

Introduction to Module 7

Programmatic consultation is an important part of infant and early childhood mental health consultation.

It seeks to enhance the overall early childhood program by, for example, assisting early childhood education and home visiting program administrators and staff with both their setting's overall social and emotional climate as well as enhancing problem-solving issues or issues that affect more than one child, staff, or family member.

Working through one situation can have a positive cascading impact on the whole program. It's important to keep in mind that programmatic consultation often takes place simultaneously with child and family consultation or classroom consultation in the early care and education world.

Hello my name is Leah Eckley. I work at Southwest Human Development in Phoenix, Arizona. I oversee our early childhood mental health consultation program, known as Smart Support.

Smart Support is a large mental health consultation program. We serve the entire state. We have about 40 consultants that work with us. This year marked our 10th year of services, which was a very exciting milestone for us.

Today, I'm here to talk with you about the Center of Excellence for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultations Core Competency 7. This competency is programmatic consultation. It has four key categories that we'll talk about in detail.

The first one is understanding and attending to program design and infrastructure. The second one, supporting and facilitating program-wide approaches to supporting the mental health of children and families. The third, engaging in group facilitation. The fourth, supporting and facilitating plans for mental health support during crisis or disaster.

Before you view this module, I'd like to share some examples of programmatic consultation in Arizona and the work that we've done. I find that stories from the field can help bring a topic to life.

The first example that I want to talk about falls under the third category of Module 7, which is engaging in group facilitation. In Smart Support, we have served a very large child care program a little bit outside of Phoenix for a few years. Many of the teachers have experienced child-focused as well as classroom-focused consultation with the mental health consultant. Her name's Diana.

The site has had many professional development opportunities available to them. They're a well-resourced center. They're fortunate in that they have a variety of specialists that come in. Diana considered along with the site director if reflective group meetings with teachers might be a next step for the site.

In the reflective groups for teachers, Diana and the teachers could think together about ways to integrate what they have learned in their professional development opportunities and think about ways to integrate ideas into the classroom.

Together, Diana and the site director crafted a plan to have the preschool teachers gather weekly for about an hour to talk about the work. They ended up having two groups so the numbers would be low enough to facilitate easy conversation.

Since the consultant knew several of the teachers quite well, she developed a list of topics she thought they might want to discuss in more detail. This included subjects such as challenging behavior, cultural sensitivity and equity, special needs, trauma-informed care, staff wellness, expulsion prevention strategies, as well as team-building.

The first meeting consisted of developing group norms for their time together. They kept their norms pretty simple, with respectful communication, refraining from interrupting, and practicing being open-minded as the top three.

The group focused on reflecting and thinking together before suggesting strategies to each other. This was sometimes hard for the group as there was a pull to offer strategies to solve dilemmas, but the consultant really wanted to help the team slow down and think through all the possibilities. She began each group meeting with a brief mindfulness activity to help center the room and the teachers.

Diana, as the consultant and facilitator of the groups, maintained a neutral stance. She strived to affirm the subjective experience of the group members. Diana focused on involving all members of the team and gently nudged the over as well as the under-talkers to create a more democratic group atmosphere.

The group met weekly for nine months of the school year. Through participating in a meaningful and intentional group experience, the staff grew closer. They had less conflict. They reported being better able to address challenges in the classroom with children as well as with adults.

The consultant felt the teams were now more grounded in child development and thinking about children's needs. Additionally, the director reported that there has been less staff turnover. She has noticed less burnout behaviors in the teachers and in herself.

Programmatic consultation can also be an effective strategy to help early care and education professionals or home visitors through a crisis. Over the years, our Smart Support consultants have been available to help navigate challenging situations that have come up, such as child injuries, teacher suicidal thoughts, deaths of teachers, children, and parents.

These situations are always challenging. I'm going to talk a little bit more about a recent situation that came up. One of consultants -- her name is Pamela -- recently helped a home visitor with a family who had experienced a loss. Pamela have been providing consultation to a home visiting team for about six months.

Consultation is offered to the team of seven home visitors and their supervisor monthly with a case consultation format. One of the home visitors shared that a mother recently gave birth to twins. Unfortunately, one of the twins passed away shortly after delivery.

The home visitor felt overwhelmed thinking about how to talk to the mother about her loss. Pamela thought together with the home visitor about words to use, potential resources. They spent time processing until the home visitor felt comfortable with providing her next visit.

In Smart Support consultation to home visiting teams, our goal is to build the home visitor's capacity to work effectively with the families they serve. This was really the intent of trying to build up the home visitor's capacity and thoughts about being able to move effectively through her next.

The visit came around. The mother appeared well, but she did speak in a quiet monotone. When the home visitor asked about the infant who passed away, the mother quickly changed the topic to her living baby. When she asked about how the mother was feeling, she stated that she wasn't sleeping well. She doesn't feel like eating and is having trouble keeping track of things.

While these symptoms sometimes are universal for new mothers, the home visitor tried to dig a little bit deeper. The mother then shared that it's hard for her to be happy about the new baby knowing that her twin won't grow up with her. The home visitor empathized with how hard grief is and the compounded stress of having a new baby to care for as well.

As the visit closed, the home visitor asked if she could come more frequently for a while. The mother agreed. This provided an opportunity for them to continue processing the grief and talking about caring for the new baby as well.

The consultant kept in touch with the home visitor by phone after the next few visits to process and offer support. She also brought information about grief to the next few group meetings with all of the home visitors present.

For one group, she sent an article on the stages of grief before the meeting and asked the group to participate in a mini book club together about this article. A few other home visitors shared that they also had families with grief struggles and valued the opportunity to share resources and even role-play a few ways to talk with families about the grief.

This instance with one family became an opportunity to help the entire team learn more about grief. While a referral may be about an individual child or family, programmatic consultation offers an important opportunity to share information and strengthen a whole system.

In Module 7, we'll talk more about the competencies needed to provide effective programmatic consultation. Programmatic consultation can be a really effective way to reach and build the capacity of early care and education providers as well as home visitors.

Programmatic consultation can be a very rewarding experience for all involved, including the mental health consultant.