TALKING TO FAMILIES
PROMOTING TRUST, RESPECT, & COLLABORATION

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ENDORSEMENT FOR CULTURALLY SENSITIVE, RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED PRACTICE
PROMOTING INFANT MENTAL HEALTH® COMPETENCIES
http://promotingmentalhealthiowa.org

Theoretical Foundations
- Infant/very young child & family-centered practice

Direct Service Skills
- Responding with empathy

Working with Others
- Building & maintaining relationships
- Supporting others
- Empathy & compassion

LET’S TALK ABOUT …
- Creating opportunities for informal exchanges
- Acknowledging family & child strengths
- Soliciting parents’ opinions & ideas
- Seeking understanding – multiple perspectives
- Demonstrating caring for the whole family (family-centered practice)
- Acknowledging & responding to feelings
  Through an Infant Mental Health Lens
WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF …

Infant Mental Health Principles & Practices

INFANT & EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH PRINCIPLES/PRACTICES

- Parallel Process
- Strengths-Based
- Rupture and Repair
- Multiple Perspectives
- Feelings Matter
- Professional Use of Self
- Cultural Competency & Sensitivity
- Reflective Capacity
- Relationship-Based
- Understanding the Story
- The Working Alliance
- Holding the baby and family in mind

“How you are is as important as what you do.”  
Jeree Pawl

“Don’t just do something – stand there and pay attention.”  
Sally Provence
“Priorities for parents and professionals often differ. It is as if we each have on our own set of headphones and are listening to our own music with its own tune, words, and rhythm. There’s the mother son, the father song, the speech pathologist song, the neurologist song, and the teacher song. Sometimes the only song we can momentarily agree on is ... Hit the road Jack, and don’t you come back no more!”

JANICE FIALKA, 2001, P. 26

THE DANCE

JANICE FIALKA, 2001, P. 22

CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFORMAL EXCHANGES

BLUE-BANNING AND HER COLLEAGUES (2004)

Frequent opportunities to talk and exchange information found to be critical to the development of trusting parent-professional relationships.
ESTABLISHING INFORMAL EXCHANGES AS A REGULAR PART OF THE WORK IS OUR RESPONSIBILITY

• What comes to mind when you hear the words “informal exchanges?”
• What is the difference between formal and informal exchanges?
• Reasons to include informal exchanges?
• Hesitations about informal exchanges?

INFORMAL EXCHANGES

• Building rapport/Developing the Working Alliance
• Create opportunities for frequent & ongoing, unstructured, informal conversations not unlike those we might have with colleagues or friends
• The accumulation of informal exchanges over time strengthens relationships
  * Do we believe it is time well spent??
  * Do we adjust our “agenda” to create opportunities?

WHAT ARE YOUR IDEAS FOR STRENGTHENING/INCREASING INFORMAL EXCHANGES WITH THE FAMILIES YOU WORK WITH?

What IMH principles and practices are used in creating opportunities for informal exchanges?
ACKNOWLEDGING CHILD & FAMILY STRENGTHS

What kinds of questions do we ask families?
What is our focus?
When is “helping” not helping?

QUESTIONS WE MAY BE ASKING …

What are the biggest concerns you have about your child/family?
What would you like to work on with your child?
How can I be of the most help to you right now?

INADVERTENTLY ARE WE IMPLYING ???

• Parents lack competence without our help?
• Parents could be doing better than they are?
• Their children or they as parents are deficient?
It is difficult if not impossible to establish a true partnership if parents perceive themselves to be in a one-down position or, even worse, when they feel that the professional doesn’t recognize the strengths they bring to the table.

BLUE-BANNING AND COLLEAGUES 2004

One of the most important qualities that a professional can have is to demonstrate sincere caring about their child.

Along the way it is important to explicitly acknowledge accomplishments (no matter how small) and positive attributes, fully appreciate what the child and parent CAN do.
Compliments about the child should be a part of our everyday interactions with parents and not reserved for formal assessments, annual meetings, or formal summaries of a child’s progress.

POSSIBLE CHILD COMPLIMENTS

• He’s just chock full of energy, isn’t he?
• What a happy baby she is!
• She may not quite be getting it, but just look at how she’s concentrating.
• He’s so much fun to be with!
• He’s trying so hard.
• Those big brown eyes are just drinking it all in, aren’t they?

Routinely compliment parents … no big productions … less obvious, well-timed compliments are more sincere and often less awkwardly accepted.

RECOGNIZE the parents’ contributions to the child’s growth, development and well-being.
POSSIBLE PARENT COMPLIMENTS
• Just look how he responds to your voice
• You are so patient with her, clearly she thrives on it
• He loves this book. What a great find! Where did you get it?
• You must be doing something right – he hasn’t been sick for weeks!
• Those blocks are just the right size for his hands to grasp.
• You’re so good at figuring out what she wants.

ACKNOWLEDGING CHILD & FAMILY STRENGTHS

CONSIDER
• Frequency of communication … How are you feeling?
• Balance of power in the relationship … Top 2 needs – safety & validation
• What is our focus? If you build it they will come (positive mindset)
• Is being “helpful” helpful?
• Unconditional Respect & QTIP

WHAT ARE YOUR IDEAS FOR ACKNOWLEDGING FAMILY & CHILD STRENGTHS WITH THE FAMILIES YOU WORK WITH?

What IMH principles and practices are used in acknowledging family & child strengths?
SOLICITING PARENTS' OPINIONS & IDEAS

THE HOME VISITOR, EARLY INTERVENTIONIST, and THERAPIST'S LAMENT

"Why don't parents follow through?????"

The lack of parental "follow through" may be because the "solution" the professional offered wasn't acceptable to the parents in the first place.

KEEP CALM AND RESIST THE URGE

to immediately dive into your "tool bag" and pull out a strategy to "solve" the child's or parent's problem
USE REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

• What have you been doing?
• What have you tried?
• What do you think it would take for … to …
• What has worked in similar situations in the past.
• What are some other ways you’ve thought about using to …. 
• Why do you think that didn’t work?
• What do you remember about which parts of that worked and/or didn’t work?
• What do you think it would take to make a difference?

Offer ideas and/or additional information only after getting permission from the parent to share information.

• Is this a parent who will be responsive to “brain science” and “research” or is this a parent who will more likely be responsive to something like … “many of the families I’ve worked with in the past have shared with me …. Worked well for them in a similar situation”
• Which of the ideas we’ve explored today seems to be something you’d like to try?
• How do you think this will fit into your already busy schedule?
• Do you see any potential difficulties implementing this idea?
• In what ways might we need to modify this idea to make sure it works for you, your child, and the rest of your family?
• So … are you good with trying … between now and the next time we meet? You can let me know what worked or didn’t work and what you noticed and we will put our heads together next time.

What if the parent says “just tell me what to do to help Johnny ….”?

• Parents are know more about their children and family than we do
• Parents (in my opinion) are right 99.9% of the time
• Empathize with the parent. Acknowledge their frustration. Magic wand statement. Then … the most effective approach I know of is you and I working together to figure out how to … I of course have a lot of ideas but many of them may not fit for you and your family. I really need your expertise to help me know which direction for us to explore together.
WHAT ARE YOUR IDEAS FOR SOLICITING PARENTS’ OPINIONS & IDEAS WITH THE FAMILIES YOU WORK WITH?

What IMH principles and practices are used in soliciting parents’ opinions & ideas?

SEEK UNDERSTANDING

Take time to understand multiple perspectives (mom, dad, child, caregiver, etc.).

When working with parents, our efforts to understand their perspectives and to view the world through their eyes is important in demonstrating respect and, over time, achieving trust.
Communicate to parents that you want to know what they are thinking, what is important to them, and that you value their input.

**SEEK UNDERSTANDING**

**BE CAREFUL ABOUT**
- Assuming motivation, why a parent wants to do something or accomplish something
- "Why" questions
- Being “right”

**DO …**
- Check for understanding
- Communicate you are interested in their viewpoints, ideas, values, etc.
- Create opportunities to see the world through their eyes/experiences

"WHY" QUESTIONS MAY BE PERCEIVED AS CHALLENGING & UNWITTINGLY CREATE DEFENSIVENESS.

Instead consider using questions such as:
- In what ways might it change things for your child or for the rest of your family if we can teach him to play with toys by himself?
- Tell me what it will look like if we are successful with …
- Tell me what will be different for your family when ….
Seeking Understanding

- Take the time to listen (without judgment)
- Convey that you have the time to listen
- Look relaxed – Breathe
- Quiet the “chatter” in your own head
- Use body language to show interest (leaning forward, eye contact, head nods)
- Use active listening skills to show interest and continue parents’ talking (oh, I see, hmmm, okay, uh huh … aka affirmative feedback from the coaching world)

SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

- Avoid the urge to jump in with your opinions, ideas, suggestions, fill in the gaps of silence or to “fix” things … seek understanding … see the world through their lens … walk a mile in their shoes so to speak
- Ask relevant questions
  - “you mentioned on Friday that you were going to visit Sam’s grandparents over the weekend. I’m wondering how that went?”
  - “the meeting on Monday felt a little overwhelming to me with so many different people talking about so many different things. I wasn’t sure if you agreed with everyone’s input. I’m curious to know what you thought about the speech therapist’s suggestion to use signs with Jenny.”
- Parents can say as much or as little as they like but you convey the desire to understand their opinions and point of view.

FRUSTRATIONS VS. OPPORTUNITIES

PROFESSIONAL
- Parent is more absorbed in talking about themselves rather than the child.
- But I’m not a therapist
- But I am so worried about the child I “need” to fix this

WHAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE
- Top 2 needs of every person: safety & validation
- Don’t need to be … simply listen & validate
- How you ARE is as important as WHAT you do – Jerree Pawl
WHEN DISAGREEMENTS OR MISUNDERSTANDINGS OCCUR

What happens if parents set unrealistic goals, fail to follow through, and/or outright reject our suggestions or approaches?

• Rupture & Repair – builds trust
• Direct energy to understanding vs. being understood
• As soon as we are certain we are “right” we are not really thinking but instead are in “survival mode” ourselves

WHAT ARE YOUR IDEAS FOR SEEKING UNDERSTANDING WITH THE FAMILIES YOU WORK WITH?

What IMH principles and practices are used in seeking understanding?

DEMONSTRATE CARING FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

There is no such thing as a baby, there is a baby and someone.

Donald Woods Winnicott
Typically children are “enrolled” in services not parents. How do we communicate that we care about the well-being of the entire family not just the enrolled child?

Relationships are not built by pronouncements of program approaches and philosophy but instead in a more personal manner and incrementally through personal interactions over time.

ATTEND TO THE PARENTS’ PERSONAL INTERESTS AND FAMILY ACTIVITIES OR EVENTS

- How did the camping trip go this past weekend? Did you get caught in any of those rain showers?
- Did you have a nice visit with your in-laws?
- I love the color of that yarn. Do you do a lot of knitting? Are you making it for yourself or a gift?
- Okay, who’s the bowler around here? Do you play on a league?
- How’d your interview go on Wednesday? Do you think it’s something you’d be interested in doing?
- You mentioned last week your mom was having knee surgery. How’d that go?
- How’s the soccer player doing this season?
Be responsive to parents needs

• At the beginning of a visit parent talks about child being up all night ... you might say something like “I hope you can take it easy this evening and get some much needed sleep tonight. I’ll be thinking about you.”
• I know you’ve got a lot on your plate today with the apartment inspection coming up tomorrow. I’ll be thinking good thoughts about you getting everything done on your list.”

AREN'T THESE THE SAME TYPES OF QUESTIONS WE'D ASK A FRIEND OR A COLLEAGUE?

Too friendly??? Too intrusive???
• No goal of becoming bosom buddies …
• We are attempting to create a working relationship – collaboration

FAMILY-CENTERED

When exploring any potential intervention/activity take the time to wonder about how the proposed idea/activity might impact the whole family.
• Sleep strategy with crying that might interrupt others
• Independent feeding that might result in food being launched towards siblings or more messes to clean up.
• Are other family members on board? Is there time in their day? How’s the stress level of the family? Is company coming from out of town? Is a vacation planned? Are siblings in the middle of a soccer tournament?
WHAT ARE YOUR IDEAS FOR DEMONSTRATING CARING FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY WITH THE FAMILIES YOU WORK WITH?

What IMH principles and practices are used in demonstrating caring for the whole family?

ACKNOWLEDGE & RESPOND TO FEELINGS

Bringing emotions out in the open may be a frightening proposition both for the parent and the professional … AND … both the parent AND the professional have emotions before, during, and after visits

VIDEO-TAPED OBSERVATIONS OF HOME VISITS BETWEEN EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICE PROVIDERS AND FAMILIES

- 13,145 verbal behaviors and 2,155 sequential patterns of exchanges between parents and professional coded.
- Category of professional verbal behavior that occurred least frequently was “accepts feelings.” LESS than 1%!!!
- When families did express feelings professionals in the study tended to offer solutions to “fix” the problem rather than responding to the actual feelings.
  - Mother with tears in her eyes and nervously biting her nails says, “Oh God, I really want her to be able to walk, you know? And, it’s like she’s not even sitting up yet.”
  - Professional responds, “Let’s get her on the sofa and work on sitting.”

  Brady et al. 2004
ONE PARENTS' PERSPECTIVE
"FORCED INTIMACY"

Janice Fialka, 2001, p. 23

ACKNOWLEDGE & RESPOND

Avoid
• Saying nothing – what does that communicate?
• Look on the bright side …
• It could be worse …
• At least you have …
• Well let me tell you what happened to me.
• If you think that is bad listen to this!
• Using distraction
• Jumping in with a 'solution'

Embrace
• Paying attention
• Respond first to emotion
• Utilize eye contact, body language, facial expressions, head nods, etc.
• Listening & validating
• Working towards solutions or enlisting assistance AFTER feelings are fully acknowledged & explained

RUPTURE/REPAIR
TRONICK'S STILL FACE PARADIGM

Still Face Experiment: Dr. Edward Tronick
WHAT ARE YOUR IDEAS FOR DEMONSTRATING ACKNOWLEDGING & RESPONDING TO FEELINGS WITH THE FAMILIES YOU WORK WITH?

What IMH principles and practices are used in acknowledging & responding to feelings?

PROMOTING TRUST, RESPECT & COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES

- How do we view the families we work with?
- What is foremost in our minds? Our compassion & empathy or our frustration?
- Are we genuine with families? Do we truly believe parents are equal partners?
- How do we put families in charge? How do we form those relationships?

WISDOM FROM ROBIN ROSE WWW.ROBINROSE.COM

- Keep in mind everyone has the same top 2 needs: Safety & Validation
- Maintain unconditional respect for families
- When we catch ourselves thinking we are ‘right’ we may no longer be thinking
- Breathe (to calm ourselves and others)
- If we believe it will work out we will see the opportunities with families
- Quit taking it personally QTIP
REMEMBER …

- Utilize reflective supervision/consultation
- If you are ‘feeling’ something so is the parent and/or child (parallel process)
- Assume the best intention (positive regard)
- Meet & accept families where they are
- Notice Ruptures, Practice Repair
- Consider all perspectives & be mindful of cultural considerations
- Embrace empathy and compassion as a daily practice with families and colleagues
- HOW you are IS as important as WHAT you do – Professional Use of Self

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