

## Introduction to Module 8

I'm Dr. Neal Horen, the director of the Center of Excellence for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation. Today, I'll be talking to you about Competency 8, which covers systems-wide orientation.

This is a critical component of the competencies in that mental health consultant's work within multiple systems, both the small system of where they're providing the mental health consultation, as well as the larger, overall, early childhood system within which all of this work occurs.

Today, we'll talk a bit about some of the skills that are involved in this, including the complexity of working within multiple systems, how we bridge services, and how we promote mental health and social/emotional well-being.

When we talk about all this, it's important to understand that all of our work as mental health consultants and within mental health consultation programs happens within a larger, early childhood system.

It's often the case that as we are doing our work, we find that the children we're working with and families, the staff we're working with, are all operating within their own systems and within the larger system that we need to be paying attention to.

For example, let me talk a bit about Isaiah, a three-year-old boy who was in Head Start and is currently receiving early intervention services for speech and language delay.

He also has siblings. It's important to know when we talk about a systems-wide orientation that a family is not just the person in front of you, the child that you're working with, but the whole family. In this case, Isaiah's sister, his younger sister, is receiving home-visiting services.

As we think about Isaiah and our work as the consultant in an early care and education setting like Head Start, what we oftentimes focus on is the work right in front of us, and yet, we have to be aware of the early intervention services that Isaiah is receiving, as well as other services that the family may be involved in that they're trying to coordinate.

Plus, this would require us understanding not only our mental health consultation, but we also have to understand the intricacies of the Head Start System, the Early Intervention System, and Part C and Part B of the early intervention system in that, at some point, Isaiah may transfer into the Part B system as he ages out of the Part C system.

Let's talk a bit about this competency and let's start with the complexity of working within multiple settings. Some of the skills that are necessary in working within multiple settings include having systems theory understanding and knowledge.

What does that mean? It means that you have to understand the system that is Head Start, the system that is early intervention, and the overall early childhood system within that community as all of those interact.

What are the relationships like? How are the policies and procedures in Head Start different from the policies and procedures in early intervention?

What is it that Isaiah is being worked on in terms of his early intervention services, and how is that message being communicated to the staff at Head Start? How does it involve any behavioral challenges that may arise that a mental health consultant may need to pay attention to?

How is Isaiah's family addressing the needs of his siblings, particularly, his sister who is receiving home-visiting services? What kind of advice are they getting? What is it that the home visitor is talking about with the family that may be impacting Isaiah? More importantly, does the home visitor have access to a mental health consultant? And if that's the case, are the two of you talking?

The complexity of working within multiple systems really does involve understanding systems theory. Also, you need to have the ability to understand the contextual considerations that happen across those different systems.

That is, what is it that will allow for Isaiah's family to not have to tell their story multiple times, but that everybody is actually focused and moving in the same direction in terms of what's going to enhance Isaiah's social/emotional development?

How, as a mental health consultant, are you helping to integrate mental health into those other systems? How are you, perhaps, supporting the work of the Early Intervention System by infusing what you're working on - the support that you're offering within Head Start - that might influence or impact how they're addressing his needs?

Next, we talk a lot about bridging services. While, as a mental health consultant, we've talked a great deal about relationships, that is the relationship between the consultant and consultee.

In a systems orientation, we're oftentimes talking about much bigger relationships, relationships across these partnership agencies - early intervention, home visiting, Head Start, mental health.

The skills necessary about those kinds of relationships certainly entail the same sorts of skills that we would use on an individual consultant/consultee level, but they also are about the larger system. Part of that is about networking and about understanding community resources.

What is it that we're trying to do as a mental health consultant, as a mental health consultation program to support the needs of Isaiah and his family such that we understand how community resources may be getting accessed in support of different parts of Isaiah's development?

What early intervention is doing about speech and language has a great deal to do with his social/emotional development. Are we connecting that, and are we helping to develop a plan for the use of community resources?

Lastly, when we talk about a systems orientation, we talk about the promotion for mental health and social/emotional well-being. What kind of materials are we sharing with others in our system, with our partners within the system, and how are we making those resources available as much as we can to help Isaiah's family access whatever it is that they need?

Isaiah is a great example of when we talk about a systems orientation not being narrowly-focused just on our work as a mental health consultant.

By really taking a look at how we evaluate the complexity of the system, how we bridge those services, and how we promote mental health and social/emotional well-being, we have a more complete picture, not just for Isaiah and his family, but for the whole system as they attempt to do all the good work that system partners are trying to do -- be it early intervention, home visiting, child welfare, education, whomever it may be within our early childhood system.

As you think about your work as a mental health consultant, your work in mental health consultation programs, wherever you're providing that mental health consultation, keep in mind that the most important piece, in some ways, is your understanding of how all of the pieces of the system fit together for you and as the consultant, and more importantly, for children and their families as they're trying to access services.