

4. Reflective Practice and Mental Health Consultation

Welcome to module 4, Reflective Practice and Mental Health Consultation, in the Center of Excellence for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation's introductory series on Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health competencies. This module provides an overview of the two competency areas and core skills associated with reflective practice.

Reflective practice refers to a consultant's ability to use reflection actively when working with consultees. Reflective practice enables a consultant to think and respond in a reflective manner rather than with projections, distortions, or premature conclusions. Doing this involves thinking about how prior experiences, personal beliefs, biases, issues of power, equity, and culture may come into play before, during, and/or after consultative interactions with infants or young children, caregivers, or staff. Reflective supervision is a central activity to support ongoing reflective practice.

Reflective Practice consists of two competency categories: Uses Self-Reflection to Enhance Consultation and Assists Other in Reflecting. To see the full list of competencies and skills please see the resources at the end of the module. In this presentation we will review some of the core skills for these reflective practice areas.

Let's consider the first Reflective Practice Competency category, Uses Self-Reflection to Enhance Consultation, a little more closely by reviewing some of its core skills.

One of the central features of reflective practice is awareness of one's own emotional and regulatory state. To support caregivers and staff, consultants need to be aware of their own emotional and regulatory state and of changes to that state. This awareness allows them to be better attuned to the consultee's needs. In some instances, emotional state may lead a consultant to draw incorrect conclusions because they are due to factors outside of the current situation. On the other hand, sometimes the consultant's thoughts, emotions, or visceral reactions are related to the specific situation and can enhance their understanding of the situation.

Okay we are going to shift our focus a bit. Right now I would like you to participate in an activity. Go ahead and find a comfortable position in your chair. (Professional voice: Pause for 3 seconds to give participants a chance to get comfortable). Either close your eyes or gaze at an object. In this exercise I am going to ask you to think about a consultee—a teacher, home visitor, caregiver, or infant or young child you have worked with. We have all struggled to connect with a consultee. Please visualize this individual in your mind. Imagine you are just getting ready to meet with them. Imagine that you have pulled up to the house or center, it's a hot day, you have lots of paperwork to complete at the office, and you don't feel like the consultee is going to welcome you. Now picture yourself walking up to the door. Now I want you to do a body scan (Professional voice Note: pause briefly after each body part to allow the audience to consider that body part). Check you scalp, how does it feel? What about your jaw? Your neck and shoulders? How about your belly? Your breathing? What about your arms and hands? Legs? Feet? What are you thinking? Feeling?

Okay now open your eyes. Jot down how your body felt, what thoughts you may have had, and any emotions you noticed.

The types of responses we often get involve folks feeling tension in a body part, often the jaw or neck. People describe feeling their breathing rate or heart rate increase and feeling frustrated or stressed. Look at the responses you jotted down. If this is how we feel just thinking about a challenging consultee, imagine how the following interactions will go. I

bet it won't be very positive. Even our feelings about a consultee can impact how we behave toward that person, unfortunately in ways we are often unaware of. Thus, an important aspect of reflective practice is spending time thinking about emotions and how it impacts consultees. Reflective supervision can help enhance your awareness of this.

Take a moment to write a description of these pictures. What do you see? What do you feel? What do you think?

(Professional Voice Pause briefly)

Did you note anything related to the age, race or gender of the caregivers? Did you make assumptions based on these factors? Where they value statements? (Note: (Professional Voice Pause briefly)

Did you say anything about the fact that the caregivers are not interacting with the babies? Is this a value statement? A bias? (Professional Voice Pause briefly)

Did you note anything about infant gender? How do you know the infant's gender? Was this based on social assumptions? (Professional Voice Pause briefly)

This exercise highlights the importance of the consultant continually reflecting on their internal perspectives and interpretations of external events in order to enhance their self-awareness and advance their practice.

A consultant regularly reflects on personal biases and can recognize when biases may negatively impact effective consultation. A consultant also works to explore biases and make objective decisions. And they regularly reflect on culture, values, beliefs, backgrounds, privilege, biases, assumptions, and experiences, including the impact of experience with racism, classism, sexism, able-ism, homophobia, xenophobia, and/or

other systems of oppression in order to provide diversity-informed and culturally attuned services.

Look at your responses to the picture in slide 8. Were some of them impacted by your own biases? After the initial "aww" response of seeing babies, my next response was "Why aren't they interacting with their babies?! Don't they know how important interacting with adults is to a young child's development?" Upon reflection I recognized that I was responding to my own bias about the importance of interacting with infants to stimulate development. And that just because I opt to use meal and household chore time to interact with my children this may not align with the decision of the two caregivers pictured.

The second Reflective Practice Competency category is Assists Others in Reflecting. The next few slides briefly discuss some of its core skills.

For the consultant to support positive change, they must first understand the situation from the consultee's perspective. This is done through carefully timed, nonjudgmental inquiry. By listening, remaining curious, being patient, and reflecting, the consultant not only enhances their understanding of the situation but also enhances the consultee's understanding. From there, together the consultant and the consultee can explore possibilities for approaching challenges and supporting growth and well-being.

Listed on this slide are examples of reflective questions that the consultant can use with the consultee to support curiosity and enhance understanding of challenging situations.

Additional core skills that allow the consultant to assist others in reflecting include encouraging early childhood providers to become aware of behaviors that stir up strong feelings and reactions; helping providers identify the origins of those feelings so they can respond to caregiver and families compassionately and effectively, and supporting early childhood providers in understanding that their values, beliefs, backgrounds, privilege, biases, assumptions, and

experiences,—along with factors connected to specific settings—influence infants’ and young children’s behavior. The following example will highlight the use of these core skills.

You are a consultant at ABC childcare. The director has asked you to provide support to Ms. Johnson’s 3-year old classroom. Ms. Johnson is worried about Elijah’s behavior. She expresses concern that Elijah’s favorite center is housekeeping, where he likes to dress up as a girl and pretend to be the mother or sister. When you observe the class, you note both Ms. Johnson and her assistant teacher urging Elijah to go to other centers such as blocks or music and trying to get Elijah to dress up in clothes befitting more traditionally masculine roles such as a pirate or police officer. Elijah clearly prefers to stay in housekeeping and enjoys trying out different dresses.

Jot down your feelings and thoughts about this situation. I will give you a couple of minutes to do this.

Now that you are aware of some of your own values or beliefs as they pertain to Elijah, how would you approach supporting Ms. Johnson in this situation? Please jot down some of your ideas.

The prompts listed on this slide provide various options that would allow you, as the consultant, to gain a better understanding of Ms. Johnson’s perspective and allow Ms. Johnson the space to think about her stance in a safe, non-judgmental, supportive environment. It is through this dialogue that you, as the consultant, and Ms. Johnson can then move into considering developmentally appropriate responses to Elijah’s behavior together as a collaborative team.

Early childhood mental health consultation is both challenging and rewarding. The consultant needs to keep many people’s perspectives in mind, including those of infants and young children, caregivers, and staff. The consultant needs to be aware of their own values, beliefs, background, privilege, biases, assumptions, and experiences and how they impact their behavior. AND the consultant needs to help others, such as caregivers and staff, do the same. Reflective practice allows the consultant to do this in a positive and productive manner.

This module provides a brief overview of the FIFTH competency category of infant and early childhood mental health consultation competency area, as well as the related required core skills. Numerous resources are available to support a consultant’s development in this competency. Some are listed on this slide.

Thank you for listening to this module. Please be sure to listen to the other foundational modules and browse our additional resources on the website. Thank you for listening to this module. Please be sure to listen to the other foundational modules and browse our additional resources on the website.