



A COLLECTION OF TIPS ON BECOMING A:

Reflective Supervisor

“Reflective supervision is a collaborative relationship for professional growth that improves program quality and practice by cherishing strengths and partnering around vulnerabilities” (Shahmoon-Shanok 2009, 8).

A collaborative relationship is a partnership where individuals bring their best thinking to identify strengths or address concerns around the families and children they serve. No one is expected to know all the answers.



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Meet Sam, a new program director.

As part of her new role, Sam will provide reflective supervision to some of the program staff.

She has been a supervisee for a number of years, but she is worried about whether she has the necessary skills to conduct reflective supervision. Sam decided to re-read her training materials on reflective supervision from a new perspective; not the beginner she was when she first read them, but as a supervisor.



Sam reviewed her training materials and noticed the three core components of reflective supervision: regularity, collaboration, and reflection.

As a supervisee, she had experienced and valued these aspects of reflective supervision. She had a sense of a partnership with her supervisor. She felt supported, accepted, and trusted. She could depend on her supervisor to protect their time and their space. Most importantly, she slowly learned the skill of reflection.

Regularity is Foundational

Sam read about how she could create the regularity that was needed for reflective supervision. She needed to arrive on time and to clear both her mind and environment of distractors. She would turn off her phone and computer and put a “Do Not Disturb” sign on her door. If she had to cancel a session, she would reschedule it immediately. Her own supervisor had created a reflective space by meeting at a table or sitting area rather than across a desk. And she was definitely going to develop a routine to start and end the session – perhaps a brief personal check-in and then start each time with the same question (e.g., So, how have you been since we last spoke?) Sam would also have a way of wrapping

up and reviewing their conversation (e.g., I see we have about five minutes left. What would you like to remember from today’s conversation?). At the very end, Sam knew she would be sure to confirm the next reflective supervision meeting. She also thought about how she would prepare herself. First, she would review her notes from their last meeting. Then, she would take a few minutes before each session to relax (e.g., take deep breaths) and clear her mind so that she could focus on her supervisee’s words and feelings. With the many details that were always going through her mind about the program, Sam could see how this would be an important step.

Collaboration is key

Sam recalled her own reflective supervisor and the term collaborative relationship. Sam realized that one reason she came to appreciate reflective supervision so much was that she was a partner in her own supervision. She thought about how she could create this environment with the staff she would be supervising.

First, she would accept the supervisee's description and perspective on the event, withholding judgment. She would use active listening, attend carefully to both verbal and non-verbal cues, and follow the supervisee's lead. Sam knew she would need to maintain awareness of her own words and actions for expressing support, empathy, and guidance. During reflective supervision, the supervisor and supervisee think, wonder, and search together for understanding – that's what makes it collaborative. They hope to gain insight into how the child interacts with the world, the parents' relationship with the child, and the supervisee's reactions to the work. It is not therapy or friendship: It is a trusted, nurturing relationship.

“Do unto others as you would have others do unto others” - Pawl

This relationship provides an opportunity to safely look at one's strengths and vulnerabilities in the context of the work and to use that insight to make necessary changes that support families and children. In many ways, the supervisory relationship parallels the work of the teacher, home visitor, or family childcare provider with the child and family and exemplifies Jeree Pawl's platinum rule: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto others” (Pawl 1995, 43-44). Through support, curiosity, respect, and understanding, the supervisor helps the supervisee to do his/her work more effectively. The supervisee uses those same qualities in helping families support their child's learning and development.

Reflection is essential

“Reflection means stepping back from the immediate, intense experience of hands-on work and taking the time to wonder what the experience really means. What does it tell us about the family? About ourselves? Through reflection, we can examine our thoughts and feelings about the experience and identify the interventions that best meet the family's goals for self-sufficiency, growth, and development” (Parlakian 2001, 2).



Reflection works best when supported by a colleague in a trusting relationship.

Sam knew that, for her, reflecting on her work had been most powerful during supervision. Reflection required a partner who could help her look more deeply into her relationship with the family and the relationships between family members and the child. She had worked with families who were living in very stressful situations. For a variety of reasons, sometimes no one in the family seemed able to develop a nurturing relationship with the child. She would leave a home visit feeling overwhelmed, discouraged, and worried about the child. Thinking about her feelings with her supervisor helped her sort out the ways she was feeling, what the family was feeling, and what was happening that evoked this distress from her own life experiences.

Reflecting with her supervisor helped her to relate well to all of the families and be more effective in her work. Now she needed to be aware of the skills she would need to bring to reflection as a supervisor. Sam looked at the chapter on the reflective supervisory relationship in her book, *A Practical Guide to Reflective Supervision* (Heller 2009).

The list of required skills was long and a little overwhelming. She decided to choose just a few to start working on in her own reflective supervision:

1. Remain emotionally present and empathic.
2. Allow the supervisee to have and express feelings about the baby, the parent, or the developing relationship.
3. Remain curious and tolerate uncertainty.

Moving Forward.

It seems like a lot of information to keep in mind. Sam realized that her supervisor did a lot of little things that helped her feel valued and respected. As Sam read more of her reflective supervision materials, she learned about supervisor attributes that support the creation of a trusting relationship. She was also glad she would continue to receive reflective supervision as she took on this new role. Overall, Sam felt confident that in her new position she would be supporting her staff the way she had been supported. She knew first-hand how important this support is to working effectively with children and families.





References

Heller, Sherryl S., and Linda Gilkerson, eds. 2009. *A Practical Guide to Reflective Supervision*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.

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