Family Engagement Basics
Resilience and Reflective Practice

Earlier we explored stress related to children and families. We touched on strategies for how to be aware and responsive. In this topic, we focus on strategies to promote and sustain our resilient engagement with families.

THE HEAD START PARENT, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Remember this framework? We are still focusing on family well-being and positive parent-child relationships, now through the lens of resilience nurtured and maintained through regular reflective practice. The capacity to be effective and persistent in work with families, especially families experiencing adversity, is intimately linked to your own well-being and continuous growth.

Working with children and families can feel overwhelming, especially when families experience poverty, racism, and other forms of adversity and systematic disadvantage. As social beings, we may “catch” and take on the distress of families. This is an occupational hazard.

Reflective practice is the “not-so-secret sauce” for staying sane and engaged. Many professionals find this is a key strategy for being effective, growing professionally, and maintaining balance while doing the hard-emotional work of engaging and being with families and children.

Recognizing signs of family stress helps you promote family well-being and positive parent-child relationships.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, REFLECTION, AND RESILIENCE

Research has shown that coupling direct experience with reflection makes for better learning, learning that is more likely to impact our future behavior and thoughts. Why is this?

We have learned from cross-disciplinary research that reflecting on experience in the field enables professionals to pause. This creates more opportunity for noticing and making sense of experience, either individually or in the company of a more experienced practitioner. This leads to increased self-awareness which, in turn, expands the possibilities for how we think, feel, behave, and relate to others. Direct experience can be leveraged by reflection, helping professionals to grow and to nurture their own resilience.

WHAT IS REFLECTION?

We all reflect in the course of daily life, telling ourselves or sympathetic listeners the story of our day, often guided by a desire to ponder “how did things go?” especially in relation to our work, relationships, and goals.

Some people do this a lot and some people do it a little. Practicing reflection leads to doing it more. Many disciplines and professions capitalize on this desire to tell our story by creating structured approaches for reviewing and continuously improving the work we do with others.
RESILIENCE AND MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness: refined attention and non-evaluative awareness of one’s internal and external experiences. (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007)

Do you see the parallels between reflection and mindfulness? As you reflect on your work day can you bring attention to your actions and reactions without judgement? A study highlighting the link between mindfulness and resilience in the Journal of Personality and Individual Differences found that “Mindful people … can better cope with difficult thoughts and emotions without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down (emotionally).” Pausing and observing the mind may (help us) resist getting stuck in our story and as a result empower us to move forward.

Difficult emotions such as fear, anger or feeling uncertain how to respond to a child’s behavior are not the enemy. It is our reactivity toward these difficult emotions that can be most harmful.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Many disciplines and professions capitalize on this human desire to tell our story by creating structured approaches for reviewing and continuously improving the work we do with others. This kind of goal-directed reflection can increase awareness and effectiveness of teachers, social workers, nurses, physicians, and others in the helping professions.

Reflective practice requires taking a pause to tell the story, often with other trained practitioners, to support professional growth. It entails examining thoughts, feelings, histories, behaviors, and intentions in ourselves and others. Although it is not therapy, elements and concepts from therapy may be used to support the reflective process.

Reflective practice in early childhood fields is characterized by being open, curious, and nonjudgmental. This provides room to explore and observe things just as they are, kind of like a curious child: "I wonder what this is?” or “I wonder how that feels?”

Being open and uncertain can be challenging! We often feel responsible to know and be an expert.

Although reflective practice activities may go deep, they need not be complicated. Reflective practice encompasses different forms across the health and education fields. It may be done individually, in pairs, and/or in groups. Shared or collaborative reflective practice with a trained mentor can be especially effective at spurring professional growth.

THINK ABOUT IT: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE (RP)

Consider these questions for a few minutes.

• In what ways is RP similar or different from chatting with a colleague?

• What are the challenges to RP?

• How do you reflect on your practice now?
Reflecting takes some time. It's a little bit like a professional time out for teachers (or nurses, doctors, or therapists). Reflecting is work, but it is a different kind of work.

In your own work or field of practice, think for a moment about some of the things that may get in the way of doing this reflecting kind of work. Think about turning to a co-worker and asking: What might be challenges in setting aside time from your work life to reflect on work-related experiences?

Reflective practice activities may feel weird at first, especially to those used to doing as opposed to wondering. Slowing down to be reflective may feel awkward, slow, boring, pointless, and out of step with our times. It may feel self-indulgent. It is normal and okay to have these responses.

Possible challenges to reflective practice include:

- Time constraints
- Professional content versus personal content
- Lack of safety or level of comfort to not be the expert
- Not in job description
- We are paid to be experts, not reflectors
- Too much to do
- No one else values this at my work
- I don’t really understand what it is or how you do it yet

**REFLEXIVE REACTING VERSUS REFLECTIVE RESPONDING**

One big challenge to reflective responding is falling into the patterns we are used to. We all have these. They make us efficient.

*Reflexive reactions* are patterned ways of thinking and responding to situations. Our brains seek patterns that help us categorize, predict, and respond quickly to situations. This helps us conserve resources. These *shortcuts* save us time and effort while navigating daily life. We often default to reflexive patterns when we feel stressed or threatened.

Reflexive reactions can save us time, but at the expense of being alive to the present and to specific situations. Having a script and shortcut may impede us from being awake to what is right in front of us, as well as to a variety of ways to respond.

In contrast, *reflective responding* is unrushed, granting us a working time out to gain perspective. Reflection can provide a sense of spaciousness around our feelings and thoughts about a situation. It is an unacknowledged truth that working with young children and families is emotionally challenging. Turning down the *react* button opens options for how to respond to feelings and thoughts that arise.

**REFLEXIVE PATTERNS**

Dr. Mary Claire Heffron, a leading scholar in infant and early childhood mental health, writes about four common reflexive patterns that professionals working with young children and families may fall into. Often, we are trying to do our best, and the worry and rush causes us to “default” to common patterns of responding reflexively.

The first pattern is a need for rapid change, or the *right away* fantasy. We want to be able to quickly fix a situation and alleviate distress. It is understandable to want to respond quickly when a child or family needs
help. But a rush to fix can get in the way of thinking things through. Sometimes a behavior makes us feel uncomfortable, and we just want it to stop.

A second common pattern is based on the Greek myth of Pandora and her box (or jar); she opened the jar out of curiosity, releasing all kinds of troubles, like diseases, into the world. A teacher, feeling like Pandora, may steer a conversation away from something perceived as uncomfortable. We may not share an observation or concern because we fear a parent’s response, or what will arise once things are in the open. In these situations, we keep a lid on things so that our fear cannot overwhelm us, or them.

Many of us entered our fields of practice because we enjoy being with children and their families. We want them to enjoy being with us. Sometimes this leads to the third reflexive pattern, the wish to please and be liked. After all, we work hard to establish rapport, to be trusted, and to develop caring relationships. It is also something to notice, reflect on, and keep in balance with the aims and structure of your professional role. Also, what is in the best interests of the child.

The magic wand fantasy may lead us to think we can somehow come up with the perfect strategy, referral, or solution to a child or family’s challenges. Especially when children are out of control in a classroom, or families are struggling with horrendous challenges, we wish we had the power to control the chaos and eliminate the distress and obstacles.

ON YOUR OWN: COMMON REFLEXIVE PATTERNS

Have you noticed these kinds of reflexive patterns in yourself and/or in teachers and professionals with whom you work? Take some time to think about the four common patterns.

- Which reflexive reaction pattern do you see or relate to the most?

- Describe how this pattern comes up in your work or life.

- Provide an example.

Four Common Reflexive Patterns

1. Desire for rapid change
2. Keep lid on Pandora’s box
3. Wanting to please or be liked
4. Fantasy of control
BEING REFLECTIVE VERSUS REFLEXIVE

OK, so what does it look like to be reflective as opposed to falling into these reflexive patterns? What is this reflective process like? It is important to learn and re-learn the lesson that simply being with families, listening and seeking to understand, is often the most powerful thing we do.

For many of us this type of “being” with others requires time away to reflect on actions and reactions. It requires protected, designated time. It is often non-linear. It takes practice.

It starts with being curious and noticing what is going on in your work and in yourself as you do the work. What situations or dynamics grab your attention? What thoughts and feelings come up? What did you notice about your body in these situations?

Just as babies are wired to engaged us, so too are we wired to have strong responses to them, and to caregiving and caregivers. We are buffeted by strong feelings and staying grounded takes practice.

Try attending especially to those moments when you know you are right and there are strong emotions that accompany that knowing. It is really difficult to see our own reflexive patterns and strong beliefs or certitudes.

Doing this with someone else, in a reflective practice group or reflective supervision, is strongly recommended, especially because being with infants and families is challenging. A reflective approach entails careful listening to the many stories behind the one story. This requires observation and conversations, which take time, so we may bring our best, reflective selves to the table. Reflective practice is so important in relationship-based professions. It is a strategy to cultivate, grow, and maintain balance in a role and field of practice. Reflective practice and supervision help all professionals, from novices to seasoned teachers and clinicians, maintain clarity about the direction of the work. It help us pause and be mindful of our professional aims and role.

“CERTI-WHAT?”

Certitude is a funny word. The concept is similar to reflexive patterns, in that it is a shortcut way of thinking, feeling, and responding. Certitudes are strong beliefs, convictions, or worldviews that help us organize experience.

Defaulting to this short-cut increases the risk of not seeing and responding to the specific people and situations in front of us. We see patterns in our minds at the expense of real people, relationships, and situations within our stewardship.

Often, certitudes are shared constructions. For example, there was considerable pressure in the 1400s to believe the world was flat, and not to question this.

People in current times hold certitudes about the meanings and causes of obesity.

My grandmother had a certitude that only-children were coddled and overly sensitive. They did not share or play well with others. She was a schoolteacher and insisted this was true, based on her decades of experience in a one-room school house.

THINK ABOUT IT: EARLY CHILDHOOD CERTITUDES

Now it is your turn. Think about some of the certitudes you have encountered in your teaching and learning experiences.
While Weigand identified four tasks of shared reflective process, we combined the last two into one: The first, to tell the stories of your feelings in relationships. He recommends not rushing this process (a tall order in current times). A compassionate, interested listener can help.

Social psychologists have suggested that learning only occurs when thought is put into language, either written or spoken. Telling the story of our experience in words, to ourselves or to others, can powerfully affect our thoughts, feelings, and behavior, as well as our relationships. Telling the story requires reflecting.

The second task is making sense of the story by evaluating the meaning of feelings and emotionally significant events of the day, unpacking the why of interactions and reactions. “What was happening at that moment or right before? What did this remind me of? What did it seem like he was feeling? Why did I feel so angry? How do I want to do it differently next time?”

For the third and fourth tasks, we leverage reflections and increasing awareness to try out new ways of being and acting. Instead of defaulting to usual patterns, we may have space to try something new. Expanding our range of options and skills makes us more effective, keeps things interesting, and fuels professional growth. And reflection is a renewable resource.

Of course, having a wise and skilled supervisor or mentor can be very helpful in this process. But there are many ways to grow reflective practice.

**ON YOUR OWN: CASE STUDY: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE**

In this activity, you will have the opportunity to practice reflecting and using the steps to better understand what is happening in a difficult situation. Read the following scenario with a teacher, toddler, and a mom.

**Scenario**

Nico is a 2-year-old boy in your class. You worked hard to develop a close bond with Nico over the past few months. Recently, he began having tantrums during which he calls you terrible names. Later, he snuggles in your lap. You feel hurt, like you are being bullied one minute and needed the next.

Nico lives with his mom and older brother. You thought you had an okay relationship with his mom, but recently she seems to avoid you. She no longer comes into the classroom at drop-off and has not returned phone calls about Nico’s behavior. You feel like she does not care, which makes you feel angry.
Understanding Roles

It is not at all unusual to sometimes feel like we are being victimized by young children, even though the rational part of us knows this is silly. It may make us question our skills or character, or to feel incompetent. Even though we tell ourselves to get a grip, we may feel hurt, angry, or triggered in other ways.

In the role of the teacher you may feel, “I have worked so hard to be there for this little guy, and for his family. Now he is abusing me with terrible language! I’ve had it!” You may start to dread lunch time, as this is when the toddler often goes off the rails and starts screaming expletives at you and throwing himself on the floor.

You may also think things like: “This mom is dropping the ball and taking advantage of me, expecting me to clean up this recent problem with Nico’s disrespectful language and attitude. I have a mind to call her to take him home from school the next time he does it. Then she can deal with this like she should be already, at home!”

In the role of teacher, you approach an experienced colleague who is a great listener and whom you trust. The colleague agrees to be your reflective practice partner for the purpose of reviewing your work with this family and your professional growth.

In another role, you are a wise and patient colleague. Your role is to listen and ask questions. Do not give advice or try to fix a situation.

In the third role, be an observer. Write down what you hear and notice for each of the three steps in the reflective process.

Instructions

Use three steps

1. Tell the story of the feelings and events in your relationships with the child and the mom.
2. Evaluate what may be going on for you, the child, and the mom.
3. Plan your next actions.

| Tell the Story | Evaluate the meaning | Plan your next actions |
REVIEW: MIRRORS AND REFLECTIONS

Review the following quote and reflect on what this means for your work with children and families.

Parker Palmer’s words
“we teach who we are”
highlight the challenge posed by
our own identities...

(Barrera, I. & Kramer, L., p. 5, 2012.)

“Most importantly, educators need to be sensitive to how their own cultural experience shapes their perspective and to realize that multiple perspectives, not just their own, must be considered in decisions about children’s development and learning.” (Copple & Bredecamp, 2009, p. 13.) When educators learn how to reflect upon their reactions and biases, they are able to see how certain reactive patterns can interfere with teaching and learning. Self-reflection when consistent can provide a way to inquire into diverse cultures and then infuse those into the curriculum.

Educators are in a powerful position to influence families and children and must first look to themselves when engagement does not occur.

TERMS RELATED TO “RP”

There are many terms and activities related to reflective practice. Briefly, here are some definitions.

If you have heard or been part of a professional learning community, you have done shared reflective practice with others. Often “PLC” groups have a process and a shared protocol for asking questions, examining information or data, noticing patterns, and using the information to set a course and act for improved outcomes.

Coaching is an approach to professional development that can entail reflective practice. In contrast to other reflective practice approaches, coaching may be short-lived and focused on discrete tools and skills mastery (“doing”) more than on who and how we are in our work in the field (“being”).

In reflective supervision, a more experienced practitioner mentors and supports reflective practice in a less experienced colleague or supervisee. The process of supervised reflection with senior practitioner, aimed to deepen professional growth and practice.

VIDEO: WHAT IS REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION?

We have been talking about personal reflective practice. Another key strategy to fuel professional growth is reflective supervision. This involves sharing the process with a supervisor or mentor, as described in the article we read this week (Weigand, R. E., 2007).

In this video, Reflective practice supervision (8:16), Dr. Stroud describes core elements and values of reflective supervision in early childhood and infant mental health fields.
Video Debrief

• What did you learn about reflective supervision?

• What are some of the benefits?

WHY REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION?

Dr. Stroud covers a lot of ground quickly! We will unpack it. But first, let’s focus on why. Why do reflective supervision?

The rate of burnout in early childhood professions is high, as is a prevalence of poor health. In fact, early childhood educators suffer disproportionately from poor mental and physical health.

Reasons for this may be complex, but stress is among them. Caring for young children and families is hard, emotional work, especially when poverty or trauma are in the mix. On top of challenging work and workplace stress, many who work in early childhood education are under financial stress due to low salaries.

Amid this complexity, reflective supervision can help. It can be a powerful tool to increase support for families and for ourselves, a strategy based in sharing strengths-based positive regard and resilience. Thinking back to earlier slides on reflective practice, consider how telling our story and evaluating its meaning becomes more powerful in the presence of an attuned, non-judgmental listener who reflects back our strengths.

Maybe the best answer to “why reflective supervision” is the idea that early childhood educators must be well to do well.

Additional resource about stress and health of early childhood workforce:

• National Head Start Association (Feb, 2016) Research blast: Mental health and wellness in Head Start [PDF]

THE WHAT OF REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION

Dr. Stroud describes the what of reflective supervision in her presentation.

Key elements:

• Focus on the needs of the other.
• Emphasis on strengths, resilience.
• Non-judgmental approach to the relationship.
• Shared understanding of the parallel process and its implications.
• Use of self in the process of reflecting.
You may or may not experience reflective supervision in your workplace. We hope this paints a picture of what this kind of support for growth looks like, so that you can find or build these kinds of support into your professional life wherever you go.

Perhaps you will have access to a reflective practice group, a professional learning community, or a wise colleague who helps you develop and grow your strengths in working with families. If not, find colleagues with similar goals. Keep connected to the peers you have now. Spread the resilience.

PARALLEL PROCESS

Let’s talk about one of the last elements of reflective supervision that Dr. Stroud described: Parallel process.

She explains that this concept is like the concept of “paying it forward.” Are you familiar with that phrase? The idea is that the quality of this interaction, in this moment, will be mirrored or paid forward by others in future interactions. Kindness, listening, and the value of relationship are passed along to ripple outward. It’s the idea that when we speak to the needs of others (staff, parents), they are better equipped to speak to the needs of others (families, children).

Jeree Pawl’s words capture this concept succinctly: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto others.” Growing self-awareness of our thoughts, feelings, and reactions in relationship is a key goal of reflective practice. Whether we are a teacher, supervisor, therapist, director, or colleague, our way of being in relationship can be a model for how to pay it forward.

While some of us do this unconsciously, we can also develop awareness to do this with intention. Another way to think about this is in terms of social learning, not just of young children, but as an ongoing process in which we are all involved and influencing each other. Modeling is key in this process of continuous, reciprocal interactions.

It’s important to note that the power of modeling and parallel process can be used for good, to be helpful, as well as to perpetuate the not-so-good. A positive example let’s say you have a wonderful connection with a parent of one of your students at pick up time. The interaction you both had sets a tone for the parent, who then goes on to have a wonderful, rich, authentic interaction with their child on their bus trip home that night. Supportive, connected interactions all round! This dynamic can be powerful and healing in relationship-based work such as teaching and psychotherapy.

Things can also go in the other direction. Let’s say your supervisor expresses her disappointment that you are not keeping up with your paperwork. You then go home and express your disappointment about your partner’s contributions to household chores. Your partner tells your child how disappointed he is in the child’s school report. You get the idea.

These dynamics are powerful and often unconscious. Reflective practice can help increase our awareness of ourselves, and of ourselves as “tools” to perpetuate ways of being we believe help children and families.

THINK ABOUT IT: NEXT REFLECTIVE STEP

- How do we continue developing our skills as benign, curious, interested observers of ourselves?
- How can you grow your reflective capacity?

Brainstorm next steps to continue reflective practice after this course is over. Identify a goal related to your reflective practice.
HEAD START PARENT, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Just like a young child picks up on distress in caregivers, caregivers pick up and can take on the distress of families. This is an occupational hazard. The capacity to be caring, effective, and persistent in work with families, especially families experiencing adversity, is intimately linked to our own well-being and continuous growth. This requires the time and space and safety required to be reflective.

Reflective practice is the *not-so-secret sauce* for staying sane and engaged. Research has shown evidence this success.

Many professionals find that reflective practice is their best strategy for being effective, growing professionally, and maintaining balance while doing the hard-emotional work of engaging and being with families and children.

If you find there is not yet time or a structure for reflective practice in your workplace, do not despair. Or give up. Here are ideas about ways to bring reflection into your professional life:

- Start a reflective practice journal.
- Seek out like-minded professionals, perhaps classmates or professors who are on a similar path.
- Start a professional learning community, either one that is “virtual” and online, or one on the ground.
- Work with your program staff to develop times and places to reflect on field-based experience.
- Consult with a program director or supervisor to see how reflective practice can become part of professional development plans.

Recognizing signs of staff and family stress helps you promote family well-being and positive parent child relationships.
REFERENCES


Stroud, B. (2019, May 30) Reflective practice supervision. [Video File]


---

Cite this source: