Reflective Practice
Across Diverse Early Childhood Service Settings

Overview

What is “Reflective Practice”?
For the purposes of these materials, we’ll define the practice of “reflection” as intentionally thinking about thinking. By this, we mean being aware of and curious about your own and other people’s thoughts, experiences, feelings and motivations for behavior. As parents and early childhood practitioners, our increased awareness of these important aspects of relationships helps us be more effective in our interactions with others.

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet” (from Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, 1600)
There are a number of other terms that are related to or have been used to describe the ability to think about thinking. These include: psychological mindedness, mentalization, insight, introspection, self-awareness, metacognition, theory of mind, capacity for self-observation, critical thinking, critically reflective practice, use of self, and others.

A number of these terms seem to focus on a process of “looking inward” (self-reflection) and engaging in some sort of critique or evaluative process. However, it is important to keep in mind that effective parenting, early childhood practice, and human connectedness each requires that we also “look outward” to be aware of the perceived experience (thoughts, feelings, and interactive behaviors) of others including babies and young children, parents, colleagues, students, supervisors, and teachers.

An awareness of one’s own thoughts, feelings and behaviors offers us important information and supports our sensitive interactions with others. As we become more readily aware of our own internal experiences, we can also become more aware of how these experiences influence our behaviors, judgments, conclusions, wishes, and tolerance about different situations. With this information, we are more likely to parent, interact with and/or teach others in ways that are both sensitive and effective. Parenting and supporting early development and education require that we are also aware of and appreciate that the internal worlds of others are -- and should be -- different from our own (Heffron, et al., 2005). This idea is both surprisingly easy to express and surprisingly difficult to keep track of in moment-to-moment interactions, especially those that we find challenging.

Why does Reflective Practice Matter in Early Childhood?
Our understanding of the world around us is tied to our everyday understanding of the human mind. We can only make sense of what is going on around us if we are able to consider things like beliefs, wishes, regrets, values and purposes as ways to understand ourselves and others (Fonagay, et al, 1991). The ability to understand the mind of self and others is important for the experiencing, understanding and regulating of emotions. Earliest parent-infant interactions influence how babies and young children develop this
ability. As young children grow and develop, they build on the foundational reflection skills that were established through their earliest interactions with their parents and primary caregivers. This foundation can support or hinder a young child’s ability to accurately read, make sense of, and respond to his own emotions as well as those of others. Such emotional literacy is necessary for social competence, success in school and in life.

Using these Materials
The information provided is developed for use by:
- Parents of infants and young children
- Home-based infant and early childhood service providers (home visitors, early intervention providers, Early Head Start home-based teachers)
- Classroom-based early care and education teachers (child care, Pre-K, Early Head Start and Head Start teachers, K-3 teachers)
- Supervisors of staff who provide services to families with infants and young children
- Consultants and those who provide training to parents and early childhood professionals
- Faculty who teach early care and education courses and/or infant mental health courses

Based on a review of the literature related to reflective practice, five key principles have been identified (see below). Each of these key principles are described as they apply to each of the applicable user groups listed above. Examples and suggested activities as well as resources are provided for each of the user groups. Many infant and early childhood practitioners interact across these groups and may find useful information and ideas in several sections. All early childhood reflective practitioners will likely benefit from knowledge about the developmental processes of reflection in infancy and early childhood, as well as about reflective parenting. The materials can be used for self-study, in small groups as conversation starters, as part of in-service training or pre-service courses.

Key Reflective Practice Principles

1. The ability to reflect (or think about the thinking of self and others) is likely present at birth and continues to develop throughout life. It is possible to increase one’s capacity for reflection.
2. Self—Other Awareness is essential to reflective practice and enhances the effectiveness of parenting as well as the delivery of early childhood services.
3. Reflective practice involves careful attention to and accurate interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal communication. Observation skills are essential.
4. Reflective practice requires one to consider multiple perspectives and to recognize multiple points of view as being equally valid. Openness, humility and authentic curiosity all support this principle.
5. Reflective practice requires one to balance an **awareness of both thoughts and feelings** as influencers of behavior and interactions. **Empathy** helps to support this balanced awareness.

**Infants and Young Children are Able to Be Reflective**

**Key Principle 1:** The ability to reflect (or think about the thinking of self and others) is likely present at birth and continues to develop throughout life. **It is possible to increase one’s capacity for reflection.**

**Key facts:** Reflection is a developmental process with some predictable expectations during the first years of life.

- Infants have an innate sense of people at birth, which is activated through sympathetic emotions. This can be seen as a pre-linguistic “Theory of Mind” (Legerstee, M., 2005).
- Foundational abilities evident during the first year of life include an awareness of:
  - Emotions;
  - Intentionality; and
  - Goal-directed behavior in people.
- During the first two years the child progresses from:
  - Understanding other people as having intentions; to
  - Understanding that others have intentions that may differ from their own; and finally to
  - Understanding that not all observable acts are intentional.
- Progress typically seen in years 3 and 4 includes:
  - Moving from an understanding that other people have thoughts and beliefs; to
  - Understanding that these thoughts and beliefs may be different from their own; to
    - Being aware that people might hold beliefs that do not match reality (Tomasello 1995 as cited in Legerstee 2005).
- Between five and seven years children become increasingly able to apply moral judgments to the thoughts and behaviors of others.

**Key Principle 2: Self—Other Awareness** is essential to reflective practice and enhances the effectiveness of parenting as well as the delivery of early childhood services.

**Key Facts:**

- At birth infants understand that other people are “like me” and are different from inanimate objects. They arrive ready to identify with people and to interact with them socially.
- From very early on, infants have expectations about what people can and cannot do.
  
  *Video clip of “Still face” experiment might be helpful here.*
When watching people direct their attention and interest toward an object, infants are aware that these cues might signal the person’s intention to act on the object. However, the infant cannot yet know that the other person likely “holds an idea” in mind about the object (“I want that orange because it is juicy.”).

Two year olds understand that people want things and so will act to get them; and by age three, many children are able to use language to express another person’s desire, “Johnny wants an orange.”

It is typically not until about age 4 that children can describe people’s internal states (believing, thinking and feeling) as related to their actions, “Johnny is hungry and wants to eat that juicy orange.”

Key Principle 3: Reflective practice involves careful attention to and accurate interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal communication. Observation skills are essential.

Key Facts:
- Infants and young children are careful observers of the world around them, paying special attention to the physical and emotional availability of their parents and primary caregivers. This ability to observe is essential to their survival.
- Toward the end of the first year, babies observe and interpret their parents’/caregivers’ emotional expressions in order to make sense of frightening or unclear situations and to decide how to respond. This is called social referencing.
- Soon after, children begin to show joint attention as they follow the adult’s gaze and look to see what the adult is attending to. This is the point at which most children also begin to use gestures like reaching, pointing, or holding an object out to show others what interests them. At this stage, infants seem to assume that others are thinking about and understanding things in the same way as they do (Landy & Menna, 2006).
- It seems to be during the second year of age when children begin to understand that they might want or like things that are different from what another person likes or wants (broccoli and fish cracker experiment http://youtu.be/cplaWsiu7Yg). It is also around this time that young children begin to be upset by another person’s sadness and may offer comfort.
- Preschool-aged children begin to engage in pretend play, for example by taking on the roles they have seen enacted by others.

Key Principle 4: Reflective practice requires one to consider multiple perspectives and to recognize multiple points of view as being equally valid. Openness, humility and authentic curiosity all support this principle.

Many of the key facts described above also apply to this key principle. As described above, young children become increasingly more able to understand that other people have perspectives (thoughts, feelings, wishes, likes) that may be different from their
own. When they are feeling safe and protected, children’s natural curiosity supports them to approach human interactions as little scientists as they try out new strategies and explore how others respond to them.

**Key Principle 5:** Reflective practice requires one to balance an awareness of both thoughts and feelings as influencers of behavior and interactions. **Empathy** helps to support this balanced awareness.

Many of the key facts described above also apply to this key principle. As described above, at an early age, young children seem to be able to discern intentions (thoughts) of others and, as they have more experience to recognize and sympathize with the basic emotions of others. As their communication skills and imaginations develop, they are better able to help adults and other children understand how they are making sense of emotions. The balancing of thoughts and emotions (and the resulting behaviors) is fundamental to emotional and behavioral regulation.

**Essential Practices** – The ability to be reflective is neurologically and genetically derived and it unfolds and is influenced by early caregiver-child interactions (Landy & Menna, 2006). Sensitive and attuned interactions are necessary.

1. Pay close attention! The baby/young child is using many ways to communicate to you about his needs, desires, and interests. Even before children have words to tell us what they need, they express themselves through eye contact, facial expressions, body movements/stillness, gestures, and vocalizations. Some of these signals are very clear and easy to read and others are subtle and may take some detective work to understand. In order to develop their reflective capacity, babies/young children need to feel that their ways of communicating are understood.
2. Attend to the internal world of the baby/young child including her emotions and psychological experiences. This requires the parent/caregiver to take the perspective of the baby/young child.
3. Adjust interactions and the demand of the external world to fit the child’s emotional needs.
4. Recognize that the child has thoughts, feelings and intentions of his own and that are different from those of the caregiver.
5. Interpret and help to contain the baby’s/young child’s overwhelming emotions.
6. Mirror and label emotions even before the child is expected to understand the words.

**Suggested Resources:**
• **Family Tools** are available through the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning at this link:
  [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/family.html](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/family.html)

• **Questions About Kids** – This series of free flyers provide answers to important questions that parents and caregivers have about the psychological development of infants and toddlers. They are written by experts at the University of Minnesota and are short and easy to read. Some are available in Spanish, Somali, and/or Hmong.  

*Ideas for Video clips –*

- *Parent interacting with baby and giving words to baby’s perceived feelings and experience;*
- *Child care teacher interacting with young child giving words to child’s perceived feelings and experience;*
- *Preschool-aged children engaged in pretend play with peers w/some teacher support (maybe)*

*Narration – “What might this baby/child be thinking/feeling?” “What might this parent/teacher be thinking/feeling?” How does this interaction demonstrate and support reflection?*
Reflective Parenting

**Key Principle 1:** The ability to reflect (or think about the thinking of self and others) is likely present at birth and continues to develop throughout life. **It is possible to increase one’s capacity for reflection.**

**Key facts:**
- Relating to others and self-reflection help our minds continue to develop throughout our lives. Parenting gives us the chance to continue to learn as we reflect on our experiences as well as on the experiences of our children, who are growing and changing before our eyes.
- As parents, we have very frequent opportunities to engage in complex and often challenging interactions with our children. These interactions, when approached with openness, curiosity, and mindful intentionality allow us to support growth and development in both our children and ourselves (Siegel & Hartzal, 2003).
- Our brains continue to develop throughout our lifespan: the brain develops new neural connections throughout life. Our experiences with our children help shape and strengthen those connections. As parents, through our interactions with our children, we also have many opportunities to shape and strengthen important neural connections in our children.

**Key Principle 2: Self—Other Awareness** is essential to reflective practice and enhances the effectiveness of parenting as well as the delivery of early childhood services.

**Key Facts:**
- At the very heart of parenting is a paradox: we are required to simultaneously be both separate from and connected to our children’s minds in intensely intimate ways. That is, we need to recognize that our parenting/caregiving mind is separate from, yet interconnected to the mind of our child (Grienenberger, J., 2007). Finding our way as we navigate this paradox is at the heart of reflective parenting/caregiving.
- Parenting is often charged with intense emotions! In emotionally charged interactions with young children, parents find they need to regulate (or manage) and soothe both the child and themselves. Babies and young children are not capable of regulating the strong emotions that can easily overwhelm their ability to cope. This is our job as parents. For parents to do this reasonably well, we must be fully aware of both the child and ourselves and be emotionally present enough to care for both (Weigand, 2007).
- Our reactions to the intense emotions expressed by our children are influenced by many factors, including:
  - Our own physiological and emotional state at that moment – are you tired, hungry, distracted, frustrated about things not directly related to your child? Each of these stressors can move you toward an “auto-pilot” response,
interfering with your ability to be thoughtful and to react mindfully to your child’s current expression of his needs and feelings.

- The immediate environment and situation in which you find yourself. Some parents find it easier to “be their best selves” when out in public. Other parents/caregivers (or the same parent at other times) may find the intense emotional expressions of their children to be most challenging when others are watching. These parents/caregivers may be at their best when dealing with their children in more familiar environments or with fewer people around.

- Many of your current responses to your children are also influenced by how your own emotional expressions were responded to by your parents when you were a young child. Often, our reactions to our children are influenced in an almost unconscious way by how we were parented. Have you ever thought or said, “I heard my mother’s voice come out of my mouth?”

- As parents, we observe our babies and young children’s behaviors through filters; some that we are aware of in the moment and others that we are unaware of. This is also true of caregivers other than parents. These filters influence how we make sense of our children’s behaviors and personalities as well as how we respond to our children in different situations. When our filtered thoughts are generally positive and accurate, we are better able to respond in ways that support the development and well-being of our children. All parents/caregivers experience some distorted, inaccurate or distressing thoughts or beliefs about their children. These distressing or distorted thoughts can cause us to parent in ways that we do not intend and can lessen our pleasure in parenting our children (Grusec, JE, 2008).

As we become more aware of both our positive and distorted filters, we are become more accurate in our observations and more intentional in our parenting/caregiving responses.

**Key Principle 3:** Reflective practice involves careful attention to and accurate interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal communication. **Observation** skills are essential.

**Key Facts:**

- As described above, your observations skills are important for **self-other awareness.** Reflective parents practice noticing their own ways of being and communicating under different circumstances as well as how their children tend to react and communicate.

- The term **attuned interactions** is sometimes used to describe when the parent is able to notice, make sense of, and respond to their child’s signals in ways that meet the need of the child and allow her to feel understood.

- No parent can be perfectly attuned to his child 100% of the time. There is a lot of guesswork involved in interacting with others and understanding their emotional and physical needs. This is especially true when interacting with young children who are just developing their communication skills! Research
has shown that typical parents are attuned to the communication of their young children maybe half the time (or even a little less). The rest of the time in interactions with the child, the parent might not have noticed, or misinterpreted the child’s communication, or responded in a way that did not match what the child wanted. Then the parent is working to “get it right” (repair the interaction or get back into attunement). This same research suggests that these misattunements and repairs help the child learn both to send more clear signals and to tolerate the real life “messiness” of interacting with others. Important brain connections are being made during this process (Tronick).

- Some types of verbal and non-verbal communication are more challenging for different parents to make sense of and to respond to. Some of us might find it very natural to respond to signs of distress or neediness in our children but may unconsciously respond less to our child’s delight or joy. This might come from an idea of “if there are no tears, leave them be”. Others may find it very natural to join in and respond to positive feelings like excitement, delight and joy, while unconsciously tending to ignore our children’s signs of distress, sadness or fear. This might come from an idea that paying attention to distress will only increase the child’s “neediness”. As described above, many of these more unconscious tendencies are related to some of our earliest experiences with emotional expressions and how we were responded to as infants and young children.

**Key Principle 4:** Reflective practice requires one to **consider multiple perspectives** and to **recognize multiple points of view as being equally valid.** Openness, humility and authentic curiosity all support this principle.

**Key Facts:**
- For a number of reasons, babies and young children perceive the world differently than we do as adults –
  - Children’s smaller size and more limited mobility give them an entirely different perspective on the world, what is safe, dangerous, interesting and scary. Think of a toddler in a room full of blue jean-clad adults. Unless he can keep his balance and look way up at adult faces, all of those “big, blue legs” might look the same. Which legs belong to Daddy?
  - Young children are more vulnerable to physical danger and have less ability to control their surroundings.
  - Babies and young children are operating with both a more limited set of experiences to draw from and more limited cognitive (thinking, reasoning, problem solving) abilities.
  - Although children certainly learn from their experiences, they often need many repetitions and frequent practice with new experiences before they can generalize and make use of the information. For example, one experience of mommy picking me up from child care after my nap will not be enough experience for me to trust that I can expect that same thing to happen each time I am left.
Children are also more likely than adults to over-generalize some ideas gained from their experiences. For example, if as a young child, I got knocked down by the big dog’s tail and became scared, I might generalize that fear to all dogs (or creatures with tails) and for a time, anticipate each of these future experiences with fear.

- The perspectives of babies and young children are both influenced by and different from the perspectives or points of view of their parents/caregivers. Babies and young children have their own feelings, thoughts and ideas. Sometimes this is difficult for us to realize or remember as parents/caregivers. We are often so close to our children that we can mistakenly believe they feel and think about things the same way we do!

**Key Principle 5:** Reflective practice requires one to balance an **awareness of both thoughts and feelings** as influencers of behavior and interactions. **Empathy** helps to support this balanced awareness.

**Key Facts:**
- *Empathy* or the ability to take the perspective of another person without losing track of our own perspective is something that can be practiced and improved. Our brains are wired so that when we empathize with the feelings and experiences of another person, we have a sense that we are feeling as we believe they feel. This empathic experience helps us respond in a way that is sensitive to the other person.
- Our babies and children develop the foundations of empathy through their interactions with us. As adults, our curiosity, openness to other ideas and feelings, as well as our willingness to acknowledge what we *don’t* know about another person’s experience can help us increase our ability to have empathy for our children’s feelings, ideas and experiences.
- Much of our parenting is done on “autopilot” or happens without our conscious awareness and intention. During our own earliest experiences of being cared for by our parents, our mental and emotional roadmap of how to interact with others and what to expect of others in their interactions with us was wired into our brains. These earliest mental roadmaps were put in place before our brains used language to organize our experiences and memories. At that time in our brain development, our emotions and body sensations (touch, hearing, smells, sights) were what we had available to help us make sense of our world and relationships. These earliest implicit memories can easily become active during the intensity of parenting, even without our being aware of “remembering” something. Can you think of a time when you felt yourself becoming intensely angry or irritated with your child, only to stop and think; maybe realizing, “It’s really not that big a deal.” or “He’s too young to know any better.”? Recognizing and acknowledging feelings and taking the time to reflect (stop, feel AND think) can often help us move from autopilot to mindful or intentional parenting.
Essential Practices:

1. See the *Essential Practices* described in the section titled, “Infants and Young Children Are Able to be Reflective”.

2. “Don’t just do something. Stand there and pay attention. Your child is trying to tell you something.” (Sally Provence). Instead of focusing on the child’s behavior, get curious and begin to wonder about what he is trying to tell you. Especially in times of crisis or intense emotions, do what you can to become curious about what you need to better understand rather than focusing on what you feel you need to control.

3. Try to imagine the world as it looks through your child’s eyes. What might situations look and feel like? How might you seem like to your child when you are happy, silly, excited, frustrated, or angry? How do these images influence:
   a. Your ability to understand your child’s thoughts, feelings, wishes and needs?
   b. How you choose to parent?

4. Stop, breathe deeply, slow down, and respond to your child as much as possible rather than reacting. Our reactions are often happening as more of a reflex than as an intentional response. When we can be intentional in our responses to our children, we are often better able to parent in the way we believe is helpful.

5. When you do react rather than respond:
   a. Forgive yourself - especially if your reaction made you uncomfortable. Your child learns a great deal from your “human-ness” as well as from your ability to recognize and forgive your own mistakes.
   b. Apologize with sincerity when you have done something wrong or hurtful to your child. Take responsibility for your reaction and your behavior. Be careful not to blame your child for your reaction. “I” statements can help with this. For example, “I got really upset when you dropped my cell phone. I know you did not do it on purpose and I should not have yelled at you. I am sorry.” This is a different kind of apology than saying, “You make me so mad that I lose control and yell.” or “I’m sorry I yelled at you but that is the only way I can get you to listen.” Apologizing in this way places the responsibility for your behavior on the child and teaches your child to avoid responsibility for his own actions.

6. Choose your battles – ask yourself, “Is this really important?” Remember that it is more important to be the right parent than it is to be “right”. Practice accepting your child for who he is and avoid trying to change him into who you think he “should” be. Parents have an important role in guiding their children’s development and behavior while still respecting each child for his uniqueness.

7. When it is necessary to set limits or to discipline your child, do so with firmness, clarity, consistency and kindness. Many parents find, that when they are stressed or angry, they unintentionally repeat some of the more negative parenting they experienced as a child. Shaming, belittling, becoming sarcastic, or making fun of a child for his mistakes are frequent “voices from the past” that parents report noticing when they are stressed. We can overcome these negative voices by slowing down and practicing some of the skills described above.

Still to come: *Ideas for Video clips* –
Suggested Resources:

See *Suggested Resources* included in the section titled, “*Infants and Young Children Are Able to be Reflective*”.


Reflective Home Visitors and Early Interventionists

**Key Principle 1:** The ability to reflect (or think about the thinking of self and others) is likely present at birth and continues to develop throughout life. **It is possible to increase one’s capacity for reflection.**

**Key facts:**
- “Reflective practice involves practitioners questioning what they think of and do with families as well as what they have not thought about or done with families. This questioning and examination by the individual practitioner is done in the spirit of curiosity and a desire to do one’s best and to help the family do their best. Individual reflection is also done in the spirit of acceptance and forgiveness. Self-reflection accepts that one’s experiences influence one’s worldview and choices AND that this worldview is never comprehensive or complete but is constantly being updated based on one’s encounters with others, mistakes made, and repair of those mistakes. Practitioners are constantly evolving, just as family members are evolving as they learn about one another and gain new perspectives and empathy for one another.” (Dorow, T., p. 5. *Reflective Practice Guide*. Illinois Children’s Mental Health Partnership, 2013), accessed online 6/5/2014 at [http://www.icmhp.org/icmhpproducts/reflective.html](http://www.icmhp.org/icmhpproducts/reflective.html)
- Reflective functioning can be described along a continuum from low to high. Practitioners and parents can develop increased reflective functioning over time and with effort. Some of us begin with little or limited ability to recognize mental states in ourselves or in others. Other practitioners are able to not only recognize these states but to describe them in rich detail, expressing an awareness of how mental states change over time and through interactions with others as well as how the mental state of one person influences the states of others (Slade, A. 2007).
- Reflective functioning is negatively effected by stress, crisis, or trauma. Both practitioners and parents are vulnerable to these effects. Even someone with typically high reflectivity may experience a lessening or loss of this ability under specific circumstances. Sometimes, reflective functioning needs to be “rebuilt” over time with the help of a reflective supervisor or through a supportive therapeutic alliance. Home visitors and early interventionists can provide such an alliance with parents. There will also be circumstance under which the home visitor or early interventionist may need to support some parents to seek additional, more specialized therapeutic help from a mental health professional.

**Key Principle 2:** **Self—Other Awareness** is essential to reflective practice and enhances the effectiveness of parenting as well as the delivery of early childhood services.

**Key Facts:**
- As home-based providers of infant and early childhood services, awareness of and attention to thoughts and feelings is necessary and a requirement of our
work, regardless of our professional training or affiliation. This is often not a routine part of our training as teachers, child development specialists, occupational, physical or speech therapists, or health educators. Still, we cannot defer to others and think of this awareness and attention as "someone else’s job”.

- In order to be effectively aware of and able to attend to the thoughts and feelings of the children and parents with whom we work, we first need to be aware and willing to explore our own thoughts and feelings as they emerge when we are doing our work. If we are doing our jobs effectively, infant/early childhood-parent work will evoke in us strong feelings and sometimes confusing thoughts. Awareness and exploration of these thoughts and feelings will help us be more intentional and grounded in our responses to children and their families, as well as to our teammates.

- As with many aspects of human relationships, the expression of feelings or emotions is very much influenced by one’s culture and history. This is true of us as practitioners as well as of the families with whom we work. With some careful thought, you may be able to describe how your family culture has affected the ways in which you express your emotions, which emotional expressions are more or less acceptable to reveal and under what conditions. We are also likely influenced by the culture of our professional/educational backgrounds as well as by the cultures of the organizations in which we work. Families too may have a number of cultural and historical influences on how they express emotions and with whom. Awareness of and respectful curiosity about these differences can support our effective work.

- In emotionally charged interactions with parents and their young children, our focus as practitioners must be to support the parents’ self-regulation as they work to regulate and soothe both the child and themselves. It is not developmentally appropriate to expect a young child to share responsibility for regulating the interaction (Weigand, 2007). There are also some potentially negative effects if we step in to manage the child’s emotions and behaviors in place of the parent. It is important to be aware of the “urge to fix” a distressing situation (child’s and parent’s distress) and to quickly weigh the potential gains and losses of doing so. Our goal is for the parent/caregiver to be fully aware of both child and self and with our support, have enough emotional presence to care sensitively for both.

**Key Principle 3:** Reflective practice involves careful attention to and accurate interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal communication. **Observation** skills are essential.

**Key Facts:**
- Observation is such an “ordinary” part of our days, that it is easy to underestimate the importance of intentional observation in reflective practice (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005).
- Observation is never completely objective. Something as basic as what we choose to pay attention to in our observation is subjective and influences all
other aspects of the observation. There are many factors that influence our observations. It is important that as effective practitioners, we are aware of those influences/biases and take them into account as we make sense of and use our observational data (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). Reflective supervision is an essential practice component to support your awareness of our biases or “blind spots”.

- Infant/early childhood and parent/caregiver observations must be grounded in solid knowledge about what is most important to the health and well being of the child and family and what will inform good service decisions (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). An important aspect of this knowledge is a solid understanding of early development and careful application of developmentally appropriate expectations. Infants, toddlers and preschoolers are all engaged in unique developmental tasks that must be understood in order to make sense of our observations.

- Both formal (assessments/checklists) and naturalistic observations provide important information, depending on the purpose of the observation and how the information will be used. Even when using a more formal or theoretically-based observation protocol, it is important to thoughtfully balance planning the observation (grounded in knowledge of behavior and development) and flexibility (openness, curiosity and a spirit of discovery) (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005).

- It is important to be aware of the context or situational factors that are likely to be influencing the interactions you are observing (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). Stressed and/or distressed children and parents are not likely to show you their “typical” ways of interacting immediately after a stressful event. For example, a three year-old child may have a much shorter attention span and ability to focus on an activity the morning after an incident of family violence. The parent too might be more scattered and unfocused in both her attention to her child and her responses to you after such an event. It would be important in a situation like this not to conclude that the child has a developmental delay and/or that the parent has a disengaged style of parenting. Multiple observations in different settings and under different circumstances are necessary before conclusions can be drawn.

- Observations are best used to form hypotheses. Even the most skilled observer may sometimes confuse what is observed with what is inferred. Again, reflective supervision can help all practitioners sort out the difference between these. Effective practitioners are expected to make inferences AND to know when they are doing so. Inferences should always be treated as hypotheses and then tested to obtain further information (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005).

- Self-observation is an essential skill in reflective practice. Awareness of your own facial expressions, muscle tension, tone of voice, rate of speaking, rate of breathing, posture/body position, comfort or distress, etc. are all important aspects to observe as you provide services and interact with families, children and colleagues under different circumstances.
Key Principle 4: Reflective practice requires one to **consider multiple perspectives** and to **recognize multiple points of view as being equally valid**. Openness, humility and authentic curiosity all support this principle.

**Key Facts:**
- As described in Key Principle 3, observations that lead to inferences should be treated as hypotheses. One of the skills of a reflective practitioner is the ability to consider several hypotheses at the same time. There is a developmental process involved in learning to pay attention simultaneously to several “screens” of thought, behavior and perception, having a quick internal dialogue about these, and then making a decision about the best immediate course of action (or inaction) (Heffron, et al., 2005). As with all skills, this process is best developed with frequent practice, increased self-awareness, and opportunities to engage in a shared reflection of our experiences with another reflective practitioner and/or reflective supervisor. An example follows:

  During a home visit, 9 month-old Sally plays contently on the floor between the home visitor and her mother. Susan, Sally’s mother tells the home visitor that she is exhausted and cannot get anything done around the house during the day and is getting very little uninterrupted sleep at night. She talks with tears in her eyes about how for 24 hours a day, Sally is demanding of her attention. Susan says, “All I do, day and night is offer her my breast, sometimes 5-6 times an hour until she is willing to latch and nurse. She really only seems to want to nurse when she is very tired and just about to fall asleep. I don’t know how much longer we can go on this way!”

  The home visitor notices that she feels a little exasperated with Susan and confused. Does Susan actually offer her breast that frequently to her daughter throughout the day and night, if so why, and if not what makes it seem that way to Susan? As the home visitor (quickly) notices her own initial feeling when hearing Susan’s account of her time with Sally, she also notices that Sally has explored toys on her own for the past several minutes, looking occasionally to her mother in delight and showing her objects she finds interesting. The home visitor is aware of Susan’s distress and becomes curious about Susan’s sense of effectiveness and pleasure in being Sally’s mother as well as how their interactions have come to look and feel this way to Susan over the previous months. If parenting Sally feels this way to Susan, how might Sally be feeling about their relationship?

  By taking the time and making the effort to “see” and attend to multiple perspectives (her own, Susan’s and Sally’s), the home visitor created the space in her own mind for curiosity. This allowed her to hold off on providing developmental information about “most nine month-olds” and to first empathize with Susan’s distress then ask for more information about their interactions and routines. As Susan senses that her home visitor understands how she feels, she is less likely to feel defensive and unsupported. With this shift, Susan is more likely to become able to reflect on her full experience of being Sally’s mom. Susan is also more likely to be able to think with the home visitor about Sally’s experience of being little and needing her mom’s attention both through nursing and through the other ways that Susan can be physically and emotionally present for Sally.

- Both culture and context will influence our ability to take the perspective of other people. Just as infants come into the world able to identify that other
humans are “like me” (and non-humans are not like me), adults also generally have an easier time perceiving the experiences of others who are thought to be “like me” than those who seem very unlike me. While this awareness of “like me” versus “not like me” may have been helpful early on in human history, there are also significant consequences if we are not able to move beyond that distinction to use the prefrontal cortex of the brain for higher level thinking processes like reasoning, conflict resolution and problem solving. Self-awareness of both what influences your perspective as the practitioner and what might be influencing the parents’ perspectives about their children and about their service providers can help broaden understanding and guide intervention decisions.

- Considering multiple perspectives supports the creation of a shared understanding of perceptions and experiences as well as opportunities for recognizing and validating one’s own and others’ feelings. As practitioners increase their capacity for considering multiple perspectives, each may become aware of situations under which they are likely to miss one or more perspective. For example, while listening to a mother describe in great detail her most recent conflict with the baby’s father, it can be easy to lose track of the baby’s perspective on the tension between her parents. As a reflective practitioner, I can choose to make it a more intentional practice to question myself about, “Whose perspective might I be missing here?” and then adjust my thought process to consider that missed perspective.

Key Principle 5: Reflective practice requires one to balance an awareness of both thoughts and feelings as influencers of behavior and interactions. Empathy helps to support this balanced awareness.

Key Facts:
- Reflective infant and early childhood practitioners do not have the option of focusing either on thoughts or feelings; seeing one as “within my scope of practice” and the other as “someone else’s job”. In fact, an intentional awareness and balancing of both is within our scope of practice.
- Reflective practice helps us increase our awareness of our own tendencies to possibly deflect strong feelings by relying heavily on our intellect/thinking or to get so awash in feelings that our reasoning becomes compromised and our ability to do our job is affected.
  - Under what circumstances might you unconsciously become too reliant on your thought process and less aware of how your thoughts are fueled by feelings?
  - When are you more likely to become so aware of feelings that you know you are being less thoughtful than the situation calls for?
  - How does this awareness help you in your work?
- Empathy and sympathy are two very different concepts that are often confused.
Sympathy is sometimes thought of as a more surface-level experience of feeling bad or sad that someone has experienced something difficult (“I am sorry for your loss.”).

Empathy is seen as a deeper form of connecting with the feelings and experiences of another person as if you were “in their shoes”. Empathy requires that we be willing to feel deeply and remember the details about the experiences that caused these often, intense feelings even if the specific circumstances were very different from the other person’s experiences. (“You feel as if your husband has betrayed your trust by staying out with friends after work when he knows you need his help with the baby. I know how desperate you are for a little time to yourself.”) Most of us can remember a past experience of feeling betrayed, misunderstood or not having our needs respected by some one close to us. One does not have the exact same experience in order to empathize with the feelings and experience of another person.

Empathy is not the same as agreeing or siding with the perspective of the other person. I can feel and empathize with the sense of distress described above without agreeing that the husband is actually betraying or being unfair to his wife. My empathic conversation with the father would likely sound very different (“It is so difficult for you to know how tired your wife is after caring for the baby all day. At the same time, you know that the baby gets especially fussy in the late afternoon/early evening, just when you are getting off work. You don’t feel like you can help the baby calm down when he’s like that. It’s hard to see how disappointed your wife is that you’re not able to be more helpful with the baby at that time of day. Sometimes, it just feels easier to hang out with your friends until you think the dust has settled a bit at home.”)

An empathic response can support a neurological shift from a stance of defense to a threat or sense of isolation to a more open stance of being understood. From this more open stance, we are often more able to take the perspective of others and to make use of support and information. Empathy can help lessen the obstacles to effective human connectedness. A mother will be more able to empathize with the feelings of her husband or baby if she has experienced empathy from her home visitor or early interventionist. An empathic response to the father described above will support him to first feel understood and then shift to understanding his wife’s strong response to his behavior. This can lay the foundation for more meaningful dialog and if appropriate, problem solving.

**Essential Practices:**

1. See the *Essential Practices* described in the sections titled: “Infants and Young Children Are Able to be Reflective”; and “Reflective Parenting”.

Jacquelyn Van Horn

Page 18

4/6/2015
2. Pay attention to your own inner physical sensations. Studies have shown that the more aware you are of your own body and physiologic responses, usually the more empathic you are able to be with the experiences of others (Hanson, R., 2007).
3. Practice staying focused or paying careful attention to just one thing at a time. You can train your mind to quiet and pay close attention, and in doing so actually strengthen a particular part of your brain (Anterior Cingulate Cortex) and become more able to attend to the inner state of others (Hanson, R., 2007).
4. Get curious about the other person’s experience and, as appropriate, ask questions that reflect your respectful curiosity: “What was that like for you?” “What did you think would happen?” “How do you feel thinking back on that experience?” When you are truly and respectfully curious about another person’s perspective, you are careful not to use questions to lead, change, or try to influence the other person’s experience, feelings, or behavior. Without a clear understanding, any attempts to influence will be limited in their effectiveness.
5. Think about how your family culture has affected the ways in which you express your emotions, which emotional expressions are more or less acceptable to reveal and under what conditions. Ask yourself these same questions as they relate to the culture of your professional/educational backgrounds as well as by the culture of the organization in which you work. How does this awareness influence your understanding of the different ways families express emotions in your presence or respond to the emotions expressed by their young children? Can this awareness help you interact more effectively with teammates, especially in emotionally intense interactions?
6. Pay careful attention to situations when you are making reasonably objective observations and when you make inferences about something you have observed or have experienced when with a family or young child. Sometimes it is helpful to turn a judgment (inference) into a question, even if only in your mind.
   a. Inference/Judgment: That mom is so uncaring that she thinks nothing of propping her baby’s bottle on a pillow rather than holding her when she eats.
   b. Possible Questions: Is this how mom usually feeds her baby? How did feeding come to look this way? I wonder why this mom feeds her baby like this?

Dr. Victor Bernstein reminds us that unless the program we work for has determined and informed parents that a specific practice is “unacceptable” it is not our job to try to change that parenting practice. Given what we know about infant feeding, it is likely that many of us find bottle propping to be a “disagreeable” approach to feeding. As you become aware of a disagreeable but not unacceptable practice, strive to learn more about the parent’s thinking and feeling about this approach. A reflective conversation through which you turn a judgment into a question can help you get a more clear understanding of the parent’s perspective. This information can help you make sure that your relationship-based approach to services is most effective (Bernstein, V. 2002-3).

Still to come: Ideas for Video clips –
Suggested Resources

- RSA Shorts: “The Power of Empathy” can be viewed online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ew9g69lw (accessed 6/14/14).
- Results Matter Early Intervention video clips that support reflective practice can be accessed at: http://www.cde.state.co.us/resultsmatter/RMVideoSeries_EarlyIntervention
Reflective Early Childhood Teachers

**Key Principle 1:** The ability to reflect (or think about the thinking of self and others) is likely present at birth and continues to develop throughout life. It is possible to increase one’s capacity for reflection.

**Key facts:**

- As indicated in the section titled, “Reflective Home Visitors and Early Interventionists”, reflective practice involves questioning ourselves about what and why we think of and do certain things with the children in our care as well as what and why we have not thought about or done certain things with the children. This questioning and examination by the early childhood teacher is best done with authentic curiosity, and a desire to do our best work in the classroom on behalf of the children. Reflection is also best done with acceptance of strengths and vulnerabilities as well as an ability to forgive ourselves and other people for being fallible and human (Dorow, T., 2013).

- As early childhood teachers, we are constantly developing and evolving both as humans and in our profession. Reflective practice helps us learn to understand that our experiences influence our worldview and choices, both personally and professionally. This worldview can never be comprehensive or completely accurate. Our views (and ability to be reflective) are constantly being updated based on our interactions with others, successes we’ve had, mistakes we’ve made, and how we’ve been able to repair those mistakes (Dorow, T., 2013).

- In many ways, as early childhood teachers, we are evolving right along with the children we teach. The same can be said for the children’s parents. The development of reflective abilities is a life-long process as we all learn about one another and gain new perspectives and empathy for one another. (Dorow, T., 2013).

- Reflective functioning can be described along a continuum from low to high. As early childhood teachers, we can develop increased reflective functioning over time and with effort. Some of us begin with little or limited ability to recognize mental states in ourselves or in others. Others are able to not only recognize these states but to describe them in rich detail, expressing an awareness of how mental states change over time and through interactions with others as well as how the mental state of one person influences the states of others (Slade, A. 2007). An important starting point is to recognize the importance of this skill to effective early childhood teaching.

- Reflective functioning is negatively effected by stress, crisis, or trauma. Teachers are vulnerable to these effects. Even someone with typically high reflectivity may experience a lessening or loss of this ability under specific circumstances. Sometimes, reflective functioning needs to be “rebuilt” over time with the help of a reflective supervisor or through a supportive therapeutic alliance with colleagues. There will also be circumstance under which supervisors may need to support some teachers to seek additional, more specialized therapeutic help from a mental health professional. Self-care and attention to our own mental
wellbeing are important to our effectiveness as teachers of young children.

The importance of social emotional development is sometimes overlooked because of the emphasis on other aspects of school readiness. We have seen more and more research helping us to understand the strong link between young children’s social and emotional competence and their chances of early school success (Raver, 2002). Studies demonstrated that social emotional knowledge has a critical role in improving children’s academic performance and life long learning (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). Children who are aware of their emotions and have good planning skills by the time they enter school also have a lower risk for problems of aggression and anxiety disorders (Greenberg, Kusch, & Mihalic, 1998). Although the importance of social emotional development is not new to early childhood educators and parents, it is always helpful to keep in mind the value of educating the whole child. This includes intentionally encouraging and promoting social and emotional learning (Berger, I., accessed online on 6/19/2014).

**Key Principle 2: Self—Other Awareness** is essential to reflective practice and enhances the effectiveness of parenting as well as the delivery of early childhood services.

**Key Facts:**
- Teaching and caring for groups of young children engages both our emotions and our thought processes in complex ways. For many of us, it is the emotional exuberance and expressions of young children that draw us to this work and keep us working in the early childhood field. This draw can also pose one of our biggest challenges. It is not uncommon in an early childhood classroom to experience emotionally charged interactions with young children or to be called on to engage with children who are highly emotional with one another. Young children are passionate about their beliefs, ideas and wishes! As reflective early childhood teachers, we find that we need to get ourselves into a calm and thoughtful state before we can effectively regulate and soothe the children. This is equally true in our interactions with parents. Through this co-regulation that we, as teachers take responsibility for, we are teaching the children in our classrooms important life skills that will help them succeed in school and beyond. In order to do this effectively in our work, we must be fully aware of the children and ourselves and be emotionally present enough to care for both (Weigand, 2007).
- There are many pressures that compete for early childhood teachers’ attention. It can be difficult to keep the joy of being with children at the heart of our work when we face increasing demands from parents, directors, districts, etc. By being aware of the various types of pressure we experience as well as our effective coping strategies for dealing with these pressures, we can find ways to be more emotionally available to the children we teach. Self-other awareness can help guide us as we work to balance and prioritize the various demands in an effort to keep the children’s needs front-and-center.

It was mid-morning in the toddler classes and the four teachers chose to bring their two groups together for a painting activity. As two teachers were finishing up toileting/diaper changing, another teacher was setting up the activity while the fourth teacher stayed with the children in the free play area. Soon the entire group gathered around the painting table.
and the children and teachers began to engage with the painting sponges, water and watercolors. Although some children were more engaged than others in the activity, all were happily sitting at the table. The teachers were available to support the children and to help make sure they had the painting materials they needed for the activity. The mood was playful, calm and engaged as some of the children were more interested in sucking the water from the sponges than in painting. There were shared smiles, pleasant comments, and relaxed looks exchanged between the teachers and among the teachers and children.

A few minutes into the activity, one of the teachers was asked to go talk with the center director. She found herself tensing up and becoming nervous as she stood up to leave the activity. Her co-teachers exchanged worried looks and then looked down at the table while she left the room. Several of the children became quieter, some looked worriedly after the departing teacher, and others either swiped their papers off the table or became more random and less focused in their painting.

At first, the distracted teachers seemed to be functioning on “auto-pilot”, responding to the children’s behaviors in a mechanical way. Then, one of the lead teachers took a deep breath, let it out and said, “Miss Julie went to talk to Mrs. Jones. She’ll be back soon. Are we all done with our painting or should we do some more?”

This teacher became aware of her tension about her colleague and how it distracted her from being fully present with the children. She sensed the effect on the children and noticed that the other teachers were also having difficulty in the moment. With this self-other awareness, the teacher made a choice to: 1) breath deeply to re-regulate herself; 2) use simple words to describe what was going on; 3) offer a choice to help everyone know they had control over what came next; and 4) adjust the emotional climate to help regulate both the children’s and her co-teachers’ feelings so that all could come back together in a way that felt safe and reassuring.

- As reflective early childhood teachers, awareness of and attention to thoughts and feelings is necessary and a requirement of our work. This is often not a routine part of our training as teachers. Still, we cannot defer to others and think of this awareness and attention as “someone else’s job”. The children are counting on us to pay attention to these important aspects of human connectedness and life long development.
- In order to be effectively aware of and able to attend to the thoughts and feelings of the children and parents with whom we work, we first need to be aware of and willing to explore our own thoughts and feelings as they emerge when we are doing our work. If we are doing our jobs effectively, our work will evoke in us strong feelings and sometimes confusing thoughts. The key to being a reflective teacher is not to be “unemotional” but to be “tuned in” to our own emotions as well as the emotions of others. Awareness and exploration of our thoughts and feelings will help us be more intentional and grounded in our responses to children and their families, as well as to our co-teachers.

**Key Principle 3:** Reflective practice involves careful attention to and accurate interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal communication. **Observation** skills are essential.
Key Facts:
- There are many resources available to learn about guidance techniques as well as published curricula to help with planning. Observation is a frequently used strategy with many of these techniques and planning tools. Observation is such an ordinary part of our days, that it is easy to underestimate the importance of intentional observation in reflective early childhood teaching (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005).
- When teachers choose to use reflective practice in their work, we are more attuned observers to many important details about the children's interactions and skills. Often, we find that our interactions with the children and their parents are more meaningful and pleasurable when we are able to be reflective.
- Our knowledge about the children in our group and about child development theory helps us better understand what happens in the classroom and to enjoy taking the perspective of the children. Our observations must be grounded in solid knowledge about what is most important to the health and well being of the children and what will inform good service decisions (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). An important aspect of this knowledge is a solid understanding of early development and careful application of developmentally appropriate expectations. Young children are engaged in unique developmental tasks during infancy, toddlerhood, the preschool and early school years. These expected developmental tasks must be understood in order to make sense of our observations. Reflection allows us to make effective, meaningful decisions about how to respond to and plan for children. It keeps us excited about our work.
- Observation is never completely objective. Something as basic as what we choose to pay attention to in our observation is subjective and influences all other aspects of the observation. There are many factors that influence our observations. It is important that as effective teachers, we are aware of those influences/biases and take them into account as we make sense of and use our observational data (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). Reflective supervision is an essential practice component to support your awareness of your biases or “blind spots”.
- It is important to be aware of the context or situational factors that are likely to be influencing the skills and interactions you are observing (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). Stressed and/or distressed children are not likely to show you their “typical” ways of interacting immediately after a stressful event. For example, a three year-old child may have a much shorter attention span and ability to focus on an activity the morning after an incident of family violence. It would be important in a situation like this not to conclude that the child has a developmental delay and/or is typically not able to perform a specific skill. Multiple observations in different settings and under different circumstances are necessary before conclusions can be drawn.
- Even the most skilled observer may sometimes confuse what is observed with what is inferred. The NM Pre-K CD titled, “Observational Assessment Tools” (available online at: https://www.newmexicoprek.org/training/) includes a section that helps us more accurately document factual observation information while being aware of inferences that we may be making. Again, reflective supervision can help us sort out the difference between these. Effective teachers are expected to make inferences
AND to know when they are doing so. Inferences should always be treated as hypotheses and then tested to obtain further information (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005).

- Self-observation is an essential skill in reflective practice. Awareness of your own facial expressions, muscle tension, tone of voice, rate of speaking, rate of breathing, posture/body position, comfort or distress, etc. are all important aspects to observe as you provide services and interact with families, children and colleagues under different circumstances.

Key Principle 4: Reflective practice requires one to consider multiple perspectives and to recognize multiple points of view as being equally valid. Openness, humility and authentic curiosity all support this principle.

Key Facts:
- As described in Key Principle 3, observations that lead to inferences should be treated as hypotheses. One of the skills of a reflective early childhood teacher is the ability to consider several hypotheses at the same time. There is a developmental process involved in learning to pay attention simultaneously to several “screens” of thought, behavior and perception. As reflective teachers, we are conscious of having a quick internal dialogue about these and then making a decision about the best immediate course of action (or inaction) (Heffron, et al., 2005). As with all skills, this process is best developed with frequent practice, increased self-awareness, and opportunities to engage in a shared reflection of our experiences with another reflective teacher and/or reflective supervisor.
- Both culture and context will influence our ability to take the perspective of other people. Just as infants come into the world able to identify that other humans are “like me” (and non-humans are not like me), adults also generally have an easier time perceiving the experiences of others who are thought to be “like me” than those who seem very unlike me. While this awareness of “like me” versus “not like me” may have been helpful early on in human history, there are also significant consequences if we are not able to move beyond that distinction to use the prefrontal cortex of the brain for higher level thinking processes like reasoning, conflict resolution and problem solving. Self-awareness of both what influences our perspectives and what might be influencing the children’s perspectives can help broaden understanding and guide our choices as we teach.
- Considering multiple perspectives supports the creation of a shared understanding of perceptions and experiences as well as opportunities for recognizing and validating our own feelings and the feelings expressed by the children. As we increase our capacity for considering multiple perspectives, we might become aware of situations under which we are likely to miss one or more perspective. For example, while listening to a child describe in great detail her most recent conflict with the one of the “tougher” children in your classroom, it can be easy to lose track of the toughie’s perspective of the conflict. As reflective teachers, we can choose to make it a more intentional practice to stay open to all
possibilities and to question ourselves about, “Whose perspective might I be missing here?” and then adjust our thought process to consider that missed perspective. To do this, we need to be able to slow down, avoid reacting, reflect and then make a conscious and intentional response to the situation.

**Key Principle 5:** Reflective practice requires one to balance an **awareness of both thoughts and feelings** as influencers of behavior and interactions. **Empathy** helps to support this balanced awareness.

**Key Facts:**
- Reflective practice helps us increase our awareness of our own tendencies to possibly deflect strong feelings by relying heavily on our intellect/thinking or to get so awash in feelings that our reasoning becomes compromised and our ability to do our job is affected.
  - Under what circumstances might you unconsciously become too reliant on your thought process and less aware of how your thoughts are fueled by feelings?
  - When are you more likely to become so aware of feelings that you know you are being less thoughtful than the situation calls for?
  - How does this awareness help you in your work?
- Empathy and sympathy are two very different concepts that are often confused.
  - Sympathy is sometimes thought of as a more surface-level experience of feeling bad or sad that someone has experienced something difficult (“I am sorry that your block tower got knocked down.”).
  - Empathy is a deeper form of connecting with the feelings and experiences of another person as if you were “in their shoes”. Empathy requires that we be willing to feel deeply and remember the details about the experiences that caused these often, intense feelings even if the specific circumstances were very different from the other person’s experiences. When teaching young children, it is important to connect with and respect their strong feelings about situations that to you may not seem so important. (“You are so mad that your block tower got knocked over during clean up time! You worked hard to build such a high tower. You wanted to leave the tower up so you could come back and play later.”) Most of us can remember a past experience of feeling angry, frustrated, or not having our wishes respected. Although as adults, we might not feel quite so strongly about “block towers”, we do not have to have had the exact same experience in order to empathize with the feelings and experience of the children in our class.
  - Empathy is not the same as agreeing or siding with the perspective of the other person. I can feel and empathize with the sense of distress described above without agreeing that the block tower should be left
in place or that the children who knocked it over during clean up should be punished. My empathic conversation with the other children would likely sound very different ("You were in a hurry to get the toys cleaned up so we can go outside to play. You didn’t know that Bobby wanted to keep the tower and not put the blocks away. You were surprised by how mad he got about the tower falling down.")

- An empathic response can support a neurological shift from a stance of defense to a threat or sense of isolation to a more open stance of being understood. From this more open stance, the children are often more able to take the perspective of their classmates and to make use of support and information offered by their teacher. Empathy can help lessen the obstacles to effective human connectedness. A child will be more able to empathize with the feelings of her classmates if she has experienced empathy from her teacher. An empathic response to the children who knocked down the block tower will support them to first feel understood and then be more able to shift to understanding why their classmate had such a strong response to their behavior. This can lay the foundation for more meaningful dialog and if appropriate, problem solving. (Now that we know why Bobby got so mad and why the block tower was knocked down, what can we do?)

- Balancing thoughts and feelings while staying aware of both and understanding that these influence behaviors is challenging for many of us as adults, especially in difficult situations. Review the section titled, “Infants and Young Children are Able to Be Reflective” for information about the developmental processes and expected timelines for the development of reflection across different ages in early childhood development. This understanding will help you adjust your teaching strategies to the developmental levels of the children in your care.

Essential Practices:

1. See the Essential Practices described in the sections titled: “Infants and Young Children Are Able to be Reflective”.

2. Pay attention to your own inner physical sensations. Studies have shown that the more aware you are of your own body and physiologic responses, usually the more empathic you are able to be with the experiences of others (Hanson, R, 2007).

3. Practice staying focused or paying careful attention to just one thing at a time. This can be especially challenging in an early childhood classroom. You may need to begin by practicing away from the children and classroom. With practice, you can train your mind to quiet and pay close attention, and in doing so actually strengthen a particular part of your brain (Anterior Cingulate Cortex) and become more able to attend to the inner state of the children (Hanson, R, 2007).

4. Ask, don’t tell. Get curious about the children’s experiences and, as appropriate, ask questions that reflect your respectful curiosity: “What was that like for you?” “What did you think would happen?” “What do you wish had happened?” When you are
truly and respectfully curious about another’s perspective, you are careful not to use questions to lead, change, or try to influence their experience, feelings, or behavior. Without a clear understanding, any attempts to influence will be limited in their effectiveness. This understanding takes time!

5. Think about how your family culture has affected the ways in which you express your emotions, which emotional expressions are more or less acceptable to reveal and under what conditions. Ask yourself these same questions as they relate to the culture of your professional/educational backgrounds as well as by the culture of the organization in which you work. How does this awareness influence your understanding of the different ways children and their families express or respond to emotions in your presence? Can this awareness also help you interact more effectively with colleagues, especially in emotionally intense interactions?

6. Pay careful attention to situations when you are making reasonably objective observations and when you make inferences about something you have observed or have experienced when with a young child. Sometimes it is helpful to turn a judgment (inference) into a question, even if only in your mind
   a. Inference/judgment: Carlito is so headstrong and always wants to get his way. He throws fits and gets mean whenever someone crosses him.
   b. Possible Questions: Is this how Carlito usually reacts to clean up time? What might have happened today to set Carlito off? I wonder why Carlito had such a strong reaction today? What was this experience like for Carlito and how does that help me better understand his anger?

Still to come: Ideas for Video clips –

Suggested Resources

- Focus: Becoming a Reflective Practitioner. Accessed online on 6/19/2014 at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/subjects/medev/Focus-Becoming_a_reflective_practitioner
- Results Matter Early Intervention video clips that support reflective practice can be accessed at: http://www.cde.state.co.us/resulstmatter/RMVideoSeries
Reflective Supervisors

**Key Principle 1:** The ability to reflect (or think about the thinking of self and others) is likely present at birth and continues to develop throughout life. **It is possible to increase one’s capacity for reflection.**

**Key facts:**

- As reflective supervisors, we are engaged in and model for our staff/supervisees, a continuous process of development and lifelong learning about ourselves as people and as supervisors, as well as about the ability to think about the thinking of others. One goal is to convey to our supervisees and staff that reflection is a process that we are all learning and relearning at every point in our professional lives (Costa & Sullivan Scott Heller & Gilkerson, Eds., 2009).
- In order to engage in and authentically model such a continuous process, reflective supervisors also benefit from participating in reflective supervision with a trusted, experienced professional. Supervisors as well as frontline workers need someone with whom we can recognize strengths and partner vulnerabilities (Shahmoon-Shanok in Scott Heller & Gilkerson, 2009). Shahmoon-Shanok notes that engaging with an experienced, emotionally attuned reflective partner helps us notice aspects of our work that might have gone unnoticed and unexplored.
- As supervisors, we can develop increased reflective functioning with practice over time and with the support of our own supervisor. Early in our development as reflective supervisors, some of us find we struggle to recognize mental states in ourselves or in others. This was often not part of our professional training as administrators, program managers, supervisors, or even as child development specialists or teachers. This awareness also may not have been something that was outwardly valued in our own families or within the cultural groups that influenced our earliest experiences of relationships. As we develop our reflective supervision skills, we become more able to not only recognize these states but to notice and wonder about the complexities, influences and interconnections we experience when reflecting with and about others. With more experience and capacity, we become aware of how mental states change over time and through interactions with others as well as how the mental state of one person influences the states of others (Slade, A. 2007). This awareness supports us to better find our way with each supervisee in a way that will benefit the children and families being served.
- As reflective supervisors, our ability to be reflective is negatively affected by stress, crisis, or trauma. Just like practitioners/teachers, parents and young children, we are vulnerable to these effects. Even someone with a lot of reflective supervision experience and typically high reflectivity may experience a lessening or loss of this ability under specific circumstances. Sometimes, reflective functioning needs to be “rebuilt” over time with the help of a reflective supervisor or through a supportive therapeutic alliance. As supervisors, when we are aware of and manage our stress, we are better able to provide such an alliance with supervisees. Home visitors, early interventionists and teachers can, with the support of their supervisors, provide...
such an alliance with parents and their young children. There will also be
circumstance under which the supervisor, home visitor, early interventionist,
teacher or parent may need to seek additional, more specialized therapeutic help
from an outside mental health professional. Reflective practice can support us in
making those determinations and supporting effective referrals to other providers.

**Key Principle 2: Self—Other Awareness** is essential to reflective practice and
enhances the effectiveness of parenting as well as the delivery of early childhood
services.

**Key Facts:**

- A developing awareness of and attention to thoughts and feelings is necessary
  and a requirement of all infant and early childhood work. This is often not a
  routine part of our training as teachers, child development specialists, nurses,
  occupational, physical or speech therapists, health educators, administrators or
  supervisors. Still, we cannot support staff/supervisees to defer to others and
  think of this awareness and attention as “someone else’s job”.

- In order for supervisors and supervisees to be effectively aware of and able
to attend to the thoughts and feelings of the staff, children and parents with whom
we work, we first need to be aware of and willing to explore our own thoughts
and feelings as they emerge when we are doing our work. If we are doing our
jobs effectively, supervising infant/early childhood-parent work will evoke in us
strong feelings and sometimes confusing thoughts. Awareness and exploration
of these thoughts and feelings will help us be more intentional and grounded in
our responses to our staff and supervisees. Costa & Sullivan (in Scott Heller &
Gilkerson, Eds., 2009) describe three important influencers of self-other
awareness:
  1. The common experience of unconsciously associating and confusing the
     thoughts, feelings, characteristics and beliefs about people and experiences
     from the past to persons or situations in the present. Often this is
     experienced as a sudden, strong feeling or idea about an unknown person or
     experience. The suddenness of the feeling or idea is usually a good indication
     that these are being triggered by internal, unconscious memories of others
     from our past and do not belong to the person or situation we are presently
     encountering.

These authors note that reflective supervision is needed both when the
supervisee is experiencing difficulty with a particular child/family/situation
and when the supervisee “falls in love with” the child/family. Both situations
can result in “blind spots” that interfere with the effectiveness of the work.
Reflective supervision helps us as we experience a situation, so that we do
not let our past experiences prevent us from understanding the present
experience more deeply, simply because we look no further than our initial
reaction (DeBonis, 2010).
2. All infant and early childhood professionals come to our work with our own histories as people, family members, members of cultural groups, professional groups, etc. Our histories can be the source of great learning and empathy as well as great difficulty in our work. Reflective practice helps supervisors and infant/early childhood professionals pay attention to how the normal and expected associations we make between our own personal life story and the feelings we experienced in our work influence how we experience children, families and work situations. Supervisors and infant/early childhood professionals use this awareness to be more principled, thoughtful and intentional in the services we provide.

3. As supervisors and infant/early childhood professionals, our thoughts, feelings and internal experiences have a profound influence on our work and deserve to be explored. This can and should be done as these relate specifically to our work with supervisees, young children and their families. Reflective supervision should not be confused with the private, intentional work of individual psychotherapy.

- As with many aspects of human relationships, the expression of feelings or emotions is very much influenced by one’s culture and history. This is true of us as reflective supervisors and infant/early childhood professionals as well as of the families with whom we work. With some careful thought, you may be able to describe how your family culture has affected the ways in which you express your emotions, which emotional expressions are more or less acceptable to reveal and under what conditions. We are also likely influenced by the culture of our professional/educational backgrounds as well as by the cultures of the organizations in which we work. As supervisors and infant/early childhood professionals, our professional training might have suggested that we leave ourselves/feelings “outside the door” when we go to work. Reflective practice requires that we challenge that belief while still maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. Families too may have a number of cultural and historical influences on how they express emotions and with whom. Supporting supervisees as they increase awareness of and respectful curiosity about these differences can support more effective work.

- Infant/early childhood work naturally presents us with emotionally charged interactions. Supervisors, staff, parents and children all experience strong feelings as we work together to support optimal parenting and early development. Our focus as reflective supervisors is to support our supervisees’ as they increase their awareness of and appropriate responses to intense emotions and situations (self-regulation). We do this so that the supervisee can support the parents’ self-regulation as they work to regulate and soothe both the child and themselves. Classroom teachers benefit from support as they develop intentional strategies to regulate and soothe both the children and themselves during intense interaction or situations (Weigand, 2007).
Key Principle 3: Reflective practice involves careful attention to and accurate interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal communication. Observation skills are essential.

Key Facts:

- Observation is such an “ordinary” part of our days, that it is easy to underestimate the importance of intentional observation in reflective practice (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005).
- Observation is never completely objective. In our training to observe certain things, we are also trained to ignore other things (Shamoon-Shanok in Scott Heller & Gilkerson, Eds., 2009). Something as basic as what we choose to pay attention to in our observation is subjective and influences all other aspects of the observation. There are many factors that influence our observations.
- Reflective supervisors can support supervisees to become more aware of their observational influences/biases and take them into account as they make sense of and use observational data (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). Reflective supervision is an essential practice component to support awareness of our biases or “blind spots”.
- As reflective supervisors intentionally balance discussion of the content and process of infant/early childhood work, we help to assure that observations are grounded in solid knowledge about what is most important to the health and well being of the child and family and what will inform good service decisions (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). An important aspect of this knowledge is a solid understanding of early development and careful application of developmentally appropriate expectations. Infants, toddlers and preschoolers are all engaged in unique developmental tasks that must be understood in order to make sense of our observations. This must be based on much more than a basic understanding of key developmental milestones.
- Sometimes, we think of reflective supervision as supporting “super-vision” in that, through reflection with an emotionally attuned, experienced partner we are often able to see deeper, wider and further (Shamoon-Shanok in Scott Heller & Gilkerson, Eds., 2009). The previous mentioned “blind spots” or factors that are outside of our conscious awareness can, through reflective supervision, be brought into focus in a way that is safe and non-threatening. Some invisible areas or blind spots are revealed more through pre-verbal and non-verbal means rather than what is said. Observation and exploration of these less obvious elements can support infant/early childhood professionals to both deepen and broaden their ideas about what they are seeing and how they can be most effective.
- When providing reflective supervision, it is important to be aware of the context or situational factors that are likely to be influencing the interactions the supervisee is describing as well as the reactions you are observing while the supervisee shares her experience with you. Just as stressed and/or distressed children and parents are not likely to show their “typical” ways of interacting immediately after a stressful event, supervisees respond differently, depending
on their own levels of stress. For example, a teacher in a three-year-old classroom might engage much differently in reflective supervision after an especially trying day when she had spent the previous night in the emergency room with her mother-in-law, several children were having difficulty, many parents wanted her immediate attention at pick up time, and her co-teacher was out sick. Just as with young children, multiple observations of this teacher’s way of processing her work experiences and under different circumstances are necessary before typical patterns can be ascertained and explored.

- Reflective supervision can help supervisees sort out the difference between what is observed with what is inferred. Reflective practice acknowledges that as effective infant/early childhood professionals, we are expected to make inferences AND to know when they are doing so. Inferences should always be treated as hypotheses and then tested to obtain further information (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). This process of hypothesizing and testing the hypothesis is essential to effective reflective supervision and is best both respectfully modeled by the supervisor and supported in the supervisee.

- Self-observation is as essential to reflective supervision as it is in all reflective practice. Awareness of your own facial expressions, muscle tension, tone of voice, rate of speaking, rate of breathing, posture/body position, comfort or distress, etc. are all important aspects to observe as you provide reflective supervision under different circumstances.

**Key Principle 4:** Reflective practice requires one to **consider multiple perspectives** and to **recognize multiple points of view as being equally valid.** Openness, humility and authentic curiosity all support this principle.

**Key Facts:**
- As described in Key Principle 3, observations that lead to inferences should be treated as hypotheses. One of the skills of a reflective supervisor is the ability to support the infant/early childhood professional to consider several hypotheses at the same time. There is a developmental process involved in learning to pay attention simultaneously to several “screens” of thought, behavior and perception, having a quick internal dialogue about these, and then making a decision about the best immediate course of action (or inaction) (Heffron, et al., 2005). As with all skills, this process is best developed with frequent practice, increased self-awareness, and opportunities to engage in a shared reflection of our experiences with a reflective partner.

- Both culture and context will influence our ability to take the perspective of other people. Reflective supervision supports the exploration and deeper understandings about differences across culture, class, privilege, race ethnicity, immigration, sexual orientation, and family styles (Shamoon-Shanok in Scott Heller & Gilkerson, Eds., 2009). When a supervisor and supervisee reflect together on these complex factors, they have a much better chance than if
thinking alone of appreciating differences and bringing up important questions that can guide the work.

- When in reflective supervision, the effort to consider multiple perspectives with the supervisee supports the creation of a shared understanding of perceptions and experiences. This process also provides opportunities for recognizing and validating the supervisee’s feelings while supporting the supervisee to try to imagine what the infant/young child/parent or co-worker might have been feeling.

- As supervisors and infant/early childhood professionals increase their capacity for considering multiple perspectives, each may become aware of situations under which they are likely to miss one or more perspectives. For example:

  During reflective supervision, the supervisor listened carefully to a supervisee share her recent home visiting experience. The home visitor shared that during this home visit, the tearful mother described in great detail her most recent conflict with the baby’s father. The home visitor expressed exasperation that this father seems to be repeating the same negative patterns over and over without seeming to understand or care how his behavior is affecting his isolated, young wife and their young baby.

  As the supervisor listened, she became aware of her internal experience of “joining with” the home visitor in her outraged exasperation with “men” in general and this father in particular. This awareness helped the supervisor mentally step back, remembering that the home visitor’s description was of the mother’s perception of what happened with the baby’s father. The father’s experience of this conflict was not represented in this telling. So far, in the home visitor’s description of this experience, it has not become apparent where the baby was while the mother was sharing her upset with the home visitor and how the baby might have been experiencing the mother's distress.

  With awareness of these missing perspectives, the reflective supervisor can make more intentional choices about the support she offers to this supervisee so that, the supervisee can be more intentional in her support to this family.

- With acceptance, empathy and authentic curiosity about the supervisee’s perceptions about and experiences with her work, reflective supervisors can invite a form of *playfulness of ideas* that allows more options to be considered (Shamoon-Shanok in Scott Heller & Gilkerson, Eds., 2009). When supervision is used to consider actions before they are acted out in the work with infants/young children and their families, supervisees can learn to safely try-out the possible perspectives of all players without actually knowing what those perspectives actually are. With this support, supervisees become more skilled at being aware of and holding off on their impulses toward premature assumptions or actions. Sometimes, reflective supervision is thought of as a process that helps us “go slow to go fast”.

  **Note:** The text above contains a typographical error in the phrase “join...with...” which should be corrected to “joining with” for proper grammar. The intended meaning is clear, and the correction does not affect the overall coherence of the text.
Key Principle 5: Reflective practice requires one to balance an awareness of both thoughts and feelings as influencers of behavior and interactions. Empathy helps to support this balanced awareness.

Key Facts:

- Reflective supervisors and infant/early childhood professionals do not have the option of focusing either on thoughts or feelings; seeing one as “within my scope of practice” and the other as “someone else’s job”. In fact, an intentional awareness and balancing of both is an essential part of reflective infant/early childhood practice.
- Reflective supervision helps supervisees increase awareness of their tendencies to possibly deflect strong feelings by relying heavily on intellect/thinking or to get so awash in feelings that reasoning becomes compromised and the ability to do the job is affected.
  - As a supervisor, are you aware of the circumstances under which you might unconsciously become too reliant on your thought process and less aware of how your thoughts are fueled by feelings?
  - When are you more likely to become so aware of feelings that you know you are being less thoughtful than the situation calls for?
  - How does this awareness help you in your reflective supervision?
- Empathy and sympathy are two very different concepts that are often confused.
  - Sympathy is sometimes thought of as a more surface-level experience of feeling bad or sad that someone has experienced something difficult (“I am sorry that the bathroom in your classroom has been out of commission for so long.”).
  - Empathy is seen as a deeper form of connecting with the feelings and experiences of another person as if you were “in their shoes”. Empathy requires that we be willing to feel deeply and remember the details about the experiences that caused these often, intense feelings even if the specific circumstances were very different from the other person's experiences. (“You sound so frustrated about this situation with the bathroom in your classroom. I know you have worked hard to help the children get into a consistent bathroom and hand washing routine. You've even talked about how some of the children had made good progress in learning to use the toilet. It’s very frustrating that your efforts have been set back because you have to use the bathroom down the hall. A change like that disrupts your routines and makes things so much more difficult for the children. Because the repair process has been so slow, you feel as if those in charge don’t really understand or care about how hard this is for you and the children.”) Most of us can remember a past experience of feeling put aside, misunderstood or not having our needs respected by some one. As a reflective supervisor, you do not have to have had the exact same experience in order to empathize with the feelings and experience of this teacher.
o Empathy is not the same as agreeing or siding with the perspective of the supervisee. I can feel and empathize with the sense of frustration described above without agreeing that the school principle or center director really does not understand the challenges posed by the broken bathroom.

• An empathic response during supervision can support a neurological shift from a stance of defense to a threat or sense of isolation to a more open stance of being understood. From this more open stance, the supervisee is likely to be more able to take the perspective of others and to make use of the support and information offered through reflective supervision. Empathy can help lessen the obstacles to effective human connectedness. The teacher will be more likely to stay focused and empathic with the experiences of the children in her class if she feels her supervisor really “gets” her feelings. This experience of “feeling felt” in supervision can lay the neurologic foundation for more meaningful dialog and if appropriate, problem solving.

Essential Practices:

1. See the Essential Practices described in the sections titled: “Infants and Young Children Are Able to be Reflective”; and “Reflective Parenting”; and “Reflective Home Visitors and Early Interventionists”; and “Reflective Early Childhood Teachers”. Consider how these apply to your role as a reflective supervisor.

2. Work to co-create with each supervisee or group, a safe, trusting and respectful environment. Common elements include: regular, predictable meeting times and locations; meetings that are free from distractions that expect and support each person’s full attention and emotional presence; clearly defined expectations regarding confidentiality and accountability; and open discussions that are free of judgment and harsh criticism. Safe reflective supervision interactions are individualized to address such things as each supervisee’s pace, experience with the work, and comfort with discussions about personal experiences/feelings that are affecting the work.

3. Focus supervision discussions to get a more clear understanding of what is happening for all involved rather than on solving problems or advising next steps.

4. Approach the reflective supervision session as an attentive and attuned learning partner rather than as an expert. It can be helpful to think of yourself as “the guide on the side rather than the sage on the stage”. In nearly all sessions, you should plan to listen more than you talk.

5. As a learning partner who guides the reflective process, it is important to let go of “knowing” and to allow space for “not knowing” in both yourself and the supervisee. Authentic curiosity about your supervisee’s feelings, perceptions and experiences invites their curiosity about the same in the children they teach and the infants/young children and families they serve. This openness allows for many more possibilities for effective practice.

6. Use language (verbal and non-verbal, silence, comments, questions, descriptions, observations) that encourages deeper thinking and more detailed exploration. Envision an iceberg that has only a small portion visible above the water line. Some
say, the purpose of reflective supervision is to lower or learn to see below the waterline. We start by thinking together about the more surface level observations and experiences. In a safe and trusting supervisory relationship we can then use the reflective process to consider what might be inside/beneath those observations, feelings and experiences.

7. **Stay mindful of parallel process.** Years ago Jeree Pawl proposed thinking of parallel process as “The Platinum Rule”: *Do unto others as you would have others do unto others.* Reflective supervision provides the type of emotionally attuned, thoughtful and respectful relationship between supervisor and supervisee that we hope to see between the infant/early childhood professional and the children and parents they serve, and, most importantly, between the parents and children our services support. These parallels go more deeply than the conscious interactions between players. Reflective practice encourages professionals to consider questions like,
   - “How might my sense of dread approaching this home visit parallel this parent’s experience of the challenges he faces?”
   - “If I find Circle Time tense and unpleasant, what might the experience be like for the children?”
   - “I never feel like I am doing a good enough job for this mom. She seems dissatisfied with me and with her children. I wonder if the children also feel as if they are not good enough for mommy?”

8. **Work to stay aware of your feelings as well as the feelings expressed by the supervisee.** Develop your ability to stay with the feelings being expressed rather than trying to hurry to “make” the supervisee feel better about herself or the situation. Might your urge to “be nice” or “make nice” diminish an important process for the supervisee? Recognize your discomfort with particular emotions, any urges you experience during those situations, and assess your motivation to act before doing so. For example, quickly and internally ask yourself, “Am I pointing out the positive side of this experience to lessen my distress or because it will help this supervisee with her reflective process?” Although reflective supervision serves to recognize and cherish strengths while partnering vulnerabilities, a rush to “looking on the bright side” is neither respectful nor effective in helping develop more effective practice in our supervisees. In fact, this tendency can serve to mask or avoid difficult topics that truly need to be discussed and explored.

9. **Model healthy, transparent and intentional conflict management.** Many infant/early childhood professionals and parents have difficulty managing conflict. Using reflective supervision to name, explore, and stay with conflicts through a healthy process of reasonable resolution or options to address the conflict supports supervisees as they experience conflicts with the children/families and colleagues with whom they work.

10. **Intentionally assess with the supervisee how the sessions are going, what is working and what could be improved.** Reflective supervision is an interpersonal, dynamic process that is neither scripted nor prescriptive. Both the supervisor and the supervisee have responsibility for making the sessions work to support the supervisees continuous professional development and effective infant/early childhood work.
Still to come: *Ideas for Video clips –*

**Suggested Resources**


  This webcast is designed to help you implement reflective supervision in your Early Head Start, Head Start, or Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program. The Webcast features a mini-training with Early Head Start practitioners led by Rebecca Shahmoon-Shanok, LCSW, Ph.D., a leading early childhood expert.

  The link above includes the following materials:

  - **Materials:**  
    - Reflective Supervision Short Paper [PDF, 142KB]  
    - Reflective Supervision Supportive Supervision [PDF, 175 KB]  
    - Webcast Viewers Guide [PDF, 56KB]

- *Finding the Words, Finding the Ways: Exploring Reflective Supervision and Facilitation* offers practitioners, instructors, and programs a new tool to build and deepen reflective supervision skills in a way that genuinely supports staff providing direct services across a variety of disciplines and settings. The videos and accompanying manual are designed as learning materials to support reflective supervisors and others such as program managers, coordinators, consultants and coaches who are involved in providing support, and guidance to those in the infant and early childhood field. More information about this resource can be found at: [http://cacenter-ecmh.org/news/finding-the-words-finding-the-ways-exploring-reflective-supervision-and-facilitation/](http://cacenter-ecmh.org/news/finding-the-words-finding-the-ways-exploring-reflective-supervision-and-facilitation/)


Reflective Faculty & Providers of Other Forms of Reflective Professional Development

A Note Before We Begin: In reviewing the available online literature related to Reflective Practice or Critically Reflective Practice in Higher Education/Pre-service and In-service education, it became apparent that much of the current practice is defined in terms of processes for continuous quality improvement and/or teacher evaluation/assessment of effectiveness. While these are important aspects of professional development, the purpose of the materials provided on this DVD is to look at the development of reflective capacity in human connectedness and relationships (including professional development and learning interactions). Please review the “Overview” section of this DVD for more information.

Those familiar with the current literature related to critically reflective practice in higher education will hopefully find that the materials on this DVD both support the foundation for these concepts and support higher education faculty and other providers of infant/early childhood professional development with information and tools to go deeper into the development of reflective capacity as it supports us and the students/professionals we are teaching.

**Key Principle 1:** The ability to reflect (or think about the thinking of self and others) is likely present at birth and continues to develop throughout life. **It is possible to increase one’s capacity for reflection.**

**Key facts:**
- As reflective faculty/trainers/consultants, we are engaged in and model for our learners, a continuous process of development and life long learning about ourselves as people and as faculty/trainers/consultants, as well as about the ability to think about the thinking of others. One goal is to convey to the learners we support that reflection is a process that we are all learning and relearning at every point in our professional lives (Costa & Sullivan Scott Heller & Gilkerson, Eds., 2009)
- In order to engage in and authentically model such a continuous process, reflective faculty/trainers/consultants will likely benefit from participating in reflective learning community with other trusted, experienced professionals who are responsible for professional development activities. A key idea to reflective practice is that we all need someone with whom we can recognize strengths and partner vulnerabilities (Shahmoon-Shanok in Scott Heller & Gilkerson, 2009). Engaging with experienced, emotionally attuned reflective colleagues helps us notice aspects of our work that might otherwise have gone unnoticed and unexplored.
- As faculty/trainers/consultants, we can develop increased reflective functioning with practice over time and with the support of our reflective learning community. Early in our development as faculty/trainers/consultants, some of us might struggle to recognize the purpose of intentional awareness of mental states in ourselves and in the learners we support. This was often not part of our professional training. It might be helpful to also think about whether/how this awareness was something
that was outwardly valued in our own families or within the cultural groups that influenced our earliest experiences of relationships and interaction. As we develop our reflective teaching skills, we become more able to not only recognize these states but to notice and wonder about the complexities, influences and interconnections we experience when reflecting with and about others. With more experience and capacity, we become aware of how mental states change over time and through interactions with others as well as how the mental state of one person influences the states of others (Slade, A. 2007). This awareness supports us to also consider how the mental state of each learner is impacted by our teaching and affects each person’s ability to learn from us.

- As reflective faculty/trainers/consultants, our ability to be reflective is negatively effected by stress, crisis, or trauma. Just like the learners we support, we are vulnerable to these effects. Even someone with a lot of professional experience and typically high reflectivity may experience a lessening or loss of this ability under specific circumstances. Sometimes, reflective functioning needs to be “rebuilt” over time with the help of our reflective learning community or through another supportive therapeutic alliance. As reflective faculty/trainers/consultants, when we are aware of and manage our stress, we are better able to provide guidance about stress management, when appropriate with the learners we support. There will also be circumstance under which the learner (or faculty) may need to seek additional, more specialized therapeutic help from an outside mental health professional. Reflective practice can support us in making those determinations and supporting effective referrals to other resources.

**Key Principle 2: Self—Other Awareness** is essential to reflective practice and enhances the effectiveness of parenting as well as the delivery of early childhood services.

**Key Facts:**

- Each of us makes assumptions about children's learning and development as well as about optimal child rearing practices. Our assumptions are influenced not only by our studies, research, and professional activities, but also by the many values and beliefs we bring to life and our work. Not all of these assumptions, values and beliefs are always readily visible to us or within our conscious awareness. This is true of the learners we support as well. Our teaching practices are enhanced and learning is improved when we allow the time and create the safety for reflective processes and activities that encourage exploration of these important factors.

- Reflective practice is a crucial way of learning and extending professional understanding for faculty/trainers/consultants as well as for the learners we support. Reflection and critical reflection are highly personal processes that we often facilitate in non-personal classroom or group settings. While staying aware of our own biases, assumptions, values and beliefs, we ask the learners to respectfully ask themselves and each other sometimes difficult questions. We do
this to allow learners time to explore beliefs and assumptions that may have otherwise gone unexplored. We strive to create an emotionally safe and respectful classroom environment so that learners are supported and support one another to engage in an intentional reflective process before deciding how to act or what the best approach might be. This challenges us as reflective faculty/trainers/consultants to be very self-aware of our tolerance for process, conflict and for having possibly some of our own core assumptions challenged. We balance this self-awareness with a finely tuned awareness of the emotional climate of our classroom and the emotional safety of the learners we support.

- When we are aware of our own biases, assumptions and prejudices (prejudgments), we are better able to reflectively support the learning of students/professionals from diverse backgrounds and help advance their learning. They, in-turn will be more likely to use reflective practices in their future interactions with diverse infants/early childhood students and with diverse families. When professionals are aware of their own emotional intelligence, their values, personal philosophies and individual belief systems, they are more likely to challenge and change ineffective practice and improve outcomes for the infants/young children and families with whom they work (MacNaughton, 2003; Raban et al 2007 as cited in Marbina, et al, 2010).

**Key Principle 3:** Reflective practice involves careful attention to and accurate interpretation of both verbal and non-verbal communication. Observation skills are essential.

**Key Facts:**
- Observation is such an “ordinary” part of our days, that it is easy to underestimate the importance of intentional observation in reflective practice (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). Reflective practice emphasizes a highly intentional, mindful observation process.
- Teaching learners to develop and enhance their observation skills is challenging! We want the learners to understand the difference between facts and inferences that we gather or develop through observation. At the same time, it is important to recognize that observation is never completely objective. In our training to observe certain things, we are also trained to ignore other things (Shamoon-Shanok in Scott Heller & Gilkerson, Eds., 2009). Something as basic as what we choose to pay attention to in our observation is subjective and influences all other aspects of the observation. There are many factors that influence our observations.
- Reflective faculty/trainers/consultants can support learners to become more aware of their observational influences/biases and take them into account as they make sense of and use observational data (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). Reflection is an essential practice component to support awareness of biases or “blind spots” in ourselves as well as the learners we support.
When we intentionally balance discussion of the content and process of infant/early childhood work, reflective faculty/trainers/consultants help to assure that observations are grounded in solid knowledge about what is most important to the health and well being of the child and family and what will inform good service decisions (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). An important aspect of this knowledge is a solid understanding of the relational and integrated nature of early development and careful application of developmentally appropriate expectations. Although we are often required to teach early childhood development across a broad range of ages (from infancy to third grade), infants, toddlers, preschoolers; kindergarteners and children in the early elementary grades are all engaged in unique developmental tasks that must be understood in order to make sense of observations. The learners we support must be able to base their observations and teaching decisions on much more than a basic understanding of broad, key developmental milestones.

Reflective practice can be used to support “super-vision” in our learners. Through safe, guided opportunities for reflection with emotionally attuned, respectful reflective partners learners can be supported to see deeper, wider and further (Shamoon-Shanok in Scott Heller & Gilkerson, Eds., 2009). The previous mentioned “blind spots” or factors that are outside of the learner’s conscious awareness can, through reflective discussions, be brought into focus in a way that is safe and non-threatening. Learners can be supported to be aware of invisible areas or blind spots that are revealed more through non-verbal means rather than through what is said. Observation and exploration of these less obvious elements can support infant/early childhood students and professionals to both deepen and broaden their ideas about what they are seeing and how they can be most effective.

Reflective practice encourages an awareness of the context or situational factors that are likely to be influencing the interactions the student/learner is describing or experiencing. Just as stressed and/or distressed children and parents are not likely to show their “typical” ways of interacting immediately after a stressful event, learners respond differently, depending on their own levels of stress. For example, a student or training participant who is distracted, disengaged and not participating in the learning activities can be supported, privately and respectfully to reflect on what might be interfering with his learning and what might help him right now. As reflective faculty/trainers/consultants we do not want to invite in-depth sharing of personal difficulties in class. Still, we can consider when it is helpful to provide the emotional space and “pause” for a student to privately reflect and make a choice about how to proceed. This both models the reflective process we are hoping to support and can advance the student’s approach to learning.

Safe, respectful reflective conversations can help learners sort out the difference between what is observed with what is inferred. Reflective practice acknowledges that as effective infant/early childhood professionals, we are expected to make inferences AND to know when we are doing so. We can support our learners to view inferences not as something to avoid, but as something to be aware of and
to treat as hypotheses and then tested to obtain further information (Farrell Erikson, M., 2005). Classroom and group activities can provide learners with many opportunities to engage in this process of hypothesizing and planning how they would test the hypothesis. This is often more effective through a generative, small group process than when done individually.

- Self-observation is as essential to reflective practice. Awareness of your own facial expressions, muscle tension, tone of voice, rate of speaking, rate of breathing, posture/body position, comfort or distress, etc. are all important aspects to observe as you engage in reflective practice under different circumstances. Again, safe, respectful classroom activities can provide learners with opportunities to practice this form of self-other awareness.

**Key Principle 4:** Reflective practice requires one to **consider multiple perspectives** and to **recognize multiple points of view as being equally valid.** Openness, humility and authentic curiosity all support this principle.

**Key Facts:**
- As described in Key Principle 3, students will likely need support and practice to learn to treat observations that lead to inferences as hypotheses. Reflective practice activities can also support the students to consider several hypotheses at the same time. There is a developmental process involved in learning to pay attention simultaneously to several “screens” of thought, behavior and perception, having a quick internal dialogue about these, and then making a decision about the best immediate course of action (or inaction) (Heffron, et al., 2005). As with all skills, this process is best developed with frequent practice, increased self-awareness, and opportunities to engage in a shared reflection of our experiences with reflective partners.

- Both culture and context will influence learners’ ability to take the perspective of other people. Safe and respectful reflective discussions can support the exploration and deeper understandings about differences across culture, class, privilege, race ethnicity, immigration, sexual orientation, and family styles (Shamoon-Shanok in Scott Heller & Gilkerson, Eds., 2009). These often take a high level of skill and self-awareness to facilitate in learning settings with groups of learners. When a learners are supported to reflect together on these complex factors, they have a much better chance than if thinking alone of appreciating differences.

- The effort to consider multiple perspectives with learners supports the creation of shared understanding of perceptions and experiences related to infant/early childhood/family work. This process also provides opportunities for recognizing and validating the learners’ feelings while supporting learners to try to imagine what the other person (infant/young child/parent or co-learner) might have been feeling and thinking.

- Creating time and regular opportunities for deep reflection in our classrooms and training groups is essential for developing teachers/practitioners who will be able to practice reflectively rather than reflexively. Opportunities can be provided in the
classroom for learners to respectfully challenge their own and their co-learners’
thinking and to encourage one another to look at things from multiple perspectives
rather than reinforcing and affirming less intentional, more automatic ways of
thinking.
• We are often able to consider, “whose perspective are we missing?” when thinking
together in groups. As learners increase their capacity for considering multiple
perspectives, each may become aware of situations under which they are likely to
miss one or more perspectives. These blind spots can be safely brought into focus
when we’ve created an accepting, curious classroom environment.
• Reflective faculty/trainers/consultants can invite a form of playfulness of ideas that
allows the learners to consider more options and possibilities. We can model
acceptance of and authentic curiosity about the learners’ perceptions of the issues
being discussed and encourage the same acceptance and curiosity in our students.
Often this practice leads to important discussions about the difference between
“acceptance” and “agreement”. When learning new skills and ways of interacting,
learners may find themselves in more restrictive “either-or” ways of thinking.
Reflective discussions often provide many opportunities to model and support
acceptance of the thoughts, feelings, beliefs and ideas of others even when you
disagree with them. Through these experiences, learners become more skilled at
being aware of and holding off on their impulses toward premature judgments/
assumptions or getting stuck in “right vs. wrong” thinking.

Key Principle 5: Reflective practice requires one to balance an awareness of both
thoughts and feelings as influencers of behavior and interactions. Empathy helps
to support this balanced awareness.

Key Facts:
• In their practices, infant/early childhood professionals will not have the
option of focusing either on thoughts or feelings; seeing one as “within my
scope of practice” and the other as “someone else’s job”. In fact, an
intentional awareness and balancing of both is an essential part of
reflective infant/early childhood practice. More and more research is helping
us understand that social and emotional competence lays the foundation for
learning and school success. This awareness and conscious work to balance
thoughts and feelings can become a planned part of pre- and in-service
learning experiences.
• Reflective practice helps learners increase awareness of their tendencies to
possibly deflect strong feelings by relying heavily on intellect/thinking or to
get so awash in feelings that reasoning becomes compromised and their
ability to do the job is likely to be affected.
  o As a reflective faculty/trainer/consultant, are you aware of the
circumstances under which you might unconsciously become too
reliant on your thought process and less aware of how your thoughts
are fueled by feelings?
When are you more likely to become so aware of feelings that you know you are being less thoughtful than the situation calls for?

How does this awareness help you in your work?

- Empathy and sympathy are two very different concepts that the learners we support may confuse.  
  - Sympathy is sometimes thought of as a more surface-level experience of feeling bad or sad that someone has experienced something difficult ("I am sorry that your block tower was knocked down.").
  
  - Empathy is seen as a deeper form of connecting with the feelings and experiences of another person as if you were "in their shoes". Empathy requires that we be willing to feel deeply and remember the details about the experiences that caused these often, intense feelings even if the specific circumstances were very different from the other person's experiences. ("You are so mad that your block tower got knocked over during clean up time! You worked hard to build such a high tower. You wanted to leave the tower up so you could come back and play later.") Most of us can remember a past experience of feeling put aside, misunderstood or not having our needs respected by someone. Learners can be supported to understand that they do not have to have had the exact same experience in order to empathize with the feelings and experience of the other person.
  
  - Empathy is not the same as agreeing or siding with one person or the other. I can feel and empathize with the sense of frustration described above without agreeing that the other children did something wrong by putting the blocks away during clean up time. Rich reflective discussions can occur as learners explore how empathy and perspective taking can be helpful in many different infant/early childhood/family scenarios.

- An empathic response during a learning activity can support a neurological shift from a stance of defense to a threat or sense of isolation to a more open stance of being understood. From this more open stance, learners are likely to be more able to take the perspective of others and to make more effective use of the reflective learning activity. Empathy can help lessen the obstacles to effective human connectedness. Children will learn to respond with empathy when they experience empathic responses from their parents and teachers. Parents and teachers will be more able to respond with empathy if they also experience it in their interactions with important others.

**Essential Practices:**

1. See the *Essential Practices* described in previous sections.
2. Expect that the students/learners in your group will join with you to co-create with a safe, trusting and respectful learning environment. This will require modeling on your part as well as a willingness to ask sometimes difficult questions and possibly reframe learners' comments to support such an environment. Learners can be supported to understand expectations related to "rules of engagement" in open
discussions that are free of judgment and harsh criticism. Safety is also enhanced when learners are encouraged to be thoughtful about how much personal information to share in class discussions and in how much detail. It is never too early to model professional reflective practice as a process that is very different from either heart-to-heart conversations with a close and trusted friend or private psychotherapy.

3. Encourage classroom discussions that aim to get a more clear understanding of what is happening for all involved rather than on solving problems or advising next steps. Often learners are unaware of how often they engage in unsolicited advice giving or premature problem solving. Reflective practice is an intentional way of “going slow to go fast”. \textit{Ask don’t tell} can be an approach you model as well as reframe/reinforce in discussions.

4. Balance your role as “teacher” with that of learning facilitator and co-learner. It can be helpful to think of yourself as “the guide on the side rather than the sage on the stage” when supporting a reflective practice approach to developing infant/early childhood/family professionals.

5. As a learning facilitator who guides the reflective process, it is important to let go of “knowing” and to allow space for “not knowing” in both yourself and the learners. This can be especially challenging when you will be evaluating student learning and assigning a grade. Clearly, it is reasonable to expect students to know facts about theories and best practices. At the same time, a reflective approach to infant/early childhood/family work is facilitated through authentic curiosity about the feelings, perceptions and experiences of the learners. This then invites their curiosity about the same in the children they teach and the infants/young children and families they will serve. Appropriate “not knowing” allows for many more possibilities for effective practice than does too much confidence in knowing “the” right way.

6. Use language (verbal and non-verbal, silence, comments, questions, descriptions, observations) that encourages deeper thinking and more detailed exploration of concepts, perceptions, beliefs and ideas. Envision an iceberg that has only a small portion visible above the water line. Some say, that reflective practice helps us lower or learn to see below the waterline. Our reflective process with the learners often starts by thinking together about the more surface level observations and experiences. In a safe and trusting classroom environment we can then use the reflective process to consider what might be inside/beneath those observations, feelings and experiences.

7. Stay mindful of parallel process. Years ago Jeree Pawl proposed thinking of parallel process as “The Platinum Rule”: \textit{Do unto others as you would have others do unto others}. Reflective practice encourages the types of emotionally attuned, thoughtful and respectful relationships between learners and teachers that we hope to see between the infant/early childhood professional and the children and parents they serve, and, most importantly, between the parents and children our services support. These parallels go more deeply than the conscious interactions between players. Reflective practice encourages us to consider questions like,

\begin{itemize}
  \item “How might my sense of dread approaching this home visit parallel this parent’s experience of the challenges he faces?”
\end{itemize}
“If I find Circle Time tense and unpleasant, what might the experience be like for the children?”

“I never feel like I am doing a good enough job for this mom. She seems dissatisfied with me and with her children. I wonder if the children also feel as if they are not good enough for mommy?”

8. As appropriate in a group learning setting, develop your ability to stay with the feelings being expressed rather than trying to hurry to “make” the learner feel better about her self or the situation. Might your urge to “be nice” or “make nice” diminish an important process for the learner? Recognize your discomfort with particular emotions, any urges you experience during those situations, and assess your motivation to act before doing so. For example, quickly and internally ask yourself, “Am I pointing out the positive side of this experience to lessen my distress or because it will help this student with her reflective process?” Although we want to be both respectful and somewhat protective of the learners we support, a rush to “looking on the bright side” is neither respectful nor effective in helping develop more effective practice.

9. Model healthy, transparent and intentional conflict management. Many infant/early childhood professionals and parents have difficulty managing conflict. Thoughtfully using reflective discussions in the classroom to name, explore, and stay with conflicts through a healthy process of reasonable resolution or options to address the conflict supports learners as they experience conflicts with the children/families and colleagues with whom they work.

10. Intentionally assess with the learners how the classes/sessions are going, what is working and what could be improved. Reflective practice is an interpersonal, dynamic process that is neither scripted nor prescriptive. Both the learners and the reflective faculty/trainer/consultant have responsibility for making the sessions work to support professional development and effective infant/early childhood work.

Still to come: Ideas for Video clips –

Suggested Resources


*Others still to be listed*
Bibliography


DeBonis, J., (2010). *What is reflective functioning? How do we encourage and build reflective capacity?* Developed for the CYFD Home Visiting Program by the Center for Development & Disability, University of New Mexico: Albuquerque, NM.


NM Pre-K CD titled, “Observational Assessment Tools” (available online at: [https://www.newmexicoprek.org/training/](https://www.newmexicoprek.org/training/))


Tronick (value of misattunements)