

Gentle Inquiry: A Strategy to Promote Learning, Discovery, and Reflection during Relationship-Based Work

- First relationships count for all babies, for all toddlers, for all families, and for all communities (Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health).
- “Working with young children and their families is **relationship-based**, which requires us to engage our emotions as well as our intellect; the past affects our present” (Minnesota Association for Infant Mental Health).
- “Relationship-based work makes one conscious of one’s feelings in interactions, one’s emotional world – and that is the one place non-clinicians have been trained to avoid” (Gilkerson, 2004).
- **Gentle Inquiry** is a style of asking questions that can prompt reflection on thoughts and feelings while minimizing defensive reactions (Heffron, Ivins, & Weston, 2005).
- During relationship-based work, gentle inquiry statements can help you learn more about the families you support and help family members reflect on their own thoughts and feelings (Champagne, 2015).
- “**How you are is as important as what you do**” (Pawl & St. John, 1998). Your tone of voice, body language, and ability to listen and be present also impact how family members may or may not respond to gentle inquiry statements.

References and Resources

Champagne, J. (2015). *Relationships count: A qualitative case study of a professional learning series for early interventionists* (Doctoral dissertation).

Gilkerson, L. (2004). Reflective supervision in infant-family programs: Adding clinical process to non-clinical settings. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 25(5), 424-439.

Heffron, M.C., Ivins, B., & Weston, D. R. (2005). Finding an authentic voice: Use of self: Processes for relationship based work. *Infants and Young Children*, 18(4), 323-336.

Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health: <http://mi-aimh.org/>.

Minnesota Association for Infant Mental Health: <http://www.macmh.org/about-maiecmh/guidelines-reflective-supervision/>.

Pawl, J, & St. John, M. (1998). *How you are is as important as what you do in making a positive difference for infants, toddlers, and their families*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE Press.

**Gentle Inquiry examples to prompt reflective thinking
during relationship-based work:**

Can you tell me more about...?

Does this remind you of another time when...?

What is it like for you to be with your baby?

How do you know when he wants to be (fed, changed, held, played with)?

Have you noticed any times when this has been (better, easier, more difficult)? Why do you think it was?

Do you think it might help if...?

Can you tell me about your biggest concern this week?

What do you think might be causing...?

What have you tried before?

Do you think you might be willing to try something different?

What makes it feel hard to... hear him cry, for you to say no, to watch him struggle...?

Do you ever wonder about...?

Have you thought about...?

How can I support you and your child today?

Is there anything you would like me to (find out, help with, look for)?

I am curious about....

I wonder if you can tell me more about....

I wonder what your child is (experiencing, thinking, feeling).

I saw that.... I noticed that.... I heard that....

Sometimes a baby likes/needs/wants/shows us/tells us....

I have seen some children respond to....

I can hear that this is really (difficult, frustrating, sad, scary, disappointing, exciting, etc.) for you....

How (wonderful, important, exciting) for you that your baby (recognizes your voice, watches where you go, copies what you do)

Examples were developed by Marian Orihel, M.Ed., IMH-E® (III)

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