Reflective Parenting
Increasing Mentalizing in the Parent-Child Relationship

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Non-Expert at work session!

• Consider the impact of you as a professional on the work with parents

• Learn how to help parents mentalize about their child and themselves

• Learn strategies for how to help parents manage their own feelings around their child/family: How to be ready to mentalize

• Help parents to develop and maintain a connection with their child during misunderstandings
First the bad news... 1 in 8 children have mental health problems in the UK
50% have behavioural problems – 1 in 16
The good news. Parenting programmes are an effective intervention (NICE 2013)

....but!

• Families often do not get the help they need
• Families often don’t get the help early enough to make a difference & reduce impact
• Scale of need far out weighs the service capacity available
• Complicated to set-up and maintain
• Complex referral pathways and stigma
Mentalizing as self help

A book for parents.....

Or professionals?
What is Reflective Parenting?

• Reflective Parenting has theoretical links to mentalizing and reflective functioning.
• Mentalization (and MBT) as a therapy helps adults understand their own minds and emotions better.
• Reflective Parenting helps adults to understand both their own (parental) minds and their child’s better. **Emphasis on the parent’s self mentalizing**
• Reflective Parenting is a method of parenting that helps parents to mentalize about their child – to keep their child’s mind in mind.
Why reflective parenting?

- Parents high in Reflective Functioning (RF) have more secure attachment histories and more securely attached children.

- Reflective parenting teaches a child about their emotions, how to recognise them and then how to control them (emotion regulation).

- Origins of RP for me - secure attachment and Theory of Mind (Fonagy, Redfern and Charman, 1997).

- Reflective parenting helps an infant and young child to understand other minds and other perspectives.
Why focus on parental self mentalizing?


Programme follows these steps:

1. Form clinician/mother alliance and trust
2. Help mothers to mentalize themselves
3. Support mothers to mentalize their toddler

Dimensions of self and other mentalizing on the PDI

Self mentalizing predicted quality of mother-toddler interaction significantly compared with mother’s capacity to mentalize the toddler (other)
Mentalizing in action!

Dad and toddler having a mentalizing conversation

Feeling understood by daddy!
Increasing mentalizing in the parent-child relationship
CORE TECHNIQUES

• Challenge of persistent ineffective mentalizing – parents do this all the time!

• Explicit focus on mental states of clinician in relation to parent mental states

• Seeking alternative perspectives and increased meta-representation of relationships

• Mentalizing the parent past and current relationship

• Mentalizing the current therapeutic relationships
Ineffective Mentalizing of behaviour

• Parent sees the external behaviour

• Attaches a meaning to the behaviour using ineffective mentalizing e.g. ‘he’s just like he’s dad’, ‘he likes to wind me up,” or no mentalizing ‘I don’t get it.”

• Parent brings own history/current influences to the situation

• Parent tries to manage or stop the behaviour based on own state of mind and ineffective mz of the behaviour

• Behaviour escalates
What might reflective parenting do for you?

- Mentalizing the self and child leads to greater emotion regulation in parent and child
- Emotion regulation in children is linked to better managed behaviour (LESS BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS)
- Secure attachment and mentalizing are highly correlated
- It helps children to learn and practice skills in their own emotion regulation and hence have fewer behaviour problems
- Children have stronger pro-social orientations, more numerous and higher quality friendships, and higher levels of peer acceptance in pre-school
- Behavioural interventions alone might be less successful without parental sensitivity increasing.
Connection not Correction

The Parent APP helps you to connect with your child after a misunderstanding.

Empathy brings about connection and can repair a misunderstanding.

Attention given in an active way when your child is upset, angry, hurt, confused, can bring you closer together. Correction closes down the feelings and increases the distance between you.
Conversations with your two year old and re-enacted with an adult
Section 2

The Tools of Reflective Parenting
The Reflective Parenting Group Programme

8 – week psychoeducation manualised programme:

1. Introducing Reflective Parenting and mentalizing
2. Thinking about yourself as a parent: The Parent Map
3. The Parent Map continued and Emotion Regulation (via the Emotion Thermometer)
4. Starting to understand the child’s behaviour/mentalizing the child: The Parent APP
5. Increasing parental reflection on the child’s behaviour: the impact of attention
6. Connection vs correction: how to tackle discipline in a reflective parenting model
7. Authoritative vs authoritarian parenting – managing difficult behaviours
8. Mentalizing during good times: play and noticing the positive attunement and interactions between parent and child. Taking Reflective Parenting forwards.
Reflective Parenting Tools

• **The emotional thermometer** (for managing arousal)

• **The Professional APP** (for the professional’s mentalizing stance *(Attention, Perspective Taking, Providing Empathy)*)

• **The Parent Map** (to encourage parental self mentalizing)

• **The Parent APP** (to help a parent mentalize the child)

• **Two Hands** – the balance between action and reflection: an approach to managing discipline
Too cold to mentalize

Too hot to mentalize

Warm mentalizing

Emotional Thermometer
Tools of reflective parenting

Professional app
The professional’s mentalizing stance in relation to the parent

Parent Map
To support self mentalizing in parents

Parent app
To support a parent in mentalizing their child
Professional APP

A tool to engage parents, which:
1. Holds in mind their arousal
2. Increases epistemic trust
3. Helps them to get a more coherent sense of their own minds
Professional APP - Bringing specific qualities into your interactions with parents

A ttention and curiosity

P erspective taking

P rovide empathy and validate
Empathy vs Sympathy

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw
Important associated techniques of the Professional APP

**Not-Knowing and checking**
Acceptance of different perspectives
Active questioning
Prioritise your need to try to understand – do not feel under obligation to understand the non-understandable or to fix.

**Pause and rewind**
review and the importance of slowing down

**Simmering down**
Provide validation
Model honesty and have the courage to accept mentalizing errors via acknowledgement of your own misunderstanding
Suggest that misunderstandings offer opportunities to re-visit to learn more
What gets in the way of mentalizing with parents?

The arousal level of the parent – too low/too high

Parents holding views that compete with professionals own

Parent stuck in teleological mode – fix the behaviour please!

You’re the expert after all!
Parents who are highly aroused may:

- Find it difficult to observe their own thoughts and feelings
- Be unable or unwilling to recognize the impact of their thoughts, feelings and actions on their child
- Confuse a feeling with a thought
- Understand behaviour in ‘concrete’ terms
Parents who are highly aroused may also

- Default to negative understandings of their child’s behaviour and his underlying intentionality
- Not be able to see how one thing has led to another
- Be inflexible from their perspective
- Feel that different perspectives are dangerous
- Struggle to relate thoughts to reality
- Act without thinking, or avoid thinking.
Parents who are under aroused may:

- Lack curiosity and interest in self and other
- Seem flat, bored, going through the motions
- Show an absence of mentalisation “I don’t know”
- Express a lack of reference to mental states
- Indicate that “my sense of what it is to be me” is cut off
- Cut off from the impact of what is going on
A checklist for Reflective Parenting

▪ How curious is the parent about the child and what might be going on for her?
▪ How much is the parent able to imagine what might be going on in her child’s mind?
▪ How empathic is the parent towards her child?
▪ How much does the parent relate what’s going on with her child to how she is responding to her child?
▪ How flexible is the parent in her thinking?
▪ How able is the parent able to regulate herself?
▪ How able is the parent to regulate her child?
In the assessment prior to Reflective Parenting

• How well does the parent recognise their emotions and thoughts? (how reflective?)
• Ability to recognise and manage negative affects such as anxiety / fear, depression, anger, shame, guilt
• Capacity to self-soothe
• Use of relationships
• Outbursts / overwhelming affect
• Avoidance
• Interpersonal relationships
Pre- RP assessment continued

How does the parent feel in relation to:

- Ability to trust others
- Capacity for intimacy and managing intimate relationships
- Dealing with abandonment feelings
- Strengths as well as recognition of vulnerabilities
- Self esteem
- Social functioning and engagement with the world
- What is the parent’s social role? and time spent in these such as employment / parenting / social network including friends and activities etc
As a parent...

How do I feel right now

What am I thinking about?

What made me feel that way?
Mentalizing
Past influences – ghosts in the nursery
Current parental preoccupations
Helping a Parent Build their Map

Important note – Mentalizing the self is really hard

The 1\textsuperscript{st} step is to be explicit in explaining the Map

Then start to step outside of yourself and build a ‘self structure’.

Help a parent build up a picture of themselves using a structure.
Parent APP – mentalizing the child

A tool to help parents to be more reflective and to look for the inside story to their child’s behaviour
Developmental stages in mentalizing capacity - child

- Mentalizing
- Affect Regulation
- Attention Regulation
Holding the balance between two hands helps the parent to develop and hold authority without resorting to authoritarian parenting, which lacks warmth and connection with the child.
Reflective Parenting Interventions

Working with a family

Running a Reflective Parenting Group
How to operationalise RP in your work

Different levels of using Reflective Parenting:

• Tier 1 – psychoeducation – a pack of materials to be handed out to parents by professionals in the child and/or parents network for self help and guidance

• Tier 2 – individual work with parents – where parents need support from professionals. No set number of sessions, but defined phases to the work

• Tier 3 – group work with parents – an 8 week manualised group programme – currently being tested

• Tier 4 – training to groups of professionals (health visitors, social care, CAMHS, midwives, etc)
Helping Parents understand reflective parenting

Have a clear rationale

Maybe if we can find ways to understand your child it might help you both get along more… is it worth a try?

Increase motivation

Pros and Cons of practicing Reflective parenting

Psychoeducation

Give examples and scenarios to explain or work through

Consider language

“Mentalizing”, “Being reflective” or “Looking at the inside story”
What is the professional’s state of mind? 
“Am I in a mentalizing range?”

The professional uses a mentalizing stance to connect with the parent’s mind (Professional APP) 
“I am conveying interest, I am thinking of my parent’s perspective

The parent is more willing or able to think about her child’s mind (Parent APP) 
“I wonder how my son felt when

The parent, through feeling felt, heard and truly connected with, gets a sense of her mind and is more open from thinking with the professional (Epistemic trust) 
“I have a sense of what I am thinking

The parent can reflect and think more about her impact on her child and how this may relate to her Parent Map 
“I wonder why I misunderstood my son in that situation”
Running a Reflective Parenting Group
Aims of a Reflective Parenting Group

- Groups are a time and cost efficient way of operationalizing parental mentalizing model
- Can reduce sense of stigma and isolation
- Provide participants with a sense of belonging and community
- Epistemic trust: people learn better from peers than experts
- Groups provide opportunities for modelling and problem solving
- By promoting a mentalizing stance, a group can provide the opportunity for a restorative, relational experience
Psychoeducation not therapy

• A reflective parenting group is a first step
• It does not replace mentalization based or other therapeutic approaches for complex problems

But…..

• The group setting and this subject matter can be very powerful
• Exposure to many different perspectives gives a ‘live’ experience of mentalizing – a culture of enquiry about mental states
• The group facilitators’ roles are to notice and promote mentalizing amongst these different perspectives
The Reflective Parenting Group Programme

This is an 8 week psychoeducation group.

Sessions are:

1. Introducing Reflective Parenting and mentalizing
2. Thinking about yourself as a parent: The Parent Map
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Primary aim of a Reflective Parenting Group

• To get the parents in the group mentalizing.

• The focus is not on the behaviour but on the parents’ state of mind in relation to the behaviour. What does it mean?
Use of video clips to stimulate group mentalizing

Misunderstandings
Ice Cream Conflict

Permissive parenting – Veruca Salt
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9mba2qb9do

Getting it right.....Everyone loves Raymond
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VOubVB4CTU

The Sopranos – parenting a teenager
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lo3HAmlp9o
MBT-G: Clinician Authority

Authority without being authoritarian
Therapist openly and repeatedly explains the primary task of the group
Maintains structure and states group principles
Active and participating clinician stance
Praise the group by acclaiming mentalizing when it happens
Maintain focus and pace the group
**MBT-G: Clinician Stance**

Maintain clinician mentalizing

Maintain focus and do not allow persistent non-mentalizing dialogue

Monitor arousal levels and non-mentalizing modes, beware hypermentalizing

Work in current mental reality when possible

Model mentalizing
Cautions

• Easy to become trapped in individual therapy in the group
• Excessive use of clinician mentalizing to make sense of story and to assume understanding of problem
• Beware of defining problem based in physical reality and development of teleological solutions
Reflective Parenting Group: Measuring outcomes

Pre and post measures:
- Parental Reflective Functioning Questionnaire;
- Parenting Stress Index;
- Brief Parental Efficacy Scale;
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire;
- Emotion Regulation Checklist.

In addition, qualitative interviews with parents.
Reflective Parenting Group: initial outcomes

PSI scores did not change significantly, but parental stress moved from being in the ‘in need of clinical assistance’ to the moderately high range.

Reflective Functioning did not increase significantly, although parents said they spent more time thinking about the parent-child relationship.

Need for a reconsideration of the measure (of RF particularly) and for how Reflective Parenting impacts mentalizing and/or behaviour
How to operationalise RP in your work

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Where is Reflective Parenting going next?
Becoming a registered Reflective Parent Practitioner

1. Attend a two day Reflective Parenting training at AFNCCF
2. Familiarise yourself with the manual (and coming soon....the wiki manual)
3. Find a co-facilitator, set up the group and video each session
4. Select video clips of three moments to discuss in consultation
5. Organise consultation with an AFNCCF consultant (funded by your employer).
6. Consultant will support you to stay on model and use a fidelity adherence rating scale to help you notice good moments of mentalizing and your group techniques
Preventative early help: Reflective Parenting for Health Visitors

- Training a cohort of student HVs at Kings College London
- To help professionals build a trusting and confiding relationship with new parents
- To promote engagement between HVs and parents
- To model a mentalizing stance to new parents
- Help parents to learn how to regulate their own emotions and understand their baby or child
Any questions?

For more information please contact:

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