

Reaching Toward an Evidence Base for Reflective Supervision

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A number of publications have been written about reflective supervision, but, to date, only a handful of studies actually have attempted to demonstrate its effectiveness (Gordon, 2004; Tomlin, Sturm, & Koch, 2009; Virmani & Ontai, 2010). Yet, despite the relative absence of research to support it, professionals in the early childhood field are nevertheless actively teaching about and practicing reflective supervision. Given the fact that “evidence-based” has become a virtual requirement for funding programs and for training, reflective supervision has not yet garnered the necessary attention by professional organizations, nor has the practice or study of it received adequate funding. Reflective supervision has, however, begun to be required by some statewide credentialing systems (Weatherston, Wiegand, & Wiegand, this issue, p. 22).

Researchers and clinicians alike must begin to aggregate and establish a foundation of evidence for reflective supervision and reflective practice before such practices can become seamlessly integrated in all disciplines, systems, and programs serving small children and their families. If a central goal of the infant–family field is to develop a strong, relationally competent corps of leaders, supervisors, and direct service workers within each discipline—professionals who possess an integrated multidisciplinary knowledge base to lead and work in comprehensive, universally available services for babies and young children—then developing a solid body of evidence for reflective supervision is nothing short of a necessity.

Given our hope, and that of ZERO TO THREE, to inspire more research on reflective supervision, this article explores that imperative, beginning with a brief description

of how reflective supervision has become such a central tenet of the infant–family field. It discusses recent attempts to begin creating an evidence base to establish reflective supervision’s efficacy and identifies next steps the field can take to draw attention to and make the case for its funding and use across all settings for infants, toddlers, and families.

The History of Reflective Supervision and of the Field

IN THE 1970s when ZERO TO THREE (the organization) was born, the “nature–nurture” controversy was alive and well. At that time, the field did not possess sufficient research to support what its members believed: that relationship is at the center of healthy development and, thus, of effective practice, no matter the discipline. Back then, many thought that IQ was inborn and that at birth an infant was a passive,

sympiotic creature without sight or the capacity for memory, for interaction, or for having a differential effect on close caregivers (Shahmoon-Shanok, 2009). We now know that much of precious brain development occurs after birth, through nurture, and that babies are born with many capacities that predispose them to relational learning including certain types of memory, imitation, and interaction. Indeed, what professionals in the field (that was not yet a field) believed before, they now incontrovertibly know: that babies—and their brains and central nervous

Abstract

Over the more than 3 decades that it has taken “zero to three” to become a field—actually the coming together of many fields—reflective supervision has evolved as the centerpiece in the attainment of high-quality, effective practice. However, there is little research evidence to support reflective supervision or practice as being central to the field’s worldview. Despite the relative absence of research to support it, the field is nevertheless actively teaching about and practicing reflective supervision. This article provides a brief history of reflective supervision in the early childhood field and shares ideas to begin building an evidence base for reflective supervision.



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We now know that much of precious brain development occurs after birth, through nurture.

systems—are deeply affected by the care they receive day-to-day. They also know that children affect their caregivers deeply, having an effect on their development as well. There is now solid evidence for the relationship centeredness that ZERO TO THREE (then the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs) held as its central commitment. That evidence includes the corpus of attachment and transactional research with their lifespan implications, other experimental and longitudinal research, and neurobiological studies that have spurred a brand new variation on the theme of relationship, variously called *interpersonal neurobiology* or *neurorelational psychology* (Siegel & Shahmoon-Shanok, this issue, p. 6).

Clinical and Reflective Supervision

So where and when did reflective supervision intersect with these emerging ideas about the essence of infant–family work? And how did what was known as clinical supervision in mental health fields become reflective supervision?

In the late 1980s, ZERO TO THREE convened a national multidisciplinary group to identify the key knowledge and skills necessary for those working with the youngest children and families. This group—which included an occupational therapist, a pediatrician–psychoanalyst, a social worker, a psychologist, a parent, a foundation representative, a nurse, a special educator, and a leader of family-centered outreach and work with very young children and their at-risk families—met for a couple of years, after which it issued

related documents for four audiences about preparing practitioners to work with infants, toddlers, and their families. Published in 1990, these TASK (Training Approaches for Skills and Knowledge) publications called for the inclusion of four important and interrelated elements of training:

- Knowledge based on concepts common to all disciplines;
- Opportunities for direct observation and interaction;
- Individualized, clinical-like supervision, differentiated from administrative supervision, that encourages reflection; and
- Collegial support (Fenichel & Eggbeer, 1991, p. 1).

This was a rather audacious position to take then—and it still is. If reflection is essential to all practice with very young children and their families across all human service professions, it implies significant alterations to the ways in which professional training takes place across each of many professions (Geller, Wightman, & Rosenthal, this issue, p. 31). The term *reflective supervision* is deeply linked to the clinical supervision that mental health professionals (e.g., social workers, psychologists, psychotherapists, psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, arts therapists, marriage and family therapists, psychiatric nurses) experience in their predegree training and then within their workplace over many years.

Soon after these documents were published, ZERO TO THREE secured funding to train teams of trainers from across the country on these training elements. As the trainers (including authors Linda Eggbeer and Rebecca Shahmoon-Shanok) prepared to teach the participants about supervision in each of the week-long intensive training events, it became clear that virtually nothing had yet been published about the supervision of cases where the focus is on an intimate relationship in which one of the members is barely verbal. The planning committee realized that they needed to differentiate the supervision they would teach from administrative supervision—the kind that tracks levels of service, paperwork, and other information of that nature—in contrast with the partnering, looking together, supporting, and guiding they were advocating. So, the model of clinical supervision used in mental health training was adapted, and through case studies and role plays, it addressed the unique and challenging issues involved in supervising professionals working with the very youngest children and families. With no model yet for a mentoring supervision, the model that was illustrated through role plays and taught in all of the trainings was clinical supervision used in mental health training.

The participants responded so strongly to the parts of the week focusing on supervision that an issue of the *Zero to Three* journal, “Supervision and Mentorship in Support of the Development of Infants, Toddlers, and their Families” (Fenichel, 1991) was dedicated entirely to the topic. By 1992, ZERO TO THREE published a groundbreaking book (often referred to as “The Yellow Book”) titled *Learning Through Supervision and Mentorship to Support the Development of Infants, Toddlers and their Families: A Source Book* (Fenichel, 1992). Between the mid-1990s and today, interest and activity surrounding reflective supervision has blossomed. It has moved beyond mental health settings into child care, early intervention, home visiting, Early Head Start, and other arenas where very young children and families are served. More and more training programs for infant–family professionals are including it in their scope. (Several useful materials have been published and are listed in the Learn More box.)

Research Is Beginning to Stir

IN EARLY 2009, ZERO TO THREE was invited by the National Professional Development Center on Inclusion at the Frank Porter Graham Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to host an online discussion on reflective supervision. The topic was chosen both to build on a National Training Institute (NTI) session the previous year and to serve as a planning tool for a full-day Pre-Institute on the topic for the 2009 NTI. ZERO TO THREE staff alerted a group of individuals across the country who were actively engaged in studying and using reflective supervision. They also sent notice of the opportunity to ZERO TO THREE’s extensive e-mail list to try to reach new audiences of professionals interested in the topic. The discussion began with a brief definition of reflective supervision and an invitation to respond to a few questions, among them: what steps, large or small, were people taking to help infant–family professionals think more deeply and reflect on their work; what settings were they working in; and how were they going about building organizational support for reflective supervision.

The very rich online conversation that unfolded over the 2-week “live” discussion was both fascinating and edifying. Professionals providing services in child care, Early Head Start, home visiting, Part C, mental health, and child abuse programs were eager to share their experiences and questions. Several provided descriptions of preservice and in-service training programs across the country. Many shared their thoughts about the influence of reflective supervision on their (and others’) practice. What stood out was that no one was aware of an empirical body of evidence about the effect

REFLECTIVE SUPERVISION: DEFINING THE PROCESS

The process of reflective supervision has been defined and described in a variety of ways, with some common themes: Trust, safety, security, respect, patience, confidentiality, thoughtfulness, presence, commitment, respect, engaged listening, being nonjudgmental, relationship for learning, refueling, mutuality, reciprocity, observation, self-awareness, deeper exploration of feelings, and parallel process. Below are a variety of definitions for reflective supervision:

Reflective supervision is the process of examining, with someone else, the thoughts, feelings, actions, and reactions evoked in the course of working closely with infants, young children and their families (Eggbeer, Mann, & Seibel, 2007, p. 5).

The essential features of this supervisory relationship are reflection, collaboration, and regularity of occurrence (Eggbeer et al., p. 5).

Reflective supervision is a set of caring conversations co-constructed over time by supervisee and supervisor, improvised or created in the moment, yet deepening their connection as together they develop their history and knowledge of one another and of the children and families in their conjoined care (Shahmoon-Shanok, 2009, p. 12).

Although reflective supervision may incorporate administrative and clinical tasks, and include attention to collaboration within learning relationships, its primary focus is the shared exploration of the emotional content of infant and family work as expressed in relationships between parents and infants, parents and practitioners, and supervisors and practitioners (Weatherston & Barron, 2009, p. 63).

Reflective supervision provides “a practice arena that can shape and strengthen the intervener’s knowledge of self in regard to relationships, empathy for others, and skills in perspective taking” (Heffron, 2005, p. 118).

Reflection . . . is an attitude of mind cultivated in relational exchange that enables people to see several levels of interchange from many angles (Shahmoon-Shanok, Lapidus, Grant, Halpern, & Lamb-Parker 2005, p. 462).

[Reflective supervision is a] shared process in which [the supervisor] provided a safe and compassionate kind of mirroring.... [Three core reflective tasks include] relating and re-experiencing emotionally significant events...; examining and evaluating the meaning of the feelings, thoughts, intentions, actions evoked during those events; and considering how [to] use this understanding for...professional [and personal] growth ... (Weigand, 2007, p. 18).

of reflective supervision on professionals and practice, let alone on client children and families. Several participants identified studies that looked at the effect of mental health consultation in early childhood programs or at the addition of reflection and other mental health concepts to training programs for different professional disciplines. Other participants noted that the fields of social work, psychology, psychoanalysis, counseling, and education are the most likely disciplines to have explored supervision and its effect on practice.

As the online discussion concluded, several members of the NTI Work Group decided to build on the obvious interest of this online discussion and bring together in person a multidisciplinary group of professionals and a group of researchers interested in thinking together about useful strategies for researching the benefits and effect of reflective supervision. The 2009 NTI seemed the logical venue to try something new: a symposium entirely devoted to brainstorming. A few known researchers were invited to

the session, and, fortunately, the participants who signed up turned out to be a good mix of researchers, educators, supervisors, and providers. With a standing-room-only group of almost 120 participants, researcher Walter Gilliam of Yale University facilitated an energetic, compelling discussion with the help of Rebecca Shahmoon-Shanok.

To set the stage, Rebecca Shahmoon-Shanok summarized the history of reflective supervision and distributed a handout with several definitions of reflective supervision and related ideas (see box Reflective Supervision: Defining the Process). Walter Gilliam then briefly discussed a study he had recently conducted looking at mental health consultation in child care programs. He described how he went about identifying the characteristics of a “mentally healthy” classroom. The conversation went on quickly from there as participants shared their perspectives about reflective supervision and what might be studied; they kept building on one another’s comments with the intention of stimulating

readers to think creatively and possibly pursue them (see box Reflections on Building an Evidence Base for some of the many insightful ideas and questions that were raised).

Finding Pearls at the New Frontier

THE IDEAS GENERATED and summarized from the NTI discussion underscore the importance of taking guidance both from the evidence emerging from recent studies on reflective supervision (Gordon, 2004; Tomlin et al., 2009; Virmani & Ontai, 2010) and from other related fields of theory and research including infant observation (Sternberg, 2005); mentalization and reflective functioning (Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Morse, & Higgins, 1991; Slade, Grienberger, Bernbach, Levy, & Locker, 2005; Steele & Steele, 2008; Toth, Rogasch, & Cicchetti, 2008); and psychotherapy research on clinical supervision (Sutton, Townend, & Wright, 2007; Wampold & Hallway, 1997). In what follows, we offer suggestions about research and training that could be fruitful to future research efforts on reflective supervision. Some of these ideas were raised in, and follow from, the 2009 NTI Symposium.

The field of infant observation (IO) in training psychotherapists was developed in the 1940s at the Tavistock Clinic in London (Bick, 1964). The training involves regular trainee visits to family homes to observe a developing infant within the context of his primary relationships—simply observing and becoming aware, not “doing” anything. At the center of the experience is post-observation, reflective writing by trainees about both their observations and their emotions and other responses to what is observed and heard, and reflective discussion with a seminar leader who serves to “hold” the trainees as they become aware of difficult feeling states that emerge at any point in the process. Leaders are encouraged to help trainees wonder, notice, articulate, and examine the range of their reactions that have emerged during the observation sessions or in the reflective writing process (Sternberg, 2005).

Sternberg’s elegantly designed study of this aspect of psychotherapy training is an example of a type of inquiry that could provide a model for research on the process of reflective supervision. Using Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), Sternberg illustrated the thoughtful use of this qualitative research methodology in which themes are noted by documenting the frequency of trainee comments relating to relevant capacities and skills such as the following:

- “Registering feelings,” “picking up projections”
- “Tolerating feelings and holding onto painful feelings”

REFLECTIONS ON BUILDING AN EVIDENCE BASE

The following ideas, questions, and suggestions were generated by participants in the 2009 ZERO TO THREE National Training Institute conference symposium, "Beginning to Build an Evidence Base for Reflective Supervision."

- We have to be able to study and measure the process or construct of reflective supervision (the independent variable). How does it work? What are its core features?
- How can we measure someone's ability to be reflective? What evidence would we look for to establish that someone is a reflective supervisor or supervisee?
- What do "good" reflective supervisors actually do?
- A national survey being conducted at the Institute for Social and Policy Research at Purdue University will define key elements of reflective supervision; perhaps researchers and clinicians together could use these data to develop an observational measure (in real time or through videotape) to determine whether these elements are present in a reflective supervision session.
- It's important to be able to understand and measure the internal processes in both supervisee and supervisor. What's going on in their minds or in their relationship that isn't necessarily visible from behaviors alone?
- We probably want to be able to measure a number of supports that need to be present (investment of program leadership to dedicated time for reflective supervision, etc.) to enable it to work in an organization.
- We need to learn how to measure the things that we hope reflective supervision will change—in the supervisees, their practice, and in the children and families with whom they work.
- How do we begin to think about measuring something that is often a long, slow process? Multiple measures over time?
- How can we best measure something that is transactional?
- How should we take into account the fact that the attempt to measure something in and of itself often changes it?
- Scott Miller's work in psychotherapy research (Miller, Duncan, Brown, Sparks, & Claud, 2003) with the Session Rating Scale and Outcome Rating Scale may be helpful (e.g., use a few short questions that clients—in our case here, reflective supervisees—answer immediately after a therapy—a supervisory—session).
- How can we go about rating reflective supervision sessions? What would we use as a measure? Do we know good reflective supervision when we see it?
- How about coding the dialogue between the supervisor and supervisee to study the shift in the supervisee's ability to look at the baby and the relationship and her own emotional responses (and other important aspects) as one way of measuring reflective supervision?
- Maybe we could code language in terms of categories of verbs—I think, I know, I wonder about . . .
- Perhaps a content analysis of case records and process notes could help us look at change in language and thinking over time, ultimately examining the language and thinking of parent-clients, as well.
- Over time, does the supervisee's conversation move from what happened in a home visit to what is currently happening in the reflective supervision session?
- We could look at Peter Fonagy's measure of reflective functioning (Fonagy, Target, Steele, & Steele, 1998), in which parents are scored on how reflective their description of their child is to see if it could be adapted for reflective supervision.
- Can the Theory of Mind literature be helpful?
- How could we look at the developmental progression of the reflective supervision relationship?
- It's important to try to tease out and understand the choices the supervisor and supervisee make to go in one direction or another.
- Might it be useful to try to define points on the reflective supervision continuum to look at the developmental trajectory?
- If supervisor and supervisee have a contract and set specific goals, we could measure whether they've accomplished them.
- Once we're able to figure out that something works, we have to figure out who it works for and under what conditions (second-generation research).
- We need to explore not only what the supervisor is doing but also the effect of the reflective supervision relationship on the supervisor.
- Possibly, the neurobiological and experimental lines of evidence already attained for relationship centrality in the development of young children and their parents could become pathways through which aspects of reflective practice can be studied.
- Could we demonstrate the importance of reflective supervision in recruiting and retaining staff members and reducing and burnout? If we could show these Human Resource implications, that would provide another rationale for investing in reflective supervision.

- “Recognizing the usefulness of own feelings as information”
- “Process, think about what is happening inside oneself”
- “Use of theory to help understanding”
- “Awareness of the importance of maintaining boundaries” and
- “Awareness of what is not noticed” and the like (Sternberg, 2005, p. 186).

In addition, the growth from pre- to post-IO experience in the trainee’s capacities and skills and what s/he felt s/he was able to bring to the infant observation is noted in interviews and includes the increased capacity for tolerance of anxiety and uncertainty, waiting for meaning to emerge, empathy, close attention, listening and skill in communication with parents, and the like (Sternberg, 2005).

Over several decades, much theory and research has been generated that examines the process of clinical supervision in the training of counselors and psychotherapists (Wampold & Halloway, 1997), including studies that examine the use of reflective space (Gordon, 2004) and reflective journaling (Sutton et al., 2007). For example, Gordon (2004) also used a grounded theory analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), as well as physiological measures to document that assisted reflection helped to uncover the discrepancy between the counselor’s espoused theory and beliefs and what actually occurred in his practice and that counselors use a range of strategies when reflecting on their practice that include both cognitive and affective levels of reflection. The level of reflection was captured in physiological measures of calmness and slowed heart rate. Through the use of focus groups, prompt questions, and interpretive phenomenological analysis, Sutton et al. (2007) documented the value of reflective learning journals in a postgraduate psychotherapy training program, finding that increased self-awareness of personal thoughts and beliefs, cathartic experiences, improved reflection through discovery, and exploration of thoughts and feelings were reported by the postgraduate trainees. The infant-family field can learn much from these studies that used varying research designs and methods to investigate aspects of supervision and reflective process and be carefully guided in the further development and refinement of research questions, research design, and methodology (including the selection and/or development of measures, quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection, and data-analytic approaches), as well as in the interpretation of findings that are grounded in related theory and empirical research.

Quite recently, the study of *mentalization*—the capacity for reflective functioning that



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Research is finding that caregiver insightfulness about the motives underlying children’s behavior is associated with having experienced reflective supervision.

allows the caregiver to hold the infant or child and her mental states in mind (Fonagy et al., 1998)—and the study of insightfulness—the “ability to understand the motives underlying the child’s behavior in a complete, open and accepting way” (Koren-Karie, Oppenheim, Dolev, Sher, & Etzion-Carasso, 2002, p. 539)—have been used in the development of measures. These include scoring of reflective functioning capacity in the Adult Attachment Interview (Fonagy et al., 1998; Steele & Steele, 2008; Toth et al., 2008), the Parenting Development Interview (Hill, Levy, Meehan, & Reynoso, 2007; Slade et al., 2005), and the Insightfulness Assessment (Koren-Karie & Oppenheim, 2004) for the study of these capacities, previously investigated in parents to study the development of these capacities in psychotherapists and child care providers. These measures lend themselves to studies of reflective supervision and have already been used in such a way in at least one instance: in a study conducted at the University of California–Davis by Virmani and Ontai (2010). This small yet well-designed study, conducted at two university child care centers, compared the effect of reflective supervision and training with that of traditional supervision and training on the capacity for insightfulness in caregivers when they first began in their positions and again at a second time 2.5 months later. They found that components of caregiver insightfulness, including complexity, insight, openness, acceptance, richness, and coherence were associated with having experienced reflective supervision. In another recently reported preliminary study, Tomlin et al. (2009) provided additional examples

of methods to explore providers’ self-report of the importance of reflective practice skills in their work with parents of young children and whether provider valuing of reflective functioning skills is associated with reported practice using hypothetical vignettes drawn from common home-visiting scenarios.

For further investigation of the affective experience of each participant—in this case, supervisor and supervisee in the process—there are several other promising approaches from other areas of our own field, including videotaped, frame-by-frame observational studies (cf., Beebe, Jaffe, Feldstein, Mays, & Alson, 1985; Stern, 1971; Tronick & Cohen, 1989) and physiologically based ones, such as those involving the lowering of cortisol (Gunnar, Mangelsdorf, Larson, & Hertsgaard, 1989), vagal tone (Porges, 1995) and other stress-level studies; those using brain imaging of parents to assess activation of emotion control centers in the brain in response to baby cries (Mayes, Swain, & Leckman, 2005); and, from other interpersonal neurobiology, experimental approaches such as those used in the study of mirror neurons (Iacoboni et al., 1999; Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese, & Fogassi, 1996).

By now, immeasurable clinical experience has made it evident to many in the infant-family field that the audacious ideas conceived in the late 1980s are valid: Reflective supervision exerts a generative effect both on providers and on the quality of the services they are able to offer to very young children and their families. The insightful ideas, abundant energy, curiosity, goodwill, solidarity, and commitment evident in the mood of participants at the

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Reflective supervision exerts a generative effect on both providers and the quality of the services they are able to offer to very young children and their families.

2009 NTI brainstorming session are a testament to—and also fuel a deep and abiding interest in—moving forward with a research agenda devoted to learning all that is possible to discover about how reflective supervision works and the effect it can have on services. Challenges for the future are to build on emerging interest in the topic of research about reflective supervision within the field and, simultaneously, to help convince (potential) funders to support the many-pronged set of inquiries necessary to adequately demonstrate its value. We hope that this article, with its 2009 NTI Symposium ideas, brief reviews of and suggestions for research angles, and the Learn More resources, will motivate some readers to find ways to pursue studies and help further many branches of the dearly needed process to build a research base for reflective supervision. In so doing, the field will teach itself more about how to improve and spread reflective supervision so that it has the greatest effect, economy, and clarity, increasing the quality and effectiveness of service delivery to babies and little children across systems. ♪

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the quality of the workforce serving young children and families. At ZERO TO THREE, these included leadership roles in the National Training Institute over many years, as well as the design, implementation, and supervision of multiple projects to improve the training and competence of professionals in early language and literacy, the prevention of child abuse and neglect, mental health support to child care, and services to children and families in the military.

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to 2006, whose memory is represented in every sentence of this article. A deeply interested, attentive, and wondering listener, Emily truly provided a process parallel to that of reflective

supervision. In forming the words contained here, we are immeasurably strengthened by the treasure of Emily's high spirits, vision, and her upbeat commitment to novice writers. We

salute all we learned from her as comrades in developing, writing, teaching, and doing reflective supervision since its earliest days.

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