Professional Boundaries in Home Visiting

What is Reflective Supervision?
Reflective supervision offers home visitors a regular, dependable opportunity to examine, approach, and prepare for their work (Gilkerson & Shahmoon-Shanok, 2000). Reflection means stepping back from the immediate, intense experience of the work, and taking time to think carefully about its meaning. What does it tell us about ourselves and about the families we work with (Parlakian, 2001)? Working closely with young children and their families can evoke strong emotional responses. The opportunity to identify and understand the meaning of these emotional responses helps home visitors improve the quality of their work.

Reflective supervision offers a safe place to acknowledge, discuss, and learn from these reactions. Reflective supervision is a mutual relationship that offers both partners opportunities for teaching, learning and professional growth. Within the supervisory relationship, home visitors are supported in identifying goals, interventions and strategies in working with families. Reflective supervision can be considered essential to carrying out programs’ missions and reaching their goals (Gilkerson & Shahmoon-Shanok, 2000).

Reflective supervision promotes home visitors’ ability to deliver high quality services. Home visitors’ capacity to create respectful, supportive relationships with parents is critical to successful outcomes. When home visitors experience trusting, dependable, collaborative relationships with their supervisors, they learn to deliver quality services. This learning happens in two ways. They get ideas and information from what the supervisor tells and shows them. They also learn on an interpersonal, emotional level, through their interactions with the supervisor. This two-level learning helps home visitors learn how to create effective relationships with parents.

Regular supervisory meetings: offer a chance to address the stress that is a natural part of home visiting; reduce the isolation a home visitor may feel in working on their own with families; help to build understanding of program philosophy and professional practice, and provide an opportunity to recognize and address the ethical dilemmas frequently encountered in home visiting. Among the ethical issues home visitors often struggle with are those of professional boundaries.

What Do We Mean By “Professional Boundaries?”
“Professional boundaries” describes the idea that there is an important line between a professional relationship and a friendship or other personal relationship. The purpose of these boundaries is not to be rigid and prescriptive. Rather, they give needed guidance to help home visitors to be objective and to make good decisions in their work with families. This is especially important in working closely with families, because this work can bring up some very strong feelings.
Acting solely on the basis of unexamined feelings can lead to decisions that may turn out to be harmful to the family, the home visitor, and the program. The process of establishing rapport and trust, so essential to providing home visiting services, can elicit feelings and behaviors that are similar to those of a friendship. This can lead to the parent and the provider responding to one another as friends. Home visitors have the complicated task of being like a friend in many ways, while at the same time maintaining the structure of a professional relationship with families. Supervisors can aid them in this by considering how professional relationships and friendships differ.

**Home Visiting as a Professional Relationship** The visitor is in a formally defined role that involves providing services and assistance to someone in need of such support. The relationship is focused on the needs and interests of the family being served. The home visitor is there to provide services that strengthen the family’s relationships, advocacy skills, and overall functioning. Home visiting involves specific responsibilities to the program, as well as legal and ethical responsibilities that may not exist in friendships. For example, a program may require home visitors to keep records and conduct regular assessments of the family’s and children’s progress. The law may require home visitors to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Such responsibilities are part of professional relationships, but are not part of friendships. What are some other differences between professional relationships and friendships?

Home visitors and the families they work with often like, respect, trust, and feel connected to each other, just as friends do. There is a difference, though, in the expectations within a professional relationship and those in a personal relationship. That difference has to do with several things. Among these are:

- **Availability** – With a friend, one might be willing to take phone calls at most times of day, and even in the middle of the night for something urgent. One home visitor may wish to be available to families, even outside the boundaries of a normal work week. After all, questions and problems can arise at any time. Another home visitor might want to make sure that families cannot reach her directly outside of normal work hours. There is not necessarily a right and wrong way to handle afterhours contacts. Home visitors need to balance their program’s policies, their own tolerance for frequent or after-hours contact, and their families’ needs.

Adrienne, a home visitor, recounts, “I used to give out my cell phone number to all my families. Then I had one parent who just called me all the time. Her life was always in an uproar and she couldn’t seem to make even small decisions for herself. I realized I had gotten so attached to her that I felt somehow like I had to take care of her! My supervisor helped me see that, after all, I was not going to be working with this parent for the rest of her life! I needed to help...
her find a way to handle things herself, or with help from family and friends. Anyhow, I got a lot of help from my supervisor on this and ended up deciding I would not give out my cell phone number anymore. Now I tell families to call our emergency after hours number if they need help in the off hours."

Tawnia, another home visitor comments, “I do give out my home and cell phone number to families. I just explain that they should only call at night or on the weekend if it is a really big emergency, or if they have to cancel an appointment at the last minute. Mostly, parents understand that. If one of them calls me when they shouldn’t, I just keep the call short, and explain later that is not what I expect them to do. It has worked out just fine so far.”

• Concrete aid – Friends might casually share belongings, lend one another small amounts of money, or do errands for each other. With a home–visited family, such help is provided using either program or community resources.

An example of the possible downside of following the impulse to “help” with concrete aid is when Sara, a home visitor, lent a mother cab fare to get home from a meeting she needed to attend as part of her family service plan. Sara did not mind if she was never paid back, but the mother was embarrassed by her inability to repay this small loan and dropped out of the program.

• The extent of involvement in one another’s lives – Friends can get very involved with each other, and can even become “like family.” Home–visited families do not become involved in their visitors’ lives. Home visitors get involved in families’ lives in limited ways, as defined by the goals and purpose of the home.

• Emotional and social support – Friends can expect some give and take with such support. You might bring your worries and triumphs about your own personal and family life to a good friend. Home–visited families are not expected to meet staff members’ needs for friendship, support, or practical help.

During Janna’s visit with Suzanne, they talked at length about Suzanne’s conflicts with her mother and her husband. At times Janna was tempted to share some stories about her own family life. She did not do that, though, because she realized her job was to listen carefully to Suzanne. She knew she needed to offer support, and perhaps help her think about what she might like to do about these concerns. She did decide to say, as a way of sharing a possibly useful strategy, “One time I was having an argument like that with my mother. What helped was when I sat her down and explained to her how I was feeling. That turned out to help a lot. We were able to have a good talk.” Janna told this story for a specific teaching purpose, not to get help or support for herself.
visiting program. Families may invite their visitor to take part in small and large family events. Home visitors need to discuss such an invitation with their supervisors, to help gauge it’s meaning for the family and to decide on a response that is in the best interest of the parents and children being served.

Anna said to her supervisor, “I have been invited to a birthday party for one of the babies I visit. I would like to go, because I think my being there will help show the family that I really do care and want to support their strengths. I am not just there to look for problems.” Her supervisor said, “You have a clear reason why going would help your work with the family. I think you should let them know why you are coming. But, I am curious about something. Would you invite this family to your child’s birthday party?” Anna thought, and responded “No, because they are not part of my support system. I am there to support them, but not the other way around.”

How Can Reflective Supervision Help Home Visitors Recognize Boundary Issues? Regular time set aside, when the supervisor can focus on the home visitor, creates an atmosphere of safety, trust and respect. Within this environment, home visitors can examine questions that may at times be difficult to consider. What can supervisors do during these meetings to help home visitors handle professional boundary issues?

First, supervisors can address boundary issues that might arise between them and their staff members. Just as the line between professional relationships and friendships can blur for home visitors and their families, this line can also blur in supervisor-staff relationships. It is natural that friendships sometimes develop between coworkers, including supervisors and staff. Supervisors can raise the need for clear boundaries with staff. Supervisors might say, for example, “We are friends, but there are still some things about work I might not be able to discuss with you, because of my role.” Or, “I know we are friends, but right now I am speaking to you as your supervisor, and we need to discuss the problems you are having in keeping up with your paperwork.” Supervisors can even say, “It is ok for you and me to be friends, if we can be careful about boundaries. But it is important that with families we make sure to keep our relationships professional. We can be warm, caring and flexible, and still be professional.” By showing staff how you respect the boundaries in your relationships with them, you are helping them learn to do the same with the families they visit.

Second, supervisors can be alert to times when home visitors might:

- Be unable to stop thinking about a family during non-work time
- Feel tempted to offer to baby-sit or do other favors for a family
- Want to offer to hire a home visited family member to do some work for them
- Might want to bring a family member to their own home
- Be reluctant to visit a particular

Contact Information:
AHVNA Phone: 780-429-4787
www.ahvna.org
Email: info@ahvna.org

Maintaining Boundaries is Complex  Human relationships are complicated. Helping home visitors maintain boundaries is not a simple matter of listing rules for them to follow. Rather it is guiding them to recognize boundary issues, supporting them in exploring these issues, and working together to think through the impact of home visitors’ decisions and actions. Reflecting together on the question, “Is this action going to help the family in working toward their goals?” can help you make decisions together about boundary issues. It is home visitors’ warmth, honesty and genuine caring that helps them succeed in their work. The goal in addressing boundary issues is to support home visitors. The supervisors’ role is to help them to be aware of their feelings, and to handle them in ways that are empowering and oriented to successful outcomes for families. Sensitivity to individual and cultural differences is critical in making decisions about interventions with families. Any one action, such as accepting a small gift from a parent, for example, might work to damage or strengthen the home visiting relationship. It is important in supervision to examine the meaning of an action from the family’s perspective, and to consider the home...
visitor's goal in taking that action. As the earlier example about the cell phones illustrates, there is more than one right way to deal with boundary issues. Regular, reflective supervision provides an important opportunity for supervisors to address these issues with staff.

References
