Self-Reflection and Shared Reflection as Professional Tools

The time to reflect—to stop and think about what has happened, is happening and what should happen next—is essential to high quality professional practice.
Skilled professionals use self-reflection to:

- *Improve their skills in working with children and families*
- *Improve their ability to communicate and work with fellow staff members*
- *Understand how their own experiences and beliefs influence their work*

Sharing reflections with other staff members can help develop more effective strategies, with the added benefit of working as a team. These are all-important ingredients for sound decision-making, staff skill development, appropriate service delivery, and effective staff communication.

How can you reflect on yourself, your work and the families you serve?

Working with families and young children is demanding, and setting aside time to think about ourselves and our work can be difficult. Making choices about what to say to a parent concerning an issue with her child or how to respond to a particular child's need may seem automatic, and in many ways it is. When one has substantial experience working with children and families it is natural to do what feels right at the time. **But an important part of the process of becoming skilled as a professional is understanding why and how you make the choices you do through reflection.** Taking the time to look at yourself and your work gives you the opportunity to acknowledge strengths and challenges, and improve your skills.

Strategies for Effective Self-Reflection

- **Observe and remember what happens with children, families and staff:** Programs require staff to record the development of children, parent contact, and information shared between staff. This is useful for communication and record-keeping, but can also be an opportunity for staff to understand what works and what does not work. Remembering and reflecting on our observations can be useful for improving what we do. Writing down one's own reflections in a confidential notebook has proved valuable for many professionals.
- **Think about how your own experiences affect you and your work:** This may be the most difficult part of self-reflection. We often take actions with children and families because they are familiar and comfortable for us. It can be difficult to question what we already think is right. Through self-reflection we allow ourselves to understand our **personal reaction** (how a professional situation makes us feel) and our **professional action** (how we choose to respond professionally in action and/or words) as two separate things, while acknowledging how they affect one another. Because caring for children and families is so important—and at times very emotional—we need to be aware of how our personal perspectives influence our work.
- **Think about the perspectives of others:** Taking the time to wonder about how others' experiences and culture influence their ways of behaving or responding under certain circum stances can open us up to a greater understanding of others and ultimately of ourselves. Reflecting on others' perspectives can help us make better sense of where they are coming from and therefore what strategies might be most effective for engaging them.
- **Identify stressors:** Working with children and families is a highly demanding profession. When working with families

facing poverty, community violence, social spending cuts, and a shortage of affordable housing, there can be an even higher level of stress and increased risk of professional "burnout." A unique aspect of Head Start is that many professionals are also parents in the communities they serve. Therefore, Head Start staff may be feeling the stress both from their own experience in the community and as a professional trying to support others in that community. Being able to name the individual stressors and talk about them with other professionals can help staff improve their skill through the promotion of self care.

How can you reflect with others?

A limit to self-reflection is that left unshared, it can not benefit from the input of others. Shared reflection is valuable because it creates an opportunity to learn about other points of view, different strategies, and new ways to interpret challenges. Here are some strategies for incorporating shared reflection into the professional practice of the program:

- **Set aside time to share your reflections with others:** Reflecting together does more than simply review what has happened. Collaboration with others gives us the chance to generate new ideas and identify new possibilities in our work. Such an activity can not happen effectively unless time is regularly set aside for it.
- **Thoughtfully consider the reflections of others:** Shared reflection is not about criticizing each other's work, but rather discussing reflections to inform better practice. Talking honestly and openly is important but thoughtful listening is also essential. Try to acknowledge others' thoughts as meaningful even if they do not agree with your own views. For instance, instead of responding, "That's not right. You shouldn't have done that," you could say, "You know, I think about that situation in a different way. I think I might have..." and supply an alternative approach. Such a communication style can promote trust among team members, and provide the opportunity for professional growth and effective collaboration.
- **Use shared reflections as a source for creating action plans and considering future responses:** Such rich self-reflection and group sharing of reflection provides a great deal of information that can be used in planning future work. Consider how to use this information to inform individual and team practice.

While the strategies presented explore how self-reflection can be built into a system for regular group discussion, you can begin in small ways on your own to find opportunities in which you can take a breath and think about yourself, your work, and the feelings it inspires. Taking such time is an important step in building your professional skill, contributing to your own emotional health, and can ultimately improve your relationships with other staff members and the families you serve.

For more support on this topic please see the following Family Connections materials:

Short papers:

Supportive Supervision: Promoting staff and family growth through positive relationships

Trainings:

Module One: *Perspective Taking*
Module Two: *The Program Climate and You*
Accentuate the Positive
Module Four: *Better Communication*

Additional Resources

Kloosterman, Valentina. "A Partnership Approach for Supervisors and Teachers." *Young Children* 58, no. 6 (2003): 72-76.

Self-Reflection and Shared Reflection as Professional Tools was developed by the Family Connections Project at Children's Hospital Boston, under the Innovation and Improvement Project grant from the Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Authors of *Self-Reflection and Shared Reflection as Professional Tools* are Mary Watson Avery, William R. Beardslee, Catherine C. Ayoub, and Caroline L. Watts. Copyright Children's Hospital Boston, January 2008.