



A Circle of Support for Infants and Toddlers: Reflective Parenting and Strategies in Early Head Start

Introduction

Reflective supervision is a wonderful opportunity to strengthen the professional relationships that support parents, families and young children. Reflective supervision is characterized by active listening and thoughtful questioning by both supervisor and supervisee. It is not therapy, but rather an opportunity for the supervisor to assist and support the supervisee with hunches, questions, and challenges related to the work. Many Early Head Start (EHS) directors, supervisors and staff recognize reflective supervision in practice as an important aspect of overall programmatic support for those who provide direct services to very young children and their families. When EHS directors model and support reflective supervision in their programs, staff are likely to follow suit by participating. When EHS staff feel supported and able to do their jobs, even when those jobs are challenging, they are in the best position to encourage and support parents to reflect on their own parenting practices. In other words, *“How supervisors are with staff influences how staff will be with the families [and parents] they serve”* (Parlakian & Seibel, 2001, p. 3). This is the parallel process in action, or the platinum rule as first stated by Jeree Pawl (1995), “Do unto others as you would have others do unto others.”

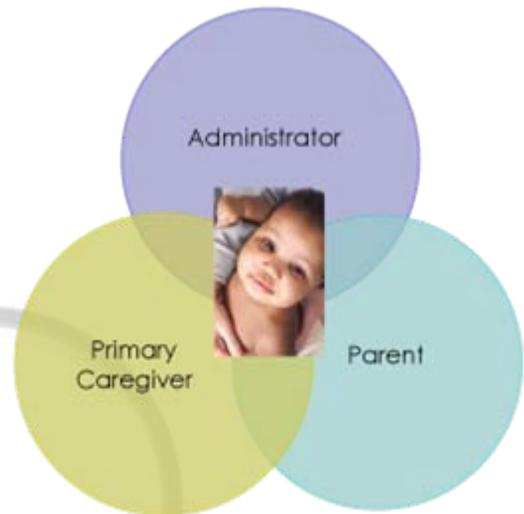
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What is the Circle of Support?

In EHS programs, reflective supervision and reflective parenting practice can also be thought of as the circle of support or the continuous relationships that allow caring for and supporting infants and toddlers to be the main focus. The circle of support means that the important adults in the infant's or toddler's life have developed and nurtured their own relationships with each other so that the child can be supported in all environments. For instance, through reflective supervision the administrator and director have a partnership that helps the director support her staff in their work with infants, toddlers and families. As a result of the director's support, the staff develops partnerships with parents in support of the children in care. The diagram below shows overlapping circles which illustrate the interconnectedness of relationships among administrators, parents and staff, with the young child at the center.

The concept of the circle of support sounds wonderful in theory, however, one of the greatest challenges for EHS programs is keeping the support alive as infants, toddlers and families actively move through the program. Another challenge is to balance the many other tasks of EHS program staff with reflective supervision for staff. Providing consistent everyday routines and transitions for very young children is a lot of work, and, many are challenged by figuring out where to fit reflective supervision into their already "packed" schedules.



Others may be struggling with how to model reflective supervision in their programs (e.g. How reflective practice looks?, and Where to start?). However, finding consistent and regular times for reflective supervision-- both formally (i.e. during prescheduled meetings with supervisees and/or peers) and informally (i.e. unplanned consultations with co-teachers or an EHS coordinator) – will go a long way in building program capacity and staff skill and self-awareness. In other words, EHS program staff that consistently use reflective strategies in their work are likely to encourage and support reflective practice in parents.



What is the Circle of Support? (cont.)



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An Example of Reflective Supervision in Practice

In the following vignette, Allyson, an EHS director, has just attended a training for directors where she learned about the connection between reflective supervision and reflective parenting practice. A reflective program with caregivers who model and participate in reflective supervision can influence parents to become more reflective in their relationships with very young children. Reflective parents have more insight into their children's behavior and the parent's responses to that behavior. Reflective parents can also develop multiple responses to support a desired behavior in their young child. Over time, reflective parenting practice can help strengthen the relationship between parents and very young children. Allyson begins her program year by providing reflective supervision for her management team. She models her expectations for the rest of the staff:

Allyson had been pushing her staff to talk with families about reflection, but she found that busy classroom staff weren't sure about how to do this - or even why. She vowed that this year would be different. She was going to find a way to use her training in reflective practice with her EHS team. She started the program year by providing regular reflective supervision to each member of her management team every other week. The management team, in turn, began providing reflective peer supervision for each other during the weeks they were not meeting with Allyson.

Julie, the center-based manager, scheduled a supervision session with Rena, a classroom teacher. They used the time to think about how to best support new parents to begin the process of reflecting on their own parenting strategies.

Rena began, "Last year I feel like I had good relationships with the parents, and they could really think about the different ways they parented their children, and how what we did at school and at home really supported the children. This year I have a few new parents that I'm finding it difficult to connect with. I try to share positive things with these parents about their children and ask them how things are going at home. The parents usually respond by saying, 'FINE'...with no more information. It's almost like they think I'm trying to get into their private family business."

"Hmm," Julie responds, "So you feel like these families see you as more of an 'intruder' than a partner?"

"It seems so," says Rena. "I mean, it seems obvious that I'm trying to connect with them to support their children...doesn't it...?"

Julie responds, "It may be obvious to you but your parents may be thinking something else."



An Example of Reflective Supervision in Practice (cont.)

She pauses. "You know, your question, 'How are things going at home?' could literally be taken any number of ways by your parents. It's a very open-ended question. I wonder if after you have shared your positive observations with the parents, you asked a more specific question about the child's progress at home."

"You mean something like, 'Your child learned 2 new words today. Has he been speaking more at home lately?'" asked Rena.

"Yes, exactly," said Julie. Then added, "You know, Rena...it's just the beginning of the year and some of your parents might still be adjusting to leaving their children with someone they just met."

"You're right, Julie," answered Rena. "I just know that when I'm able to work closely with parents the consistency at home and school is so much better for the child."

Julie offered, "It seems to me that if we want to encourage our new parents to begin the process of reflecting about their parenting practices with their children, we might want to facilitate a discussion about this early in the year."

"It's a great idea," said Rena. "Maybe we could ask Allyson or even one of the other managers to facilitate a discussion about reflective parenting practice at the upcoming parent meeting."

Julie chimed in, "And we could ask some of the other infant/toddler teachers who are comfortable to share how these parent partnerships have been helpful to them. I'll ask Allyson about the agenda for the first parent meeting and find out if there's time to put this topic on the agenda."

In fact, the topic of the EHS program's first parent meeting was Reflective Parenting Practices and Strategies in Early Head Start. A few weeks after this meeting, some of the new parents began sharing their parenting practices at home with Rena and some of the other infant/toddler teachers, thus strengthening the developing caregiver/parent bond. The caregivers appreciated the family expertise, and felt that they were in a better position to support the infants and toddlers in care. This is the circle of support in action.

Allyson began the program year with her staff embracing Reflective Supervision, and putting it into practice. Because her staff felt supported, they were able to develop meaningful, open relationships with parents. The benefits were two-fold:

- parents who developed a sense of trust and rapport with their young child's caregiver, were more likely to share their own parenting practices with their teachers; and
- parents were also in a better position to support their own children when they developed meaningful relationships with staff to whom they could consult.



Encouraging and Supporting Reflective Practice in Parents



As our vignette continues, Karyn, a parent who attended the recent parent meeting on **Reflective Parenting Practices...** approaches Rena about a new development in her daughter Lenore's behavior.

Karyn was determined to talk with Rena today about Lenore. She understood that new behaviors could sometimes "spring up" in young children overnight, but this seemed sudden. As Karyn approached Rena, who was speaking with another parent, Rena turned her way, smiled and said, "I've been meaning to talk with you about Lenore." Karyn thought, "Oh no. Rena's going to tell me I need to change something I'm doing with Lenore."

Rena turned to Karyn and said, "Whatever you've been doing with Lenore, please keep doing it!" Karyn was at first stunned, then relieved, then a bit confused. She expected Rena to tell her the exact opposite. Rena went on. "Lenore has so much energy and is interested in everything. She is learning so quickly that we can hardly keep up with her here in the center."

Karyn jumped in, "But that's just it. I can't keep up with her now either. She's getting into everything and I feel like I'm saying 'no, no, no' to her more now than ever. I just want my quiet little baby girl back." Rena smiled reassuringly and acknowledged that while Lenore's progress did seem to happen overnight, her curiosity had been growing for some time.

She also shared with Karyn that, " 'No' is the often one of the first responses of many parents when their young children's behavior tests the limits. Our job is to create ways to support and encourage Lenore's natural curiosity while keeping her safe."

Rena brainstormed with Karyn about how she could support Lenore's new behavior and curiosity at home. Rena added, "We have been able to support Lenore's new found interests in the classroom by introducing a few new items each week. Rena then asked Karyn about what Lenore liked to do at home. She encouraged Karyn to continue using a variety of toys, books and other items with her daughter. Rena also suggested that Karyn could begin borrowing age-appropriate toys and books from the program's toy and book library to supplement what she already had at home.



Encouraging and Supporting Reflective Practice in Parents (cont.)

Parents – the first teachers of their children – do not always have the support or experience to reflect on their own parenting practices and strategies. However, supporting reflection skills in parents through the circle of support and staff-parent partnerships will ultimately benefit the infants and toddlers in care. Parlakian (2001) outlines ways that staff can model reflective practice in their relationships with parents:

- **Ask parents open-ended questions.**

This helps caregivers learn more about the children in their care, and gives parents time to reflect on their reactions to their young children. Sharing information, like developmental stages, and talking about the meaning of infant and toddler behavior can help parents determine whether or not their parental responses support or stifle their child's development. Rena brainstormed with Karyn about ways to support Lenore's home environment and then asked questions for understanding (e.g. "Tell me what happens at home?").

- **Encourage parents to ask "I Wonder Questions."**

This helps parents actively strengthen the skills of asking questions, wondering and brainstorming about their child's development and behavior. Using questions such as, "I wonder what my child would like to explore?", or, "I wonder what my child likes to play with the most?" can help parents develop the skill of reflective practice.

Rena suggested developmentally appropriate items that Karyn could have around her home to facilitate Lenore's newfound curiosity and encouraged Karyn to borrow a few items to help get started. Now, Karyn will look at items for Lenore with an "eye" for what would feed her curiosity. Sometimes all parents need is a gentle "nudge" to help develop their reflection skills.

- **Emphasize and/or model the infant's or parent's perspective.**

This helps parents strengthen their ability to read their infant's or toddler's cues. "Talking through the baby" is one way that caregivers can help parents become more in tune with their children. Rena might say to Karyn in Lenore's 'voice,' "Mommy, I'm so excited about all of these new things I'm learning. It's fun for me. I'm learning about limits. I'm learning what is o.k. to touch and what is not o.k. I want to explore everything." Taking on Lenore's perspective can help Karyn reframe her experiences with and responses to her daughter's new found curiosity for learning.



Strategies for Keeping the Circle of Support Alive/ Quick Tips for Staff

Allyson remembers the last program year, when staff were often coming to her frustrated; blaming families for not supporting caregiver's strategies at the center, and criticizing other staff for not following through on tasks and basic center responsibilities. She spent a lot of time dealing with staff conflict and recognized that staff often shared little with parents when they arrived at days end to pick up their children. When Allyson's staff began participating in regular reflective practice in the beginning of this year, they criticized each other less and began working together more. They appeared less frustrated at the end of the day and often talked with parents about how the day went with their children.

Staff were not taking the time to brainstorm and, reflect with each other, or share ideas and explore possibilities with parents. Rena found herself at times giving concrete advice rather than asking parents questions to help them explore their own feelings and experiences. Staff began working alone with little reflection or input from others and parents did not seem to share as much as in the beginning of the year. Allyson frequently asked herself, "How do I model reflective practice when I am constantly reacting and responding to requests from my staff, my parents and our delegate agency? Well, she mused, next month will be different."

As the year moves quickly, Allyson and her staff begin to feel the challenge of balancing reflective practice, and sustaining the relationships that developed as a result of the Circle of Support with all of the other responsibilities of the EHS program.

After the first five months, canceled appointments with supervisors became more frequent and Allyson noticed a change in the practice of the staff. By midyear, reflective practice had all but ended. Allyson's missed supervision meetings with her managers caused a ripple effect throughout the program. The managers stopped meeting regularly for peer supervision and with classroom teachers and caregivers. Allyson's staff began feeling like reflective supervision was less important than attending to all of the other tasks and challenges of operating their program.



Strategies for Keeping the Circle of Support Alive/ Quick Tips for Staff

(cont.)

Maintaining reflective supervision and practice is a common challenge of many EHS programs when other tasks and responsibilities seem to begin to take precedence. Strategies and issues to consider in order to overcome a break down in reflective practice are as follows:

- Think of reflective supervision in practice as a regular component of your EHS program. When reflective practice is considered an extra task, it will not be consistent. Sometimes it will happen, and sometimes it will not. As a regular and consistent part of your program, staff will make it a part of their regular schedule – even when all of the other responsibilities begin to feel overwhelming. This is actually a time when reflective practice is most needed.

- Build a partnership with each of the parents and families of the infants and toddlers in care. Once parents have formed a partnership with staff and experienced the circle of support in action, they will want to share their parenting experiences with staff and compare notes between home and school. When reflective practice is inconsistent, and staff are feeling overwhelmed, their ability and willingness to engage with parents could suffer.

- Understand the boundaries of reflective supervision. Reflective supervision is a way to think about yourself within the context of your work, and to consider, questions, ideas and thoughts related to your work with children and families. Therapy, on the other hand, is an opportunity for you to work on personal issues with a mental health professional.

- Get training as a way to support your ability to facilitate reflective supervision and model reflective practice in your EHS program. Think of it as a learning and growing opportunity for the whole program, and another chance to support parents, families and young children. The relationships within your program serve as a model for staff with parents, and parents and families with their own children.





Resources

- Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Services, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. 2000. *Early childhood mental health consultation*. Washington, DC: National Technical Assistance Center for Children's Mental Health, Georgetown University Child Development Center.
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- Weigand, R., and Weatherston, D. (Guest eds.) 2007. *Reflective supervision: What is it and why do it?* 28(2). Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.

Web-Based Resources

- Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC)—Head Start Bulletin, #73, *Reflective Supervision*, Jackie Pflieger <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/>