

Ask the Expert

REBECCA SHAHMOON SHANOK, LCSW, PhD

ZERO TO THREE Board Members answer your questions about best practices and provide practical information you can use in your work with infants, toddlers, and their families.

MEET: Rebecca Shahmoon Shanok, LCSW, PhD, director of the Institute for Infants, Children & Families at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, New York, NY. Dr. Shahmoon Shanok's expertise includes parent development, assessment and intervention, dyadic interventions with delayed young children and their parents, peer play psychotherapy for young children, the interweaving of mental health services in community-based settings, post-degree transdisciplinary training, and reflective supervision and practice.

This column is excerpted from an expanded special feature by Dr. Shahmoon Shanok on her approach to reflective supervision available on-line at www.zerotothree.org/ask

A Relationship for Learning

Q: As the director of an early intervention program, I'm trained in child development. How am I qualified to provide reflective supervision to my staff?

A: Great question! The short answer is, you are not . . . yet. Your question, however, indicates several strengths, including your awareness that it takes training and support to learn to supervise someone reflectively, an approach that goes beyond your own disciplinary background. Other strengths are your training in child development and the experience you have gained about how to interact with children. You know a great deal about adult development by knowing how children grow and change, and your prior experience in interacting with many different kinds of children means that your observation and empathic skills have gotten practice. Both will serve you very well as you look for a practical way to grow toward doing reflective supervision with your staff. Perhaps it's obvious, but I think it's still worth saying: I believe that your interest and the steps you take in turning toward reflective practice will enhance your program.

Directors and staff members can move a workplace toward reflective practice even without prior experience or spending additional funds. For example, reframing meetings, even administrative meetings, builds a community at work together. Looking as a staff together at everything from the point of view of the people being served, from their very first contact with you right through every step (including how they are billed) until termination cultivates reflective practice. Such discussions embody several aspects of reflective supervision: thinking together about process, looking at experiences and requirements from several different vantage points, elevating awareness of emotions, and talking up as well as down the hierarchy of your organization. These discussions could become a deeply reflective conjoined staff experience.

What will most help you to become a reflective supervisor is to experience it yourself. In fact, the reflective supervision you experience

could be precisely about your supervision of your staff. We call it "holding so that others can hold." Using this method, you would find a supervisor whom you respect and with whom you feel comfortable and meet with that person regularly, ideally for an hour or so each week. In that forum, you would recall, describe, and discuss the supervision you are doing with your staff. Your supervisor's ability to help you freshly think about your own efforts will fuel your own abilities to do the same for others. As your supervisor holds you and your dilemmas, so you will be able to hold your staff members', and your staff members will become better able to hold their clients'. This pass-it-on effect is called parallel process, and appreciating its power is another key to reflective practice and supervision.

Q: If I had to meet for an hour with every member of my staff each week, I would never get my job done. Reflective supervision sounds like a nice idea, but how can I realistically offer it when I have other pressing demands on my time?

A: Although the huge time crunch seems to be a primary dilemma across all sectors of modern society, I often think that it is particularly and painfully true that there is not enough time in programs serving young children, because so much of what we do is chronically underfunded. Everyone, from directors on down, has too much to do. Nevertheless, I think there is a lot that directors and other lead staff can do to promote reflective practice and supervision in their programs or departments. There are many ways, for example, to use reflective approaches in existing meetings, even administrative ones.

Why not open your worthy question to your staff? There may be other ways to get certain requirements of your job done if staff members, in return, get something as enriching as reflective supervision and if they can feel like partners with you in proactively bringing about constructive change. Encouraging other people to think about this with you implies that you have already begun to move in the direction of greater reflection and sharing and that,



in turn, empowers others to do the same. As a group, you may actually come up with some ideas that would streamline or delegate certain demands and allow you more time.

Another way to bring reflective supervision into your agency is by not doing it all yourself. Be in touch with your local mental health agency, preferably one that serves very young children already, and ask them if they have staff member(s) who might assist you. If they are not able to do it officially, some of their staff might be willing to volunteer, especially if you can help them imagine how much there is for *them* to learn from people who have hands-on daily experiences with young children and their families. Such a partnership could actually move in the direction of a collaborative grant proposal to support reflective supervision at your agency. Also, there may be other staff members in your program who would be interested in learning more about reflective supervision; you could decide to go to workshops together or read an article about it and discuss it over lunch.

During supervision, I often feel that time pressure slows down and moves into the background, while the concentration of sharing thought and care about cases emerges and takes over. It feels as if taking the time actually *makes time last longer*. A deep sense of being alive and connected in this work emerges and reminds me of why I do all the other things demanded of me as a director. It feels great to turn off my phone, place the "do not disturb" sign on my door, put my paper piles off to one side, and turn off the computer screen to truly engage with a partner in what I believe is our all-important work: growth-promoting, reflective care of society's next generation.

Being in reflective supervision as either supervisor or as supervisee is a respite from the more frantic demands of day-to-day life and rarely fails to satisfy and help me be aware of why I choose to do this work. I hope, over time, that through moving toward reflective practices you will discover a similar joy of concentration, shared meaning, and connection, along with a sense of authentic growth together.