

Setting the Foundation for Sensitive Conversations

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NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Theoretical Foundations:

- Relationship-focused practice

Systems Expertise:

- Service delivery systems
- Community resources

Direct Service Skills:

- Observing & listening
- Advocacy

Reflection:

- Self-awareness

There are complexities to consider as a home visitor. One of those includes facing substance use within families and supporting families through the challenges substance use may bring to all involved. Due to the nature of the work and the focus on relationship-based practices within home visiting, many of us may find ourselves in familiar situations or even in unfamiliar situations. According to the FY21 Home Visiting Annual Report, 10.1% of mothers reported the use of illegal substances. Of the 10.1% who reported use, 61.5% discontinued use by the end of the pregnancy, with 34.6% discontinuing use by the end of the first trimester (UNM, 2021). While this may seemingly be a low number, we need to consider other family members in the home that influence the mother and child during and after pregnancy.

As we think about substance use within the family, here are some things to consider: What is our comfort level in having a conversation with a family about substance use? How do we set the frame for the conversation? What might we need to think about throughout our discussion with the family? Are we aware of our own thoughts and biases? Where is the child in the situation? These are just a few questions to be aware of as a home visitor, especially when discussing sensitive topics. Our awareness helps support the preparation before entering a home and what it looks like after leaving a home following a tough conversation.

Home visiting is based upon a foundation of reflective practices. Understanding reflection and using it during home visits are more impactful than we may realize. Mary Heffron stated, “rather than avoiding difficult issues, practitioners can develop a capacity to listen carefully, reflect and find a language to talk to families about serious problems and powerful feelings. We can all learn how helpful it is to “be there” for families, instead of running away from painful emotions or complex situations” (Heffron, 1999). The power of simply being with and lending a listening ear can impact a relationship that will build trust between the home visitor and family and give the family comfort in knowing that their home visitor truly cares for them and their child. When we have a family’s trust and confidence, we can open doors to relationships that we might not have believed possible.

Home visitors have ongoing opportunities to attend training and consultations to add vital skills to their home visiting toolbox. Some of these skills include the FAN, Motivational Interviewing, reflective

case reviews, reflective supervision, and mindful self-regulation practices, to name a few. Some may ask why these skills are important to consider when we have sensitive discussions with families. However, as we know, home visiting can be quite unpredictable. Therefore, the more we are prepared as home visitors for these challenging circumstances and conversations, the more able we will be to handle them, stay regulated, and support the family appropriately.

As we know, the focus within home visiting is to ultimately ensure the child is safe and healthy, even though support is provided to the whole family. When we take into consideration substance use in the home, how can and how will this affect the child? According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, children are not only endangered when the parents' substance use interferes with providing a safe and nurturing environment. The child can also experience developmental delays and inadequate medical and dental care (Smith and Wilson, 2016). Research continues to be conducted regarding the short-term and long-term effects that substance use has on children. Some things to hold in your mind when there are concerns of substance use: be alert for signs of child abuse or neglect, conduct the proper home visiting screenings anytime you feel there has been a change in the family dynamic, monitor for developmental delays and become familiar with the mandatory requirements for reporting any suspected child abuse or neglect.

As home visitors, we have a unique opportunity to help support families affected by substance use and continue to have an awareness of what we can and cannot control. This can be quite difficult, but using mindful self-regulation and receiving reflective supervision regularly is vital as we continue to move forward to provide the proper support and resources to families and help prevent burnout. Home visiting can be rather challenging, and we need to ensure that our focus is not solely on the families. We need to also think about what activates us, how we regulate, self-care practices, etc. so that we can continue to provide the best support to the families we serve.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection.

1. How do you prepare for a conversation regarding substance use within a family?
2. Why is it good to consider your own history, previous experiences, and the parents' history and experiences when having a crucial conversation?
3. What additional needs do you have as a home visitor to feel adequately prepared to deal with parents using substances?
4. How do you take care of yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally after a tough conversation?
5. What internal protocols does your program have to ensure your safety when doing an in-home visit?
6. Are you familiar with the state reporting requirements?

References

- Heffron, M. C. (1999). Balance in Jeopardy: Reflexive Reactions vs. Reflective Responses in Infant/Family Practice. *Zero to Three*.
- Smith, VC., & Wilson, CR., (2016). AAP COMMITTEE ON SUBSTANCE USE AND PREVENTION. Families Affected by Parental Substance Use. *Pediatrics*. 2016;138(2): e20161575. Accessed online March 28, 2022, at:

<https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/138/2/e20161575/52464/Families-Affected-by-Parental-Substance-Use>

University of New Mexico ECSC Database Services. (2021). New Mexico Home Visiting Annual Outcomes Report Fiscal Year 2021.

Resources

CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates: <https://nmkidsmatter.org/compass/>

Central New Mexico Community College: <https://www.cnm.edu/cnm-community/substance-abuse>

National Alliance on Mental Illness: <https://www.nami.org/Home>

National Rehab Hotline: <https://nationalrehabhotline.org/new-mexico/>

New Mexico HIV/Hepatitis/STD Online Resources Guide:
https://nmhivguide.org/search_detail.php?id=58

New Mexico Opioid Hub: <https://newmexico.networkofcare.org>

New Mexico Prevention: <http://www.nmprevention.org/>

Operation Engage: <https://www.dea.gov/engage/operation-engage-albuquerque>

Santa Fe Recovery Center: <https://www.sfrecovery.org/treatment-programs/residential-treatment/women-and-childrens-program/>

State of New Mexico Network of Care: <https://newmexico.networkofcare.org/mh/links/index.aspx>