

**Reflecting in Action:
Responding to difficult interactions
between parents and young children**



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Welcome!




- Why this topic?
 - Despite training, preparation, and much experience, home visitors can get thrown off balance by the **intensity of interactions** between parents and children
 - Our best strategy is to develop a reflective, regulatory skill set for the unexpected
- What kinds of interactions?
 - Ex: Parent is furious with child's behavior and wants to send the child away
 - Ex: Parent is angry because two year old has not cleaned up her bedroom

Focus for today

- Why do children behave the way they do?
- Why do parents behave the way they do?
- Why do we, home visitors, react the way we do?
- Helping parents understand the meaning of children's behaviors
- Developing self-regulatory strategies
- Strategies for intervening in intense parent-child interactions



Remember the three lenses?
(to understand BOTH child AND parent)

- The developmental lens 
- The attachment lens 
- The stress/trauma lens 

What's it like to be the parent of an infant (under the *best* of circumstances)?


Becoming a parent is psychologically re-organizing:

- Parents think about the way they were raised (which can be very arousing!)
- Parents think about their child (before/after birth).
 - *What kind of child will I have?*
 - *What is the meaning of this child to the parent?*
- The expectations for becoming a parent—
 - *I have someone who will always love me.*
 - *I will be treated with more respect.*
 - *I will be a perfect parent.*


What's it like to be the parent of a toddler (under the *best* of circumstances)?

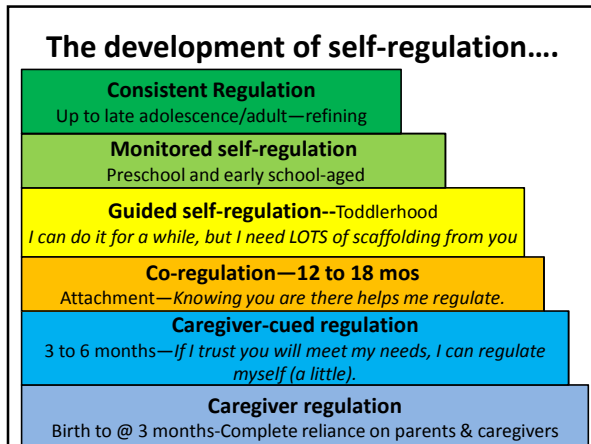
- Going from "oneness" to "two-ness"—need to define intimacy in different ways than infancy
- A time of mixed feelings of loss & pride
- Depends on how well the parent is able to negotiate her own intensity of feelings & how her own past plays into **balancing protection and "letting go"** to parent a toddler. (Lieberman & Slade)

What's it like to be the parent of a preschooler (under the *best* of circumstances)?


- Confusing! So grown up and yet so vulnerable....
 - They can seem to be so grown up and yet they fall apart under stress. 
 - They are all about negotiating to their advantage.
 - They can use hurtful words like 'I hate you' but they still have difficulty knowing how that feels to others.
- On the spot! Preschoolers are curious about everything, including subjects that make adults uncomfortable—gender, race, sex, "potty talk".

But what if, as the parent/caregiver...

- You are seventeen years old?
- You are experiencing significant depression?
- You have felt disrespected and abandoned by others in your life?
- You are very achy and it's hard to move? 
- You are homeless?
- You are in a relationship characterized by violence?
- You have no support from family or others?



Why do children behave the way they do?




All children:

- Learn how to get what they need
 - Adaptation/Maladaptation
- Have learned how their world works
 - Patterns
- Do not know another way to get what they need

And parents do not know another way to teach them

Why do parents behave the way they do?



All adults:

- Have learned how to get what they need
 - Adaptation/Maladaptation
- Have learned how their world works
 - Patterns
- Do not know another way to get what they need

And we practitioners try to find a way to teach them

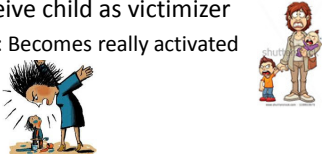
Why do parents behave the way they do?

- Cultural differences
- High risk parents were once at-risk children— their own history of being parented
- Lack of understanding about development and appropriate expectations
- Lack of understanding about childr
 - Attachment

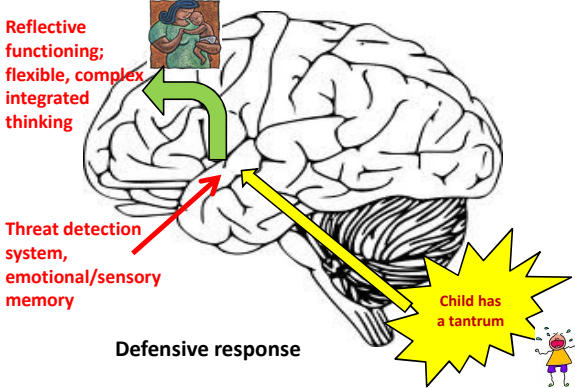


Why do parents behave the way they do?

- When parents' needs weren't met:
 - They don't recognize their child's signals as "need"
 - They resent or become angry at child's needs
- Effects of trauma on development
- Parent may perceive child as victimizer
 - Trauma reaction: Becomes really activated or shut down



The Parental Brain

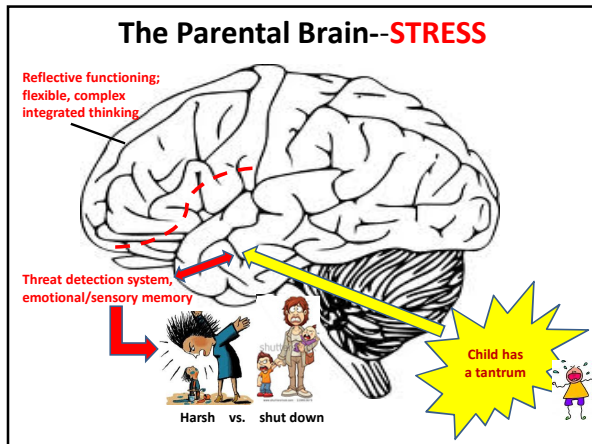


Reflective functioning; flexible, complex integrated thinking

Threat detection system, emotional/sensory memory

Defensive response

Child has a tantrum



Parenting and Unmanageable Stress: When WE becomes ME

Parents under too much stress feel like they are fighting for survival, and sadly, they experience their children as the threat to their well-being.

(Hughes & Baylin 2012)

A history of trauma may make it difficult for a parent to:

- **Recognize what is safe** and what is unsafe, and keep himself/herself and the children from harm
- **Stay in control of his/her emotions**, especially in stressful situations with the children
- **Deal with stress** in healthy ways
- **Trust other people**—more likely to respond consistent with past negative experiences

Illustration of three figures holding a large net, symbolizing safety or protection.

Trauma-based Expectations...

The world and people in it are dangerous

- Which affects parent's perceptions of the child's behavior—



- And actually shapes the biology of the developing child, affecting the child's perceptions, feelings, thoughts and behavior



Trauma and Reflective Functioning

- Trauma obliterates reflective functioning—the capacity to connect emotions, events, and behavior and the ability to take the perspective of another (e.g. the child)
- Restoring reflective functioning allows parent to be sure of what is happening to her/him





Role Play: What did you hear that was helpful?

- Therapeutic elements:
 - Listening
 - Tracking
 - Summarizing
 - Creating orderly narrative
 - Remembering
 - Linking concrete behavior to thinking, feeling

Why do home visitors behave they way they do?

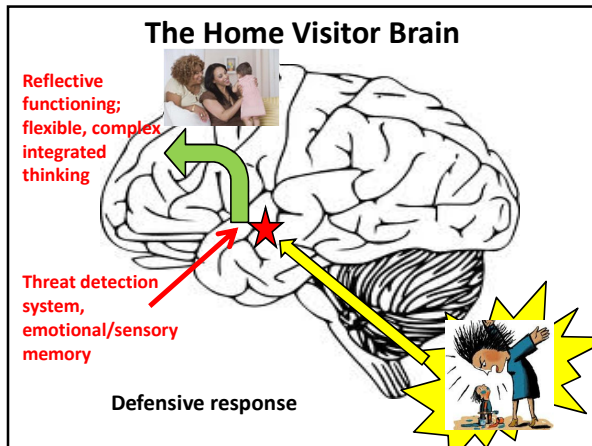
- We have an explicit mandate to get good outcomes, to make our “numbers,” to accomplish our goals...
- We have an implicit mandate to save the world.
- We have biologically-based protective urges.
- We get activated by injustice.
- We want to make a difference!

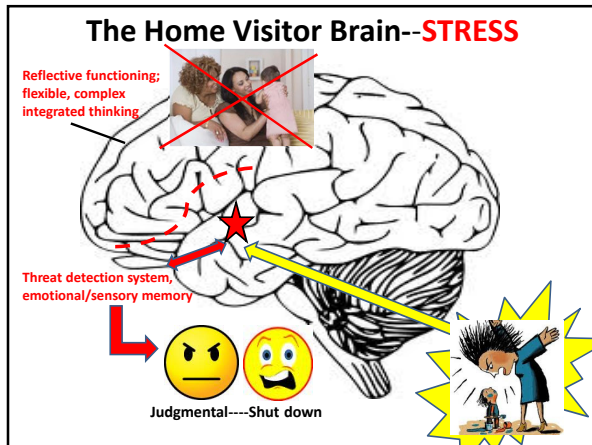


Why do home visitors behave they way they do?

- The less competent we feel, the harder it is to maintain a non-judgmental stance
- The more at sea we feel, the harder it is to stay allied with the parent







Parents and home visitors often differ in how they understand children's behavior

- That difference can be cultural, philosophical, educational, spiritual and can lead to great divide
- Parents' explanations may include: spoiled, demanding, immature, "just doing it for attention," "acting like a baby"
- Home visitors' explanations may include: it's not the way it is supposed to be, cultural differences, not enough attention, too much attention

The illustration shows two red human figures standing on opposite sides of a deep, dark chasm that has formed in the ground between them, symbolizing a significant divide or gap in understanding.

Parents and home visitors often differ in how they understand children's behavior

- Belief on home visitor's part that parent will change if she just would **believe** the home visitor.
- Belief on parent's part that it would get better if the home visitor would **do something !!**
- Frustration on part of both parent and HV



How can home visitors help parents make changes that will make parenting easier?

- **It's not about logic:** if it were, written materials would work!
- Our goal for the parent is for them to reflect on action with us so that they will be able to reflect in action
- You're all familiar with parallel process: It's the same process that the home visitor is going through with colleagues and consultants






First: Regulate self




Put on your own oxygen mask before helping those around you.

Ask yourself.... 

- **Do I identify with the child?** (which may feel like fear, shame, guilt, confusion)
- **Do I identify with the caregiver?** (which may feel like annoyance, anger, frustration)
- **Am I feeling judgmental?** (which may lead to feelings of rejection, anger, hostility)

Be mindful of your own regulatory process



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graph TD; A[Preparation of meaningful work with children and parents] --> B[Disruption of success]; B --> C[User discouraged, angry, hopeless]; C --> D[Consultation with caregiver/brand]; D --> E[Restoration of perspective, honest, fair]; E --> F[Regulation of stress, reflective capacity]; F --> G[Integration of being and functioning]; G --> A;
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Make yourself useful to parent

- Help parents feel glad you came
- Lend your thinking
- Help parents feel smart and resourceful
- Help parents gain perspective – *“no wonder you were so upset” – “losing a job is so hard” – where do you put your frustration?--seems like every little thing he does makes it worse, hard to remember it's not his fault*
- Help stabilize what you can: taking a moment, breathing, calling a friend, etc.



Help parents' thinking come back on line

- Don't try to reason with people until they have calmed down
- Match intensity, then bring it down
- If it is very intense, make statements rather than ask questions
- Acknowledge parent's feelings while naming child's needs
- Remember that both parent and child are listening to whatever you say





Role plays

- You arrive at 11 am--mom is just getting up and the toddler's diaper has clearly not been changed since last night. He is whining and hanging on mom who is pushing him away.
- The 3 year old is having a major tantrum and mom is angrily calling her a 'spoiled brat.'
- When you arrive, you can hear the toddler crying in the bedroom and mom says, "I just can't take this anymore."
- Mom is looking at you helplessly as toddler hits her.

Reflect ON action so that you are more effective IN action



- Remember the dynamic that you have experienced before -- if you do so you won't be surprised when it happens again.
- Consider the elements that create the problem:
 - Ex: Competition for attention or time from you
 - Ex: Competition over who is better/worse (parent or child)
 - Ex: As there is no parent in the home except you, needs equal demands, needs stir up hostility, etc.

Once you know the elements, practice statements that can help calm it down

- Ex: Competition for attention
 - I'm so glad to see you both*
 - I'm glad we have so much time together*
 - I have time to listen to each one of you*
- Ex: Competition over who is better/worse
 - Sometimes it's hard to remember that she's little and just learning*
 - I can see you really like that puzzle -- I wish you had had one like that when you were little*

Helping parents raise children

- Remind them that children really don't know, just like the parent didn't as a child
- Children haven't been here before – they are learning what you teach them



Parallel experience between home visitor and parent

- Our goal for the parent is to be able to *reflect in action*
 - have processed their experiences and emotional responses (“*reflected ON action*”)
 - their minds can be available for thinking even when agitated
- The regulatory process that allows the home visitor’s mind to be free to manage arousing experiences results in being able to reflect
- Teaching the parent to reflect on action so that the parent can reflect in action

We can't always judge the effectiveness of our intervention by what happens in the moment

- Internalization is a long-term process:
 - Best outcome is when someone tells you about an idea you have discussed and believes it is her own

Consultation gives us an opportunity to:

- Step back to see whole picture
- Have full use of cognitive capacity
- Add more brains – always helpful!
- Clarify our role – staying clear about scope of practice
- Relief!