Working With the Parents:
An Introduction to
Infant Mental Health

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Healthy Start Parenting Education
Understanding Mirror Neurons

• Activated when we watch someone else engage in some behavior;

• Kick in within minutes of birth;

• Link sensory systems with motor systems and emotional regions of brain & shape language areas;

• Same brain structures that produce language participate in comprehending it.
“A child learns by simply seeing, hearing, touching; mirror neurons differentiate words, intentions and moods. How you react to adversity or happiness is absorbed by your children through the mirror neuron system as they watch you moment to moment. Mirror neurons allow you not only to understand the action, but to apprehend the intentions behind it.”

Sandra Blakeslee
Fostering Social-Emotional Growth
Self-regulation and Attachment

- Change in evolution of human eye
- Reciprocal interactions; reciprocal nurturing
- Limbic system
- Emotional experience
- Emotional learning
- Memory
- Social smiling
- Protoconversation
- Awareness of feelings
- Persistent infant regulatory problems linked to later behavioral difficulties.
Infant Mental Health

“Developing the capacity of the child from birth to age three to
1) experience, regulate and express emotions,
2) form close and secure interpersonal relationships, and
3) explore the environment and learn.”

(Definition developed by the Zero to Three Infant Mental Health Task Force).
A Dyadic Systems View

“...forming a dyadic state of consciousness is a major constitutive process for forming and growing relationships. As in the expression “neurons that fire together wire together,” individuals who create something new together connect to each other.”

Tronick, E and Beeghly, M.
Self-Regulation

• management of arousal

• maintenance of alertness

• ability to dampen positive or negative arousal in the face of over-stimulation

• and the capacity to inhibit behavior
Interactive regulation

“....a co-constructed process in which each partner makes moment-by-moment adjustments to the other’s shifts in behaviors, such as gaze, facial expression, orientation, touch, vocal quality, and body and vocal rhythms.”

Beatrice Beebe
“Between birth and 5 months, face-to-face exchanges of affective signals between infant and caregiver play a key role in the development of the child’s representation of affect.”

Peter Fonagy and Mary Target
Assessing Dyadic Interaction

- **Gaze**: look-look away cycle regulates infant’s degree of arousal
- **Head Orientation**: degrees of head aversion = severity of ‘cut-off’ act
- **Face**: full display of facial expression emerges gradually from 2-4 months
- **Vocalization**: develops a ‘turn-taking’ structure; vocal turn-taking an essential building block of language
- **Body Positioning**
- **Touch**
Mother’s Behavior

- Intrusive
- Withdrawn
- Encourages autonomy
- Playful
- Reflective

Child’s Behavior

- Attentive
- Withdrawn
- Complaint/non-compliant
- Able to self-regulate
Mentalization

- The capacity to think about feeling and to feel about thinking
- The capacity to fully experience emotion
- A non-defensive willingness to engage emotionally without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down
Reflective Function

• Crucial human capacity that is intrinsic to affect regulation and productive social relationships

• A parent’s capacity to reflect upon her own internal mental experience as well as her child’s – “Minding the Baby”

• Crucial to the development of a secure attachment

• Mentalization manifested in speech
Our Therapeutic Stance

• Non-judgmental

• Culturally sensitive

• Mark the positive

• Ask and listen

• Lend support and nurturance
Working With the Parents

- **Relationship-based** - the building block of attachment between parent and child.

- **Strength-based** - highlight positive interactions in the relationship and emphasize competencies.

- **Reciprocal nurturing** - success and pleasure inspires baby AND parent to grow and develop in a positive way.
Teaching Tips

• Encourage parents to say what they are doing, feeling, thinking - what their baby might be doing, feeling, thinking

• While interacting with the baby and mom, model this; then ask her to try it out.

• Give permission to do less, to slow down, to wait….

• Mentalizing requires asking questions rather than searching for – or giving – answers.
Thank you!

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