Relational Intervention from Theory to Practice
Santa Clara Behavioral Health ECMH Academy
May 11, 2021 - Mary Claire Heffron
• Think about a person without whom you would not be the person you are today. How did they influence you?
Goals for Today

To increase awareness of the centrality of relationships in planning interventions & the goal of supporting secure attachment

To increase the participants appreciation of the need to attend to developmental differences and the context of the family

To increase participants understanding about the importance of critical self reflection and the perspective of others
Peripheral vision vs. Tunnel vision; where we are very focused on one thing and ignore everything around else.
Peripheral vision is the opposite

It’s about paying attention to what’s happening at the edges – the periphery – of your “field of vision”
Objective #1

- Participants Will Practice Four Techniques that Support Providers’ Awareness, Self-Awareness, Regulation & Ability to Co-Regulate
Caregiver Safety and Connection

Think about a time when someone created a sense of safety and connection for you.

Share with a partner what that person did and what you sensed when you were with them.
Conditions for Reflection

EXERCISE

1. What conditions, environments, or stance in therapy PROMOTE a SENSE OF SAFETY & Connection, the ability to BE BRAVE, to talk about uncomfortable or difficult topics?

2. What conditions, environments, or activities in therapy might INTERFERE with a SENSE OF SAFETY, Connection, BRAVERY or BELONGING?
What Supports or Conversely Impedes Safety & Connection?

Promote

• Ability to slow down, time to think
• Confidentiality
• Shared purpose
• Non-critical climate
• Curiosity

Interferes

• Danger and Fear
• Pace of practice
• Self criticism, judgement
• Assumptions about our own or another's motivations
• Historical or past Trauma
Territory of Reflective Capacity and Needed Components

Mindfulness Supports Regulation-Regulation Supports Co-Regulation

Inspired by the work of Arietta Slade
How the parent makes sense of his/her own and the child’s behavior in terms of underlying cognitive and emotional states
As therapists we want to both use and promote reflective functioning/mentalizing

• Mental states of other can’t be known for certain, we can only get curious.

• Asking about mental states activates reflective functioning (mentalizing) process.

• During advice giving, prescribing what to do, interpretation, or theorizing), the parent’s reflective function (mentalizing process) can be interrupted.
Territory of Reflective Capacity and Needed Components
Mindfulness Supports Regulation-Regulation Supports Co-Regulation

Inspired by the work of Arietta Slade
As arousal increases or someone becomes hyper-aroused reflective functioning (mentalizing capacity) diminishes.

- Notice bigger more complex emotions of ourselves and how they influence behavior of others.
- Notice impact of bigger more complex emotions of others and how they affect emotion & behavior in ourselves.
- Use techniques that calm emotions of self and others.
- Note our own mental & bodily states or simple emotions.

Hypo-arousal leads to a crash in reflective functioning.
THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Zone of Hyperarousal

- Fight/Flight (sympathetic nervous system activated)
- Anxiety, anger, impulsivity, reactivity, threatened
- Can’t effectively connect with others

Window of Tolerance

- Present, engaged, alert (ventral vagal)
- Access to creativity and problem solving
- Connected – Safe & Social

Zone of Hypoarousal

- Freeze (dorsal vagal)
- Numb, shut down, protective path of last resort
- Disconnected from self and others, can’t act

Originally Developed by Dan J. Siegal
What happens to you or your clients when “stirred up” shows up in a therapy session?
Where Does Mind Go When it is Hyjacked?

Past....... Future........
Common Responses to Getting “Stirred Up”
Where I or others tend to go in response?

● Get on the fix-it train! Seek a quick solution.
● Flee-tell a story, change the subject, imagine a happy ending or something good that will come of this.
● Get perky! Get overwhelmed, become one with client.
● Tell stories about similar situations that have a happy ending
● Get irritated and impatient, sleepy or hungry, check out
Defining Mindfulness—*Preventing Hyjacking of the Mind*

• **Attention** to what is occurring in the present moment (simply observing thoughts, feelings, sensations as they arise)

• **Intention** to cultivate awareness (and return to it again and again)

• **Attitude** that is non-judgmental, curious, and kind.
Mindful Self-Reflection

Helps clinicians stay in balance so they can be present, non-reactive and access useful responses for clients-tends to co-regulate others.

“Connecting deeply and directly to what is actually happening without becoming it.”

Sharon Salzberg 2001
What Does it Take to Hold a Mind In Mind? Two Minds? Three Minds?

What helps me remain aware of my body and thoughts?

What helps me remain aware of my positionality, impact, and privilege as I interact with others?
Mindful Self Regulation (MSR Strategies)

Imagery

Self-Talk
MSR Strategies

Breathing

Grounding
Calm gets passed up and down as a kind of parallel process. To bring calm, you need to possess it.
Deliberate Focus on Mindfulness/Calming Approaches with Clients Can be Useful

Before we start, let’s get settled in our bodies a bit to help us through this.

This is a lot. Let’s take a deep breathe and take this in.

Let’s stop for a moment to see where we are.

Would you like to get a glass of water? I think we need a pause.

Before we start, let’s take a minute to stretch our body out and notice where are feeling tight.
Grounding Techniques with Children and Parents

• Consider simple grounding exercises together. “Let’s both push our feet down, and remember, we are here, you are safe, let’s come back to the present.

• Lean on or hug a tree, pillow or teddy bear.
  Squeeze it hard, lean in.
Foolproof Mindfulness for Preschoolers

• Smell the flowers  Blow out the candles
I have heard you talk about how important your auntie was, what do you think she would say right now if we could call her in?

• Calling in an angel, a compassionate other, a spiritual figure or icon.

“Imagine that you could call in someone that was important and positive for you in your past life, a parent, grandparent, friend, even a spiritual figure or an icon, and tell them about this situation. How would you feel, what would they say that might comfort you? What might they do or say that would help you feel calm?”
Territory of Reflective Capacity and Needed Components
Mindfulness Supports Regulation-Regulation Supports Co-Regulation

Inspired by the work of Arietta Slade
Secure Attachment - Sensitive and Timely Responses

- Child receives: mirroring, protection, attunement, safety, eye contact, responsive, and supportive care.
- Child feels: “I am lovable and I am loved.”
- Child will be on track for well met social emotional developmental needs: empathy, regulate themselves, have positive expectations of others.
Infancy and Early Childhood is a Window When A Child is Learning about his Mind and Managing the World

• Learns through the experience of being with a regulated other

• When he is acknowledged and held, learns to regulate over time

• Infant and young child are dependent on these processes to learn how to regulate stress and upset

• Parents grow in this capacity when they have someone to a well-regulated co-regulator
“The provider (or parent) who cannot think about the child or adult’s internal experience deprives him of the basis for a viable sense of himself.”

Elements of Mentalizing (RF)  
Demonstrating Balanced Attunement

- Gaze
- Vocalization/tone
- Touch
- Imagining out loud
- Different cultures, groups, regions can express RF in different ways, think about touch, ability to read cues and adjust, proximity,
The Role of Parallel Process in Helping Parents Build or Reactivate Mentalizing (Reflective Functioning)

• Therapists can use reflection to explore emotional dysregulation related to the parent-child relationship (and other relationships)

  *Observe, note with compassion, wonder*

• Allow and listen to parent or caregiver & let them to lead you to their dysregulated affect *Pay attention & stay curious*

• *Sensitively open topic* with parents about how their child’s emotions impacts them & how their state impacts the child

• Support the parent to recognize and understand the child’s *hidden* emotional needs and cues beneath the behavior

• *Assist* the parent in noticing what helps to regulate the child
The Experience of Non-Mentalization, Non Reflective Function in Interaction

• Deny thoughts and feelings-ignoring signs
• Mind reading and assumptions “I know what you’re feeling”
• Assuming my feelings are like your feelings, “that happened to me”
• Distortion of experience “It’s not that bad”
• Let someone be defined totally by their behavior “what an idiot!”
• Mind can feel taken over “colonized” no space for feelings that differ or another perspective “Of course it is like this”
• Projections of bad feelings onto another. “He really wants me to fail”
Factors that Make Mentalizing (RF) more Difficult

- Trauma (current or unresolved)
- Disrupted attachments and history of abuse or neglect
- Socio-economic stress e.g. adversity
Use Critical Self Reflection to Examine What you See

What you are Noticing
- Withdrawn
- Quiet
- Anger
- Irritation
- Cynicism about help
- Dismissal of symptoms
- Perky self-reliance
- Reluctance to share personal information

What the client might be feeling
- Vulnerability
- Fear
- Shame
- Worry
- Hopelessness
- Judgement
- Real or perceived bias
- Accusation
- Sadness
The Sounds of Mentalizing……..

I wonder if you’re feeling worried because you are thinking that I’m annoyed that you missed our zoom call.

Are you wondering if your struggles with your kids might have been like what your mom experienced when you were little?

Did he just look away because he’s angry? Or could he be thinking about something else?

Is my daughter having a tantrum because we had to leave the park before she felt ready? Is she tired? Or does she miss her father? Has our move upset her?

Do you think your anger at your son was triggered by the sadness you were feeling when you remembered your partner’s mean words towards you this morning?
Tolerate and Empathize with Parental Emotions

• Expand your ability to tolerate and empathize with a parent’s negative emotions about parenting. (Frustration, shame, anger, disappointment)

• If parents are supported to mentalize these emotions & get help with co-regulation they can make room in their minds for their children’s big emotions and attachment needs
Research demonstrates that the ability to reflect is an ordinary human capacity, not limited by education, socioeconomic status, race or ethnicity.
Ways Mentalizing (Reflective Function) Can Breakdown

- Escalation of stress
- Temperament and/or fit with a particular child, family, or colleague
- History of unresolved loss or trauma may lead to difficulty processing one’s own or others’ (child, parent, peer) experiences
- Explicit or implicit biases
- Situation brings up similarities in the listener’s experience
Building Reflective Capacity - Attend To Subjective Experience of Parent or Caregiver

- Attune to the attributions and projections
- Listening to subjective reality is not the same as acceptance
- Align and try to understanding parent’s perception - Use RF Mentalizing techniques - think parallel process
Wondering Instead of Knowing

- Avoids the pull to immediately offer advice
- Elicits currently held beliefs and felt experience
- Encourages reflective functioning
- Shows that understanding is a process moment
- Makes meaning together
Questions Are a Cosmic Flashlight That Can Help Direct Attention Inside or Outside
Promoting Reflective Functioning

- A self-aware questioner who has considered the potential impact of the question
- Conditions of interpersonal/organizational safety & time and space
- Questions attuned to needs of the other
- Questions are not asked with an answer in mind