

Ways to Support Reflective Functioning in a Virtual Setting

As family support professionals working through a virtual platform, our goal remains the same: to encourage and increase positive, responsive, supportive parent-child interactions. Supporting PCI through video or phone can feel more difficult than when we were in a family's home alongside the caregiver and child. Let's think about reflective functioning and how to use reflection virtually.

What is reflective functioning?

Reflective functioning is the ability to step back from a behavior, think about its impact and meaning, and imagine what might be going on in the mind of the other person and see it as distinct from one's own mind.

A caregiver's reflective stance supports the attachment relationship. Their ability to reflect on the intentionality of their child's behavior enhances the child's self-control of strong emotions. Rather than just looking at the behavior, the caregiver reflects on the child's feelings, motivations and thoughts. FSPs can use questions to guide parents to try to understand the meaning or reason that underlies the child's behavior, and respond to this meaning.

"I know he misses his friends and teacher and doesn't understand why he can't go to school. I miss my coworkers and worry about when everything will get back to normal. I think he might sense my anxiety, and perhaps that's why he clings even more on some days. The way he clings really helps me understand where his emotions are at."

A caregiver with high reflective functioning may say this about the challenges they face as a result of COVID-19 and the child no longer being in childcare. This caregiver is able to see her child's behavior as meaningful, which will support an empathetic, more positive response to his behavior. In labeling his emotions, "lonely" or "confused," and relating those emotions to behaviors, the caregiver will support the development of the child's self-control and affect regulation.

Supporting a caregiver's reflective functioning can also be a powerful tool to increase moments of mutual reciprocity and delight between caregivers and their children.

Transition to Virtual Environment

How do we support caregivers in following their child's lead, in being attentive, nurturing, warm and responsive in a virtual format? How we attune to a caregiver, how we listen and observe, may guide them to do the same when they are with their child. When we are on a video call, what are we noticing about PCI and how are we supporting the caregiver's reflection?

Let's think through some examples of questions that can elicit reflections from our caregivers.

"Wow. He seemed so excited to be rolling the ball back and forth with you just then. I'm wondering what that was like for you?"

Here we are asking for the caregiver's reflection about the interaction: What was she feeling in the moment? Did she notice her child's excitement? Did she have an understanding that the interaction between her and her child contributed to her child's happiness in the moment?

We may follow this up with asking, *"I'm wondering what you think might have been going on for him while you were playing together with the ball."*

Here we are thinking with the caregiver about the child's experience of the interaction. Can the caregiver think about her child's feelings and how they might have influenced his emotional state?

“Mom, I noticed your big smile when she stacked the last block up so high. Can you tell me what was happening for you?”

Here we are asking the parent to reflect on her own feelings as she watches her child accomplish a task. Did she feel proud? Did she feel she had contributed to her child’s success? Did she realize that smiling at children often encourages them to keep trying when something is hard?

When a caregiver is quick to notice their child’s emotions and feels it adds to the delight their child is experiencing, the parent is also likely to feel delighted. This mutual delight strengthens attachment and supports sustained and supportive PCIs.

Reflection When a Child's Behavior is Challenging

“Sarah was really having a hard time today. It seemed really hard for you too. Can we think about what was happening for you when she wouldn’t listen?”

Here we are letting the caregiver know we were with them during the interaction, we noticed it was difficult for them and their child, and we are wondering what it was like for the caregiver. Once they have talked through their experience and feelings, perhaps of frustration, we may follow up with, *“What do you typically do during a moment like this?”* and *“How does she respond when you do that?”* We are hoping to reflect with the caregiver about their typical course of action and how the child responds to that. We are able to think together about the caregiver’s strategies and how effective the caregiver feels they are. We may even think together about other ways to support the challenging interaction to promote a positive outcome for both the caregiver and child.

Reflection Phone Session

When we are on a phone session, we have to do our best to make meaning of what we are hearing and how it reflects what is happening on the other end of the line. If you are unsure, ask the caregiver to describe what is happening so you can create a mental picture of the PCI. Since we are creating our own visual that may not be accurate, we want the caregiver to give us a better understanding of the interaction.

“Mom, I heard Gina giggling when you were reading. What was happening just then for you and her?”

We are now asking the caregiver to reflect about her own experience and feelings—as well as her child’s—during the interaction. Does she see herself as contributing to her child’s delight? Perhaps she replies, *“She was laughing because I was tickling her. When we read this book there’s a part where I always tickle her.”* Can we reflect back to the caregiver what we’ve heard in a way that encourages the routine the caregiver has built and wonders about the child’s experience? *“What a great routine. She must really get excited to read this book with you knowing there’s such a fun interaction built in. What do you think?”*

Home Visitor Reflection

As we learned in a previous RRVHV webinar, reflective supervision plays a significant role in home visiting, especially when working with the youngest of children. We hope FSPs are receiving reflective supervision virtually, via a video platform or phone.

It is in this protected space that a home visitor can share their self-reflections about a case—including their emotions, insightfulness, attunement and curiosity—as it intersects with past and present experiences.