be difficult to complete more ordinary administrative tasks.

One EHS home visitor worked with a mother who suffered from mental illness and who lost custody of each of her six children. Eighteen months after losing her last child to the foster care system, she contacted EHS and asked for the same home visitor to help her with her newborn seventh child. She was on medication, married, having overnight visits with her sixth child, and interested in learning about child development. Reflective supervision helped that home visitor stay available to this mother despite her own

anger and feelings of helplessness. In the long run, there were significant benefits for everyone.

In fact, supervisors and staff members have many facets to their relationships. Reflective supervision can provide another model of relationship—one that helps program staff to be more effective in serving families and managing their own feelings. A supervisor will understand this well if she is able to hire a mental health professional to provide reflective supervision to her. Exploring her own effectiveness in her job within a reflective relationship is the best training a supervisor can have for providing reflective supervision.

Conflict With Other Supervisory Responsibilities

EHS is a complex program. Supervisors tend to have many responsibilities including meetings, ongoing monitoring, documentation, staff development, and visits to sites that may be great distances from each other. A crisis with a family or in a facility can suddenly take the supervisor away from any planned activity. Simply arranging and protecting the needed time is very challenging for supervisors. One program that had well-established reflective supervision found that it was dependent on having a supervisor who was committed to it. When she left the program, her successor had other priorities, including establishing classes to ensure that each staff member had her CDA.

Supervisors also worry about doing the mutual work of reflective supervision and then being in a position of possibly having to assert authority over the same staff member. However, several EHS programs using reflective supervision report that there is greater staff member satisfaction and less turnover because people feel supported in solving problems while they are small.

SUMMARY

EHS programs support the child–family relationship through a nesting of many relationships involving the program staff and the child, the staff and the family, and relationships within the staff. Relationships can be complicated and a system that supports taking time to reflect on how different people relate to the child’s development—and to each other—can be very helpful. Reflective supervision uses the supervisory relationship as a way to respectfully understand the many relationships surrounding a child and to support everyone involved in the sometimes emotional work of EHS.

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