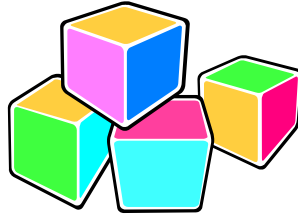


Building Solid Relationships through Reflective Practice

by

Monica Sullivan



Relationships form the bedrock of our lives. From the very beginning, we are supported by relationships that lay the foundation for maturation and development. We learn from example how to have relationships with ourselves, our friends and family, and then with the world around us.

Since all of our learning occurs within this context of relationship, we need a mechanism to encourage active reflection about our experiences, both internal and external. This is particularly true in our professional lives when we work with vulnerable families. Reflective practice provides the framework for an active, collaborative reflection about our experiences.

When I first started working in family-serving programs, I realized quickly that I didn't have all the answers. I learned from experience that it is much better to do more listening and to spend less time giving advice or suggestions. Since reflective practice wasn't an established idea outside of the social work field, I relied on accessing colleagues that I could be honest with, and more often, talking things through with friends and family. This helped me work in challenging circumstances, but it wasn't sufficient.

Once I started working in programs that provided regular reflective practice with a group or a supervisor, I came to rely on this exchange to help me stay honest in my work—to see more clearly both my strengths and my blind spots—and to see where I was truly supporting families and children. This time for reflection became a safe space where I could talk honestly about what was happening and how the work was impacting me. Through this process, I grew in my ability to maintain compassion and caring for vulnerable families, even when feeling overwhelmed.

Once I became a supervisor, I started using reflective practice with child family advocates to help support their professional growth and the growth of their families. As a supervisor, this required that I really got to know my staff. Each one had different emotional, professional, and organizational needs. I had to understand and to appreciate

each person in order to know the best way to provide support. I also had to learn to let each person lead in their own way and to act as a witness to their process.

In both roles, as supervisor and supervisee, regular reflective practice has the potential to create a nurturing framework that scaffolds growth by providing a safe, honest, and thoughtful space. It creates a container to hold the challenges of family service work and to support personal growth. Used consistently and with skillfulness, it lets each of us know that we are not alone and that what we do makes a difference.

Essentially, the creation of this safe, nurturing space can help organizations become more trauma-informed, treating clients and staff with the same openness and respect. As a trauma-informed practice, reflective work helps to create a potentially healing environment for everyone, empowering staff and families to move forward in their lives. Breaking down barriers and lessening isolation, regular reflective work builds connection and trust, allowing for real growth and change.

Monica Sullivan has worked in diverse training and educational organizations throughout her career, working as a teacher in elementary schools on the Navajo reservation, as a teacher-trainer in Uganda, and as a staff development coordinator at children's museums and other agencies. She currently provides trainings to a variety of non-profit agencies within Philadelphia, using her expertise in yoga, meditation, stress management, and child development to help organizations support staff and clients. She also loves to bake, read, hike, bike, camp, and travel.