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supporting quality
home visitation programs
in Alberta

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Alberta Home Visitation Network Association

Finding the eye of the storm

By Rebecca Parlakian

During hectic moments or situations, it's easy to get caught up in the whirlwind of emotions that are evoked. In order to reflect on a particular situation, however, staff members need to be able to find the eye of the storm. It is only when staff members and supervisors slow down and give themselves time to be still that they can truly think, wonder, hypothesize, listen, question and experiment.

This ability to find the eye of the storm even on the busiest of days or in the midst of frenetic situations is also a useful skill for families. Being able to pull away from the intensity of the moment—even if it's just for a few seconds—to consider the issue at hand objectively before reacting can have a powerful effect on interactions between parents and their children. Staff members—and families—learn this skill first by experiencing it and then by practising it.

Reflective Supervision in a nutshell

The term "reflective supervision" is used to describe supervision that is characterized by three key components—reflection, collaboration and regularity—and is focused on learning from working with families. It is an approach that is supportive and collaborative in nature and is characterized by active listening and thoughtful questioning by both supervisors and staff members. While reflective supervision can occur in a variety of forms, including one-on-one conversations with supervisors, group meetings, or peers supporting one another, it isn't something you can do only once and are done. Rather, it's a way of being with your colleagues—an approach to interacting with others that recognizes each person as an individual with unique thoughts, beliefs and experiences.

In order for reflection, collaboration and regularity to take hold and flourish, there must first be a solid foundation of trust and acceptance. And the way that organizations can ensure that there is such a foundation is by valuing relationships both within and outside the organization. Quality relationships among supervisors, staff members, parents and children need to be valued as a critical part of delivering effective services.

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AHVNA's new training program ready to roll

by Cheryl Moskaluk

As part of AHVNA's quest to provide technical assistance to home visitation programs across the province, the association's education and training committee has created a new curriculum for training in reflective supervision.

The training program is tailored to supervisors in home visitation programs and other early childhood service providers. The committee believes this training package could also be presented to corporations such as oil companies and other businesses which could benefit from principles that change perceptions of supervisory relationships, and empower employees to come up with their own solutions for the betterment of their organization—and community, says committee chair Marianne Symons.

The program trains supervisors to build their working relationships with staff in the same way they would like home visitors to empower the families they work with. AHVNA began with a focused mission to follow guidelines set up for home visitation in November, 2004, in conjunction with Alberta Children's Services, particularly the guidelines that state that the ratio of workers to supervisors should not exceed one supervisor to six staff members, and that staff and supervisors engage in individualized, reflection-based supervision meetings at least twice a month. Since the fall of 2004, AHVNA has supported programs in their efforts to meet those guidelines.

Promoting reflective supervision goes against some mainstream ideas that supervision should be about supplying stock answers, and offering top-down solutions. Instead AHVNA encourages home visitation supervisors to help staff explore practice options in a way that draws on their creativity and experience. "Reflective supervision



is not something that people pay much attention to," Marianne says. "Most supervisors in the work world are accustomed to doing administration and most of us stay there because it's a safe comfortable zone. Reflective supervision is much more difficult. One of the obstacles to establishing this in the corporate world generally is that it's seen as airy-fairy and not seen as a process that works. But we would argue that just because you embrace this type of reflective supervisory practice, doesn't mean that you don't look after the administration of your program. If you have home visitors going into people's lives and contributing to their lives, you need to know that those contributions are not harmful and will help move the family to the right place."

Supervisors who can build a trusting relationship with the home visitor will ultimately have a much better handle on what's really happening within their program, Marianne says. However, fulfilling guidelines that build in the time for frequent, regular reflective supervision meetings represents a huge shift for some programs. To support that effort, AHVNA hosted a two-part training series earlier this year, bringing in a leading expert from ZERO TO THREE, a

Washington DC-based organization that informs, educates and supports adults who influence the lives of infants and toddlers; and a coach who led participants in an experiential series that put reflective practice skills to the test. About 70 people attended the January and May workshops. In an effort to sustain AHVNA's education around reflective supervision, another day was added to both workshops. The "train the trainer" session was attended by about 10 supervisors or managers who are making a commitment to provide reflective supervision training in the future.

Since the workshops, committee members have worked to join the two curriculums presented earlier in the year and to add some made-in-Alberta creativity to the new training package that's now ready to go. "We all believe strongly in the intent behind reflective supervision. It's a tremendous amount of work to make it fly but it will be an exciting challenge. We have the volunteer commitment, the dedication and loyalty, so we're excited to get started."

Connections editor Cheryl Moskaluk is a freelance writer in the Edmonton area.

Alberta's home visitation programs commit to reflective supervision

by Connie LeMay

Due to the nature and demands of home visitation, supervision is a priority for AHVNA and its member agencies. Of all programs in Alberta, 97 per cent report they use reflective supervision principles, and 94 per cent of programs report that they set aside blocks of uninterrupted time for supervision either on a weekly or bi-monthly basis.

Alberta's home visitation programs have plenty of foundations to lean upon, in shoring up their support for reflective supervision. A 2001 analysis prepared for the American Psychological Association by Jennifer W. Clark in 2001, indicates that the quality of interpersonal relationships between parents and home visitors strongly influences the effectiveness of parent-focused interventions. The well-established early childhood educational organization ZERO TO THREE, through its Centre for Program Excellence, notes that the key characteristics of reflective supervision, active listening and thoughtful questioning by both staff and supervisors, help home visitors to remain attentive to their interpersonal relationships with parents.

AHVNA is committed to the delivery of technical assistance specific to supervision, through:

- Delivering 'Reflective Supervision' training opportunities.
- Facilitating opportunities for networking, sharing and discussing supervision issues.
- Developing training and resource materials for developing learning plans for home visitors.
- Developing training and resource materials that focus on well-being and safety issues.

Connie LeMay is consultant with the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association



On the Home Front

Home visitors: a friendly face and much more

- "Home visitation is a voluntary program that enables lower risk families to access prevention and intervention services without formalized protection services." —Strengthening Families, Children and Youth Report and Recommendations from the Alberta Child Welfare Act Review, 2002
- The long-term outcome of home visitation is to create family and community environments that are nurturing, safe and support the development of children.
- The postnatal period is an important opportunity to engage high-risk families who may otherwise not engage in traditional early intervention services.
- Home visitation services have been found to reduce social isolation, improve parenting skills and enhance parents' self-esteem.
- Studies have demonstrated that as the frequency of home visits increase from none through monthly and biweekly to weekly, the benefits increase as well.
- Early childhood interventions that have achieved long-term reductions in antisocial behaviour and delinquency, include home visitation as an essential feature along with early education.

Reflective supervision strengthens agencies

by Cheryl Moskaluk

Home visitor teams that are reflective in their practice and in supervision, are more likely to form strong bonds as co-workers and will send more confident, creative staff members into the field.

That's the kind of statistic that many of Alberta's home visitation supervisors are confident is being borne out, as AHVNA launches its training program to encourage and educate its members about making reflective supervision an intrinsic part of practice.



Holly Crone, a supervisor in Calgary who has been assisting with the work of AHVNA's education and training committee, has been supervised herself in this way for three years and began this spring to practice reflective supervision with her Healthy Families team of five home visitors in Calgary. That means she takes time to meet with each staff member once a week. The benefits are already being realized, she says.

"It has a lot to do with the relationships we form with staff but also how staff are forming relationships with the families they visit. The goal is to get people thinking about their own solutions," Holly says. "In being supervised, I don't find it helpful to be directed into actions that may not fit the situation. Generally, if you want creative, perceptive, independent staff members—and parents—it's not through a prescriptive approach. Everyone's entitled to their view of a situation."

Holly creates a management structure that leaves time and space for home visitors to review their cases with her and she's able to really listen and can help the staff member

explore and brainstorm for solutions. The reflective approach is definitely working for her agency. In a field where high turnover is common because of factors such as pay levels, which are beyond a supervisor's control, reflective supervision helps agencies create an attractive work environment. Supervisors who practise in this way, demonstrate how much they value a staff member. "We find that we retain good staff because this style of supervision is making people feel that they are heard," Holly says.

Introducing the concept does have its obstacles, especially because every staff member and supervisor joins an agency with particular past history. Some people arrive with negative experiences around supervisory meetings. Others may have had little relationship with a supervisor beyond perfunctory annual performance reviews.

One of Holly's staff members, Lianne Vroegrkyk, has been with the team for three years. She arrived with plenty of experience out-of-country, working with mothers and

families in pre and post-natal care. "To be honest, I wondered at first about why we needed to meet with a supervisor so often. But now I see that it's really very important. We have a very good group and I feel lucky to be here."

Lianne finds that being able to review her work frequently, leads to enough trust to disclose the times when she has doubts

about whether she's done the right thing with a family, or if there's something she forgot to do. In a reflective meeting with her supervisor, she knows she won't be shut down and often she finds other options she hadn't discovered.

"It might be as simple as finding another resource for a family," Lianne says. "There was one child who really needed help and when I was discussing this with Holly, she knew of another resource and everything worked out great."

Holly is very optimistic that the new training program will strengthen supervisors around the province and help them discover tools for getting people to interact. "You want to leave staff with a feeling of being accountable for themselves and in a way that leaves room for their own creativity," she says. The same is true for the relationships between a home visitor and the families they serve. "Families appreciate it when you are less directive and give them credit for what they can accomplish. Otherwise our work with them is just not real."

What does it look like?

by Rebecca Parlakian

Reflective supervision requires that you look both internally and externally, exploring your own feelings and motivations as well as those of the staff members, colleagues and families you work with. It requires that you not only glance but truly look, not only hear but truly listen, and not only act but also learn.

Look. Observe the staff member, parent, or child with whom you're speaking. What do you see? What unspoken messages are they conveying through their eye contact, body language, or closeness or distance from you? What do you know about this person's background, culture, experiences and temperament? How might these factors play a role in the situation at hand?

Listen. What is this person's perspective? Listen openly and without judgement. What does the person's tone of voice indicate? What emotions seem to be involved?

Learn. Develop a "best educated guess" as to what might be going on. Wonder about this person's needs and feelings. Ask questions. Knowing what you know about this person's temperament, experiences, thoughts and feelings, identify a response that best meets the person's needs. As you receive more information, modify your "best guess" and the response that goes with it.

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Key Components of Reflective Supervision:

Reflection

Collaboration

Regularity

Benefits of Reflective Supervision

Reduces isolation

Reduces burnout and stress

Helps staff maintain objectivity

Increases staff morale

Results in collaborative relationships with families

Methods for Incorporating Reflective Supervision

Individual or individual session

Meet in pairs or groups during slow times

Monthly or weekly case presentations and discussions

Use of peer supervision

Meet Us Online

www.ahvna.org

Look for these new resources soon:

On our website this fall:

- Reflective Supervision on the Run, by Rebecca Parlakian. Read the complete version of this comprehensive article.

Links & Resources

Zero to Three's Centre for Program

Excellence has published some great tips on reflective supervision:

www.zerotothree.org/cpe/tip_2003_02.html

Coming Up

The next issue of Connections will focus on the theme of goal-setting.

Hearing From You

Connections is published quarterly by the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association. We welcome comments, questions and feedback on this newsletter.

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Donations and Memberships

Want to become more involved? AHVNA is a registered charity. We welcome your support for the association through donations. You can also find out more about membership in AHVNA through the website, or by calling the office.

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AHVNA elects new board

The Alberta Home Visitation Network Association annual general meeting was held on June 23 in Red Deer with 26 member agencies represented. The new board was elected and the members are as follows:

Chair: Marianne Symons, Calgary Regional Home Visitation Collaborative

Vice-chair: Bev Parks, Norwood Child and Family Resource Centre

Treasurer: Linda West, Healthy Families Healthy Futures

Secretary: Line Perron, Castor Consulting

Vedna McGill, Chinook Health Region

Sandra Logan, Accredited Supports to the Community

Laurie Lafortune, Family Services of Central Alberta

Bev Moylan, Grande Prairie

We bid farewell to Shauna Seneca and Jim Pritchard, both founding members of AHVNA. Jim served as treasurer for the past five years as a representative of the fiscal agent, Hull Child and Family Services. A presentation was made to Pat Wade and Anna LaChance in appreciation of the support and guidance that this agency has provided since AHVNA's inception.

Shauna Seneca, Executive Director of Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society has served as the President of AHVNA for the past four years. She has willingly shared her leadership, wisdom and insight with the association as we have grown. AHVNA has reaped the benefits as a result. We thank both Shauna and Jim for their time and commitment in these key roles.

In conjunction with the meeting a professional development opportunity on "Dealing with Parents who have Mental Health Issues" with Dr Gary Meiers as the facilitator. Dr Meiers provided a number of experiential exercises as well as techniques that would be useful when working with parents who have mental health issues. The techniques could be transferred to working with hard-to-reach clients as well. Overall, the feedback was positive and the 60 participants found the workshop helpful.



Outgoing AHVNA board president Shauna Seneca receives a gift from AHVNA Provincial Director Lavonne Roloff, in recognition of her work as a founding member.