Group reflective support – not just another meeting!

Ann Parker outlines the benefits of group reflective support for all practitioners

NCT are introducing group reflective support as a supportive mechanism for all practitioners. Group reflective support is not another meeting but the opportunity to build empathic relationships between everyone involved in providing NCT direct-to-parent services in order to improve the experience for parents. Group reflection is the opportunity to facilitate the development of practice through reflection, discussion and deeper understanding.¹

Practitioners’ meetings and group reflective support

In some areas practitioners are having regular meetings to discuss practice and issues relevant to their area. Group reflective support differs from a practice meeting by looking at a particular topic, piece of research, a new book etc. Some areas have started to incorporate group reflection into the first hour of practitioners’ meetings, with the second hour for ‘business as usual’ discussions about local issues and practical arrangements. Practitioners benefit from shared knowledge and experience.² Group reflective practice is based on the Ooijens supervision model whereby practitioners are given the opportunity to explore a topic in more depth.³ This also provides space for practitioners to explore with others their responses to a situation.
It would be wonderful for every practitioner to have the opportunity for supervision; unfortunately NCT’s budget does not stretch that far. However, having a specific focus for an hour can enhance learning and hopefully draw local practitioners closer together to create a supportive and cohesive working group.\(^4\)

There are four different styles of group supervision upon which group reflective support is based.

1. Authoritative — this is similar to one-to-one supervision with other members of the group observing. This may be useful to those new to this way of working.
2. Participative — the group facilitator is very much ‘in charge’ of the group but also invites other members to participate. It may encourage quieter members to contribute.
3. Cooperative — a facilitated group with all members taking responsibility for learning and participating.
4. Peer group — all members take responsibility, but it is more difficult to identify the group facilitator.

Feedback received from group reflective support study days has indicated that a session may involve a mixture of these styles of group work. Practitioners were most comfortable with the cooperative model as it seemed similar in style to their sessions with antenatal or postnatal parents. However, participative group working also seemed to have a place, encouraging everyone to participate while enabling the facilitator to include quieter people and encourage more dominant individuals to take a step back. The authoritative model was deemed not as useful: although it may help one person to have their situation explored in depth, other group members might become restless. The peer group approach could work well for an experienced group but some participants may have doubts about what the facilitator is actually doing.

**Group reflective support in practice**

The NCT practitioners’ annual returns survey in 2015 shows clearly that some areas of the UK have regular practitioners’ meetings, while other areas have seen a decline. There could be many reasons, including that other types of meetings have taken priority, more practitioners have work outside of NCT and the logistics of the geographical area concerned. For areas where regular practitioners’ meetings already take place it is simple to add in some group reflective support. Other areas will need more work to start up a practitioners’ meeting with group reflection. In some areas this may be very difficult and there may be other opportunities such as using Skype. The aim is to run group reflective support sessions twice a year for the same group of practitioners, in combination with a regular practitioners’ meeting.

The group reflective support project will be evaluated in spring 2017 to see if practitioners feel more supported and valued by NCT.
Conclusion

By encouraging practitioners to meet to discuss and reflect on relevant topics, and through using group reflective support, we can build stronger and more cohesive relationships, and have greater understanding of each other’s roles. Ultimately, this will have impact on the expectant parents and parents that we work with.5

More information

I would suggest that any NCT practitioner who feels that group reflective support would work in their area should encourage a local Excellent Practitioner to attend one of the planned NCT study days listed on Babble. Alternatively they are welcome to contact me so that I can keep a note of their area to see if a facilitator is willing to travel to there. Ann.Parker@nct.org.uk

Ann Parker has been a breastfeeding counsellor since December 2004. She qualified as a supervisor in 2008, an assessor in 2012, a tutor in 2014 and a mentor in 2015. She initially became involved after meeting her local NCT coffee group — some of whom she has remained friends with ever since. After struggling to breastfeed her eldest son Jack and bursting into tears when visiting her GP, an infant feeding coordinator diagnosed him as having a high arched palette and supported her. Ann wanted to give something back and has been with NCT ever since. She never tires of supporting other women.

References