

Supporting & Holding Young Children and Families: Using Reflective Supervision/Consultation to Explore How We Are

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In a very general way, the work of supporting young children and families involves two skillsets that are captured in the title of a publication by Jeree Pawl and Maria St. John printed over 20 years ago:

How You Are Is as Important as What You Do

There is not a clear line that separates ‘What you do’ from ‘how you are’. In a general way, ‘what you do’ has a lot to do with knowledge of your role and understanding your program and its purpose. It could be viewed as the mechanics of the job. Completing intake forms, screenings, or assessments, learning a curriculum, knowing resources in the community, learning a treatment model, and writing notes are examples. For many of us, these ‘what you do’ skills can be easier to learn than the ‘how you are’ skills.

‘How you are’ is largely a reflection of the sum total of what we learn from our experiences, especially our early ones, which are forged into the guiding beliefs we use to understand the world around us and our place in it. Our guiding beliefs let us know how to act (or react) in any given situation. At some point, our way of being in the world (‘how you are’) becomes more or less automatic, just like signing our name. And, in large part, because of our early experiences, certain types of behaviors or other people’s ways of being in the world can trigger or activate our stress response. When working with young children and their families, this often happens when parents have beliefs that conflict with our own beliefs or behaviors that remind us of unpleasant experiences we’ve had. Sometimes we are aware of why we are feeling triggered or frustrated, sometimes we are less aware, and sometimes we are relatively unaware.

When we operate on autopilot, and particularly when our stress response is activated, we may find ourselves wanting to change how parents are, and perhaps we even feel that is our role. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, we can’t change anyone, we can only change how we respond to others.

Relationships are at the core of our work with young children and their caregivers. To be as effective as we can be in our relationships with families, we want to become more aware of why we think, say and act (or react) in the ways we do. A key purpose of Reflective Supervision/Consultation (RS/C) is to expand our awareness, in part, by exploring the nature of relationships and how current and past relationships influence ‘how we are’ with others. The way relationships (especially current ones, in this context) affect other relationships, is



referred to as the parallel process. Another way to think of this is that our ability to support others is, in part, influenced by how well supported we feel. We can see this in the relationship between a parent caring for a child, a provider supporting a parent, a supervisor supporting the provider, and so on all the way up to the value society places on the work of supporting young children and families.

The reflective supervisor/consultant can, and often does, share ideas or suggestions, especially when providers are building new skills. But the emotional reactions related to working with families are explored first, in large part by taking a closer look at and trying to support the provider in more fully understanding their own perspective (beliefs/attitudes) as well as the perspective of the child, the parent, and others involved with the family. This process helps the provider become more regulated (less reactive) because an attitude of curiosity requires us to rely more on the thinking and creative parts of our brain rather than the automatic, reactive parts. When we are more regulated we tend to see things more clearly and, along with broader insight, this allows the provider to discover different choices they might make in their work with a family (how they might change their response).

While RS/C has some similarities with, and might sound like therapy, any exploration of our beliefs is always related back to the work of supporting young children and families. When we are responding to parents in automatic and reactive ways, it is helpful to make the connection between our beliefs that arise out of our early and current experiences, and what we think, say and do in any given moment. It isn't necessary to analyze or explore those early experiences and relationships in depth as one might do in therapy. Just being aware of, and keeping in mind that connection, encourages us to move from the reactive parts of the brain to the thinking parts. In the process we create a space for our own growth by making enough room to choose a different way of responding to families. And this different way of responding creates a space that can allow families, and caregivers' relationships to their children, to grow as well.

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