



Guidelines for the Relationship-based Home Visiting



What is relationship-based work?--Relationship-based work is about using *our* relationship with the parent in an intentional way to enhance the parent-child relationship and thereby optimize developmental outcomes for children. Relationship-based work requires curiosity on our part about the parent's perspective and implies a belief in a family's capacity for change.

Key Concepts in Relationship-based Work:

- **Parallel Process** (*Do unto others as you would have others do unto others. Jeree Pawl*)—This refers to the parallel process of our building a relationship with the parent that contributes to the parent's ability to build a positive relationship with her child. Whatever you do for the parent, you are also doing for the child. Be aware of the parent's vulnerability. Parenting/caregiving is a deeply personal experience.
- **How you are is as important than what you do.** (Jeree Pawl)—Our willingness to let go of being an "expert" and instead presenting as a partner with parents around their child is essential.
 - This requires us to **acknowledge that the parent is the "expert" on her child.**
 - **Listen** to the spoken and unspoken observations, thoughts, and worries the parent may have about her child.
 - **Ask** what it is the parents are wanting, needing, expecting from you.
 - **Use open-ended questions** to gather information and to help parents discover things about their child for themselves (*Why do you think he reacts that way? How did you know what he wanted?*)
- **Don't be afraid of parents' feelings and worries;** hearing these feelings/worries does NOT mean you have to 'fix' them. Feeling listened to and validated contributes to the child's well-being if parents feel heard, understood and not judged.
- **Be aware that parents have their own attachment relationship histories** (internal working models of relationships) which influence how they relate to others. The parent may respond to us in ways that are not really about us, so try not to personalize. The "difficult-to-engage" parent is often the parent most in need of our support. Assume that there is meaning under the behavior; for example, a parent who 'no shows' after a visit in which she revealed something personal, may suggest that she is worried about what you think of her and/or is testing to see if you will stick with her.
- **Relationship-based work is strengths-based.** Help the parent recognize her own strengths and those of her child. Strengths can be used to address areas of challenge. But don't be afraid to acknowledge parents' concerns and worries. Acknowledge the special relationship between parent and child, the importance of the parent to the child.
- **Every family has its own "culture.** We need to observe, acknowledge and inquire about each family's culture (defined as "what you learned sitting at your mother's table"). This requires *cultural humility* on our part; that is, an awareness of our OWN cultural lens (our assumptions, beliefs, values and worldview). This is essential so that we do not define this as the "normal" against which all other cultures are measured.
- **Use a reflective process such as:**
 - **Careful observation**—*What's happening here? What is the meaning of the behavior I am seeing?*
 - **Self-awareness**— *What are my thoughts and feelings about this? Where do they come from?*
 - **Flexible response**—*What are my goals? What responses will best fit this parent? How am I being intentional in my responses (KNOW why that's the intervention you are choosing).*

Be consistent and predictable (yet flexible to meet individual families' needs):

- **Never promise more than you can deliver.** Provide clarity about what services you can (and cannot) provide at the beginning of the relationship and ask the parent about her hopes and expectations for your services.
- **Follow through** on what you say you will do with and for the parent.
- **Show up when you say you will** even if the parent 'no shows.' If they 'no show,' pursue them; leave a note with a promise to call and reschedule. Sometimes a parent may be unconsciously testing whether you intend to "hang in there." If you need to reschedule, give as much notice as possible and reschedule as soon as possible.

Attending to self-awareness and establishing boundaries:

- **Maintain good internal boundaries.** This requires that you be reflective and intentional in responding to the parent, the child and the situation, rather than reacting in the moment (easier said than done!). We need to figure out what and where the boundaries are in an atmosphere of meeting an individual family's individual needs.
- **Sharing your own experience** in an appropriate, thoughtful way can convey empathy and partnering, BUT if you find yourself tempted to disclose personal experience to establish your credibility, it's probably not a good idea.
- **[Brackett] your own experience.** Having had a similar experience as the parent does not make you an expert on the parent's experience. Avoid, "*I know exactly how you feel*" messages—we don't ever really know "exactly" how someone else feels.
- Be aware (and help the parent understand) the **difference between "friendly feelings"** in your relationship with parents versus "being friends." Sharing a family's personal story, while maintaining your own boundaries, makes this a very thin line, but is essential to maintain so as not to disappoint them or reduce the value of what you have to offer in your professional capacity.
- **Pay attention to "protective urges."** We may have "rescue fantasies" about the child-- they're part of what makes us human, but not necessarily okay to act on. Protective urges also make us more susceptible to being judgmental of the parents, so it's important to be aware of them.
- **Respect confidentiality.** This includes having guidelines about potential conflict of interest when you know someone in another context and not necessarily greeting someone in public unless the client says hi first, etc.

Acknowledge your own feelings, reactions—self care:

- **Seek out reflective supervision/consultation** from a trusted supervisor or co-worker.
- **Take care of yourself.** Laugh. Cry. Exercise. Create. Do whatever helps you renew.

Michele Fallon, LICSW, IMH-E(IV)[®]
Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultant
Whataboutthebaby@comcast.net