

Reflective Supervision: What is it? Why is it important?

One Practitioner's View

Reflective supervision is the shared exploration of the emotional content of infant and family work as expressed within a safe and secure relationship between supervisor and supervisee. It begins with the offer of a very regular meeting, in which the supervisor gives full attention to the person who has walked through her door. It is a partnership in which the supervisor makes it clear that she is there to listen, to share her understanding, to be emotionally available and a source of steady support. The supervisor invites the telling of stories, encouraging details about the baby (activity, capacity to regulate, affective development, nature of the social and emotional relationship with mother or father, cognitive tasks), the mother or father or primary caregiver, their interactions, what was said, and, when the practitioner feels safe enough, what she found herself thinking about or feeling in their presence. This will most certainly not come quickly – any more quickly than a relationship evolves between a parent and infant. The supervisor will have to be aware and invite the practitioner to consider what the baby or parent might have been experiencing, and, later, what was the practitioner's own response. The supervisee will have to bring her full self to the conversation, too.

For many people, supervision or mentoring is a new experience. The invitation to think about a baby's emotional pain in face of trauma or a mother's or father's depression and despair requires a deep trust in the supervisor before the practitioner can speak. She must trust that the supervisor will respect and hold and contain the various thoughts and feelings that she bravely offers up. In the quiet of the supervisory time, the practitioner becomes accustomed to thinking about feelings awakened in the course of an office or home visit: feelings that a parent or infant have or express within the context of their interactions and relationship or with words; feelings that are more personal and lead to reflection about relationships and events, past and present.

Should we be surprised that as we observe and listen carefully to parents and infants who have experienced abandonment, separation, loss or traumatic events, that we each have professional and personal responses? We need a place for remembering, as parents and young children do, a place where the remembering will be safe and understood as important to our ability to be emotionally attentive to families who have experienced trauma and need our undivided and available selves.

Reflective supervision is built out of mutual respect. It is a partnership that requires a commitment between two people, supervisor and practitioner, to go on a journey together. The practitioner may not feel so alone in the protective presence of her supervisor, a trusted guide. She will feel empowered because she is listened to and responded to with respect by a supervisor who is open, non-judgmental and responsive.

At its best, supervision offers a place for refueling and reflecting on one's work and, as trust is established, one's self.

Reflective supervision is a core principle of infant mental health . It is a core principle of best practice as defined by the *MI-AIMH Endorsement for Culturally Sensitive, Relationship-Focused Practice Promoting Infant Mental Health*. Refer to the MI-AIMH website for additional information about reflective supervision:

www.mi-aimh.org

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