

Strengthening Reflective Capacity in Skilled Home Visitors

Linda Gilkerson
Erikson Institute

Jaci Imberger
Taos First Steps
Taos New Mexico

Abstract

This article describes the FAN (Facilitating Attuned Interactions) approach to attunement in relationships and how it serves as a framework for reflective practice in an exemplary home visiting program. The authors highlight the role of the FAN as a tool for "reflection-in-action" and as a guide for "reflection-on-action." The process of learning the FAN combines formal training with mentored practice within the reflective supervisory relationship. There is a parallel process for the supervisor who is mentored by a FAN trainer through a similar reflective process. Home visitors reported changes in the perspectives and practices as they incorporated the FAN into their reflective practice, as did the supervisor as she grew in her capacity to provide reflective supervision.

Taos First Steps is a state-funded home visiting program which serves 170 families from pregnancy through their child's first 3 years who are living in Taos County, New Mexico. The program is 10 years old and has a strong foundation in infant mental health practice with the parent-child relationship as its central focus. The staff consists of both very experienced and new home visitors, a data coordinator, and the program supervisor. The team is trained in emotional intelligence, trauma-informed practice and trauma stewardship, Circle of Security, Infant Massage, Keys to Caregiving, and reflective practice. Of the nine home visitors, seven have their infant mental health endorsement. The supervisor is deeply committed to the use of reflection as a way to build capacity in both parents and in the staff. Four years ago the supervisor and several staff attended an introductory training on the FAN (Facilitating Attuned Interactions; Gilkerson et al., 2012; Heffron et al., 2016), an approach to engagement in relationships and reflective practice. The structure that the FAN approach provides for reflection was immediately attractive to them, as was the emphasis on Mindful Self-Regulation which seemed to fit so well with their work on emotional intelligence. Here we describe their journey toward infusing the FAN into their reflective practice with families and within the supervisory relationship.

FAN: A Framework for Engagement and Reflective Practice

The FAN is a model for engagement in relationships and a framework for reflective practice. The theory of change guiding the FAN is attunement. *Attunement* in helping relationships is defined as feeling connected and understood. The felt experience of being understood opens the possibility for change and for trying new ways. One important guideline of the FAN is to first see the child the parent sees or more broadly, to first see the world the parent sees. From this empathic stance, parents can feel heard and more open to seeing their child differently and parenting in more flexible ways.

Reflection-in-Action

The process of attunement requires the ability to read affective and behavioral cues, to understand internal states (e.g., needs and motivations), and to remain flexible so as to offer interactions that most fit with what the other person is available for in that moment. Attunement also includes tending to mismatch and working toward repair, which involves reading cues about what is not working and shifting as needed. Thus, attunement is a form of reflection-in-action or "thinking on your feet." (Schön, 1983)

The FAN operationalizes attunement through matching four core processes to the kind of interaction the parent is most able to use in the moment. These four core processes are: Empathic Inquiry, which is used when the parent is experiencing feelings; Collaborative Exploration, which is used when affect is contained and the parent wants to think through an issue; Capacity Building, which is used when the parent needs information or is ready to try a new way; and Integration, which is used when the parent has insights or sees new meaning. (See Figure 1)

At the heart of the FAN is the practitioner's ability to maintain a reflective posture throughout the interaction. *Reflective posture* is the ability to be fully present, monitor affect and engagement cues, offer interactions using the core processes that are attuned to the parent's readiness, and observe the parent's responses. The practitioner is continually assessing attunement by asking the reflective question: "Is this working?" When there is a misattunement, that is when the parent is in one wedge of the FAN (e.g., Feelings) and the home visitor offers interventions from another (e.g., Doing), the home visitor notices and readjusts the interaction to more closely meet the parent where they are in the moment. Because of its reliance on the continual conceptualization of what one is observing, feeling, and doing, and how one is impacted by these experiences, the FAN relies on the reflective capacity of the practitioner (Fenichel, 1992).

There are clearly times when a practitioner is unable to maintain this stance and becomes dysregulated or thrown

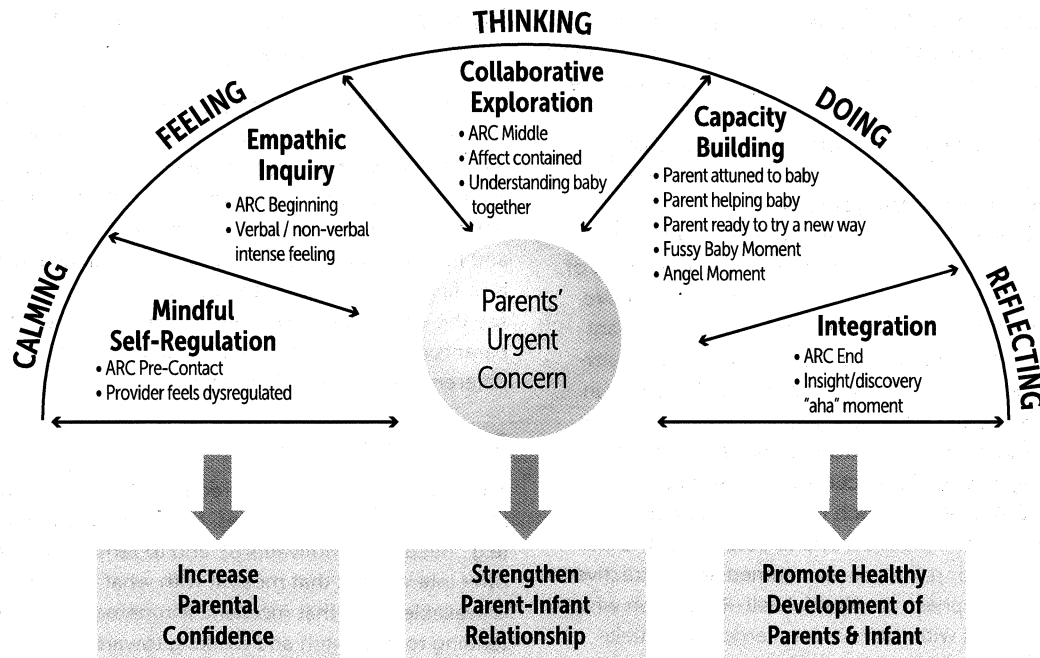


Photo: istock/DGLimages

One important guideline of the FAN is to first "see the child the parent sees."

off balance. The fifth FAN process, Mindful Self-Regulation, is a reflection-in-action rebalancing tool. Mindful Self-Regulation is an intentional process that requires awareness and tracking of one's own internal state (e.g., body sensations, feelings, urges, needs, and thoughts) and the active use of self-regulatory strategies, such as breathing, self-talk, and imagery, to bring oneself back to balance in the moment. The goal of Mindful Self-Regulation is clarity: regaining balance so that you can see clearly and make decisions about how to reconnect with new awareness (Saakvitne, Pearlman, & Staff of TSI/CAAP, 1996).

Figure 1. Fussy Baby Network® FAN, Facilitating Attuned Interactions



In addition to the FAN attunement process, the careful pacing of engagement is another form of reflection-in-action. The FAN deliberately uses pauses to slow down the interaction and allow time for the parent to process and respond. For example, in Empathic Inquiry, home visitors are encouraged to validate feelings, then pause and allow time for the parent to absorb and respond. When giving information, home visitors are encouraged to give input in small doses and then explore the meaning to the parent. This careful pacing is designed to help the practitioner respect what the parent can take in the moment and offer the just right amount of information.

The ARC of Engagement (Figure 2) provides a structure to pace the visit and give the practitioner and parent time to reflect on their experience. The suggested pacing begins with preparation. Prior to meeting with the family, the practitioner takes time to assess her own state and pause to reflect on that state, breathe, and prepare to be present. Early in the meeting, the home visitor invites the parents to reflect on their current parenting experience (e.g., How has it been *for you* to care for your baby this past week? or What has it been like for you to be a mom [or a dad] this week?). Toward the middle, the visitor checks in (e.g., Are we getting to what was most on your mind?) At the end, the home visitor invites the parent to reflect on their child (e.g., If you were to describe your baby in three words today, what would you say?) and reflect on the meaning of the visit to the parent (e.g., What would you like to remember/take with you from our time together?).

Reflection-On-Action

The FAN is learned and sustained in practice through guided reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). Following a 2-day Level I FAN core training for the whole team, the home visitors move into a 6–8 month Level II Facilitated Practice period during

which they complete reflection tools on eight visits and review these tools in reflective supervision to reconstruct and reflect upon their visits. The reflective sessions are structured by the ARC questions. The supervisor guides the process by asking questions similar to the ones the home visitor asks the parent: What was it like for you to be with this family on this visit? Are we getting to what was most on your mind? What would you like to remember from our time together? Is there something that you would like for me to remember?

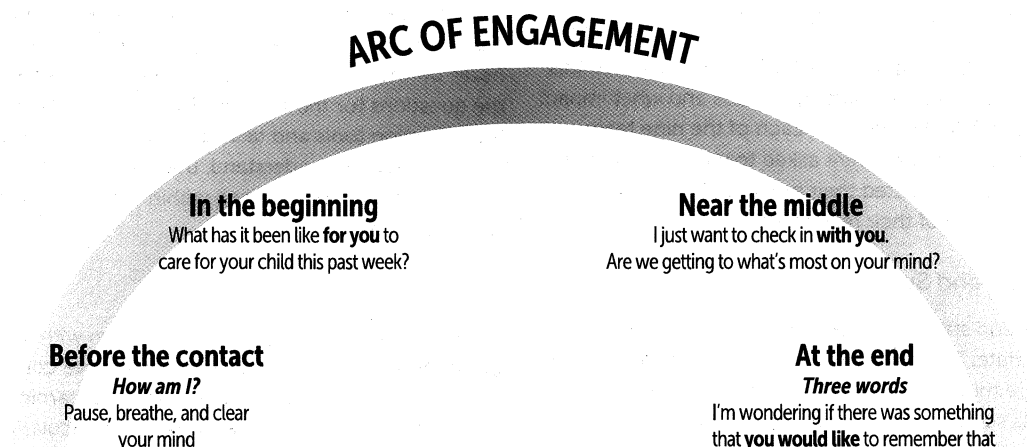
The reflection tool contains three reflective questions for each process. The home visitor fills out the first of three questions for each process prior to the session and then the supervisor guides reflection on all the questions for each core process during their time together. Here are sample reflective questions for two core processes:

Mindful Self-Regulation: What thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions were you experiencing that led you to know that you needed to go to Mindful Self-Regulation? What did you do to help regulate these feelings in the moment? How did you feel this worked for you?

Empathic Inquiry: What cues did the parent give you, both verbal and nonverbal, that let you know he was ready for/ needing Empathic Inquiry? What were two or three of the strongest feelings that the parent expressed during the visit? What do you think you said or did that encouraged the parent to express these feelings?

While the staff are engaged in a reflective learning process with their supervisor, the supervisor is engaged in a parallel process with the FAN trainer to develop her skills on the Supervisor FAN (Gilkerson & Heffron, 2016). The Supervisor FAN helps the supervisor simultaneously keep the supervisee's concerns, the supervisor's concerns, and the program

Figure 2. ARC of Engagement



standards in mind. Using the same core processes, the supervisor reads the supervisee's cues and attempts to meet her where she is and move with her on the FAN. The ARC of Engagement is used to guide the supervisor in organizing the supervision session. The ARC reminds the supervisor to: prepare prior to starting, start with the supervisees' experience, check in with the supervisee in the middle, and slow the end down for reflection. The Supervisor FAN Learning Tool asks the supervisor to map out the flow of the session, noting which core processes were used and respond to a series of reflective questions for each core process. Later, the supervisor processes the Learning Tool in mentoring sessions with the FAN trainer. Sample reflective questions include:

Mindful Self-Regulation: What led you to go to Mindful Self-Regulation during the supervision? What strategies did you use to regain your regulation and attention, and how effective did you feel they were? Looking back, were there other moments when Mindful Self-Regulation might have been helpful?

Collaborative Exploration: Describe two things you said or did that helped you gain an understanding of the supervisee's concerns? Describe the child, family, or issue that the supervisee sees. Describe the child, family, or issue that you hold in your mind. What was the supervisee's theory of the problem?

After a home visitor has received his Level II certification on the FAN, the visitor enters Level III Sustained Practice in which he periodically uses the tools in supervision to reflect upon the work. The FAN debriefing process is also evoked when the home visitor feels stuck. Simple reflective questions often open up a deeper conversation that allows the home visitor to see the situation through a different lens. Questions include: What did this experience evoke in you? Where do you think the parent was on the FAN? Where were you? Looking back at the interaction, what do you think was happening for you? For the parent? Has anything shifted for you as you have been reflecting on this encounter?

Infusing the FAN Into Reflective Practice

In this section, we describe how the FAN was infused into this program using the reflective learning process and what impact this had on the staff and supervisor. Each of the nine team members and the supervisor were asked to write down how the FAN training had impacted their practice. The following represents a summary of their responses.

Staff Openness and Supervisor Commitment

The supervisor and staff's prior exposure to the FAN created a receptive climate. The staff's willingness to participate, even those who were more skeptical, and openness to learning were keys to its success. The supervisor believed that the FAN complemented and integrated the previous training the staff had received and was committed to following the Level II certification requirements—step by step. This commitment

provided the steady framework which held the staff through the almost year-long process.

Fit With Program Values

Because the FAN supported the accomplishment of core program values, including empathic communication and reflective practice, the FAN was seen as a framework for engagement in all facets of the program. Thus, each team member from the supervisor to new and experienced home visitors, to the data supervisor who does Medicaid enrollment participated in the full training sequence including the reflective tools and their discussion during reflective supervision.

Holding the Frame

The supervisor's consistent implementation of the Level II process was critical to the successful implementation of the FAN. To complete the certification, an extra hour of supervision was added for each staff member each month. The staff completed the tools right after their visits and brought the completed tools to the FAN supervision session. If a staff member did not have the tools ready, the meeting was rescheduled: "we did not do them on the spot." It was more work for the staff to write up the reflective tools and some, more than others, felt the FAN was a new language. The supervisor validated their willingness to try because she deeply believed that the FAN would enhance their practice.

Accepting Differences and Giving Control

Although the response to the FAN was mixed at first, everyone was open to trying. Some were eager and felt they had waited a long time for the training. Others felt the FAN was unnatural, like a "foreign language" and too scripted. Responding to their individual needs, the supervisor offered flexibility within set boundaries as she gave staff control over how many families and with which families to use the FAN. She asked new staff who were just learning their roles to choose one element of the FAN where they felt most comfortable and encouraged them to practice this until they were more confident. New staff often chose the beginning or end of the ARC and made notes on their charts prompting them to remember to ask the questions for the selected FAN process. By completing the reflection tools and talking through what was difficult or what they did not understand, the staff naturally built their confidence and competence within the supportive relationship with the supervisor.

Benefit of Guided Reflection

The FAN Learning Tool provided the team with a structure and guide for reflection, which can be an elusive concept to put into practice. Because the supervisor was learning too, she felt that having scripted questions was particularly helpful. By the end of the fourth session, the supervisor described their mutual growth in this way: "We started to embrace the slogan: 'Any time we talk about the FAN, we deepen our awareness and our skill...We were all practicing together.'"

Visual Presence of the FAN

The supervisor hung a large FAN poster in her office that served as a “visual compass” for their discussions. Staff receive a laminated letter-size (8½ x 11) FAN and smaller, pocket-sized FAN as memory aids. As one staff member said: “The FAN never fails you as long as you remember to use it.”

Compassionate Process for Growth

The FAN framework provides a gentle way for practitioners to look at themselves and their interactions and discern which interactions are working well and which are more difficult. The supervisor found that reviewing the tools with the staff revealed what core processes they were good at and comfortable with and which ones they needed to work on. Some knew where they would struggle and this was confirmed whereas others discovered their area of growth through the reflective process. The staff was willing to look into the mirror and see what they brought to the situation. The supervisor described the FAN reflection as a “magical process... a compassionate way to talk about areas of growth in a non-threatening way. I loved that as a supervisor.”

What Did the Staff Learn and Experience?

The overarching theme for staff was that the FAN deepened their practice. They grew in reflective capacity including each area described by Heller & Ash (this issue, p. 22): self-knowledge, self-regulation, collaboration, process, authentic attitude, and multiple perspectives.

Structure and Meaning

One staff member summarized the impact this way: The FAN brought “structure to our visits while adding meaning to each one.” The staff found that the FAN helped staff organize the visits, reminded staff to keep the timing in mind allowing for a more paced visit, and helped staff recognize when screening tools could be presented in a noninvasive way. The FAN structure helped keep the visits on track. For example, staff commented, “First by adding structure when I feel at a loss as to where a visit is going. I find myself going to the reflective questions in those moments.” Or as another staff member noted, “We all know that home visits can go down many difficult-to-navigate pathways. I also feel my ability to find comfort with the questions has deepened and that they are meaningful to families as well as to myself. I have started using the questions... with my own family so I feel they are becoming a part of who I am.”

Brave Practice

FAN allowed staff to have greater confidence and skill in a wider range of interactions. One team member shared that she had been learning to ask potentially difficult questions.

Up till now I have been too nervous to alienate a client by asking a probing question... I am learning how to be open and curious and willing to hold space for any negative reaction to my question that might occur. I think my practice of [Mindful Self-Regulation] has provided me the tools I need for that possibility.

Self-Knowledge

As the supervisor observed, staff reported that the FAN helped them become more aware of their own tendencies and to embrace growth. It was not surprising that the patterns differ.

For example, one team member shared, “I am also learning to spend a little time in the core process of capacity building, my weakest area, noting and taking advantage of learning moments that arise during a visit.” Other staff who describe themselves as “doers” found that the FAN helped them stay longer in the hard places, becoming more comfortable with handling the strong feelings that can arise for both parent and home visitor.

Staff also took pride in their growth. “Collaborative exploration has been

one of my most favorite areas to work on, and I’m definitely improving!” Another staff team member felt that increasing her skills in collaborative exploration helped her grow in ways that enhanced the program core value, “refraining from giving families our own suggestions has been First Steps’ motto and to empower families to find their own way and what works for them.”

“Languaging” Practice

The FAN offered the team a common language and way to name their experiences. “It feels good to have the language now around the practice we were already doing.” The supervisor remarked that “the FAN fits perfectly with an infant mental health approach as we are able to name our feelings” and she also noted that the FAN allowed staff to describe what happened on visits in a way that everyone can understand. The supervisor noted that the staff were better able to label their own triggers and talk openly about their use of Mindful Self-Regulation; thus normalizing the dysregulation that is part of the intense work of home visiting and making it more possible to talk about what to do in these situations.

Reflective posture is the ability to be fully present, monitor affect and engagement cues, offer interactions using the core processes that are attuned to the parent's readiness, and observe the parent's responses.

Knowing Where the Family Is

Home visitors are often encouraged to start where the family is but are not given practical ways to figure out where to start. The ARC helped the home visitors take the pulse at the beginning of the visit and continue to check in with the parent throughout the visit. The positioning of the parents' concern in the middle of the FAN keeps the spotlight on the parent's needs and concerns. "Using the FAN has given me a lot more information about where a caregiver is during a visit. By understanding what area [of the FAN] a client is in, I am better able to adjust my response and meet the needs of the client."

Internalization of Mindful Self-Regulation

Staff noted that Mindful Self-Regulation was a critical component of the FAN and allowed them to stay grounded and be more "open and curious." Many staff members described the FAN as being of double benefit, helping them in their personal lives as well as their professional lives.

I have identified a couple techniques for MSR that are really effective for me and through practice and repetition have integrated them into my work and life practices. I now feel that I am able to access these techniques without much effort or premeditation.

Seeing From the Other's Perspective

The FAN allowed the staff to see that they, at times, were imposing their perspective onto parents.

They became aware of when they felt judgmental and wanted to pursue their own agenda. The supervisor noted that the FAN allowed them to "see the other and also be the regulated other." For the less experienced staff, there were many "ah-ha" moments around their home visiting and how much they wanted to give "buckets of information." The FAN conversations around the reflective tools helped them see that they were setting their own agendas for families without incorporating the family or the family's wishes. The program uses the analogy of a beach ball. When you are holding it yourself, you look at a situation through one color. When you turn the ball and look at it through another color, you are made aware of the other's perspective. Instead of going to Doing on the FAN, they expanded their use of Collaborative Exploration to understand the other's perspective and are guided by the mantra: "When in doubt, listen and ask one more question."

From Transactional to Transformative

The FAN was embraced in all aspects of the program so families experience a coherent approach regardless of the activity. One staff member adapted the ARC questions for Medicaid enrollments, using an opening question such as "How is it going today?," later asking "Did we address all of

your concerns around your health insurance?" and finally, "How was this process for you today?" These questions helped the staff member to assess and meet the clients where they are and make appointments more meaningful for the client. For example, the client's chair is now repositioned so the client can see and be involved in filling out the application. When possible, the client sits at the computer while the staff provides assistance as needed. The appointments have become more collaborative and the process "more transformational to the client rather than just transactional."

What Was the Supervisor's Parallel Process of Growth?

Here we describe the supervisor's reflections on her growth.

Putting Reflective in Reflective Supervision

Because the FAN provides a coherent model for relationships and reflective practice, it is also used as a framework for reflective supervision. Up until her FAN certification process, the supervisor had always felt a bit unsure how to do reflective supervision. She was entering her fourth year and, like most program supervisors, had not had formal training in reflective supervision in her professional education. The supervisor identifies herself as "a fixer/do-er as a nurse by trade." When staff encountered a problem, her approach was to give suggestions. She was not sure how to move past the "reporting" aspect of supervision (e.g., I saw Jennie this week,

all is good, no problems, she's been regular with her visit) and support them in reflecting on their work, especially if she felt resistance. "I didn't know the words to go deeper. For me, the structure for reflective supervision was what I was yearning for." Using the FAN review process was like adding a "visual video" of what the visit was like. Supervision could now focus on the process and the meaning of what

was happening for the parent and the visitor. The supervisor felt less awkward and more confident because she had a structured process to follow. She added a "check in" box at the top of her notes and a "take away box" at the end to remind her of the ARC.

Felt Experience of the FAN

Although the supervisor was fully committed, the FAN certification process was a steep learning curve for her as well. "My stumbles were similar to the staff's, without the skepticism." She was learning to listen more and ask more questions and allow the staff to come to their own conclusions. The supervisor's use of the FAN was critical to the staff internalizing the approach as it provided the staff with the "felt experience of the FAN." Similarly, the supervisor experienced the FAN during mentoring calls twice a month

When giving information, home visitors are encouraged to give input in small doses and then explore the meaning to the parent.

with the trainer—one focused on her sessions with the staff in using their reflective tools and the second focused on her use of the FAN in supervision. She used the mentoring sessions with the trainer to look both inward and outward about her own supervisory practice and reflective skills.

From Hesitancy to Confidence

A common fear that staff voiced was that families would not want to answer the end of ARC questions or would think they were too scripted. In actuality, their experience did not match their hesitancy. Families were fine answering the questions and often had new insights to share at the end of the visits. Guided by the FAN, the supervisor stayed regulated and used Collaborative Exploration to explore their concerns and asked questions which allowed the staff to recognize their own hesitancy. For example, the supervisor would inquire “What did you notice about the parent when you asked the last question?” and “How was this for you?” Through this process, the home visitors were able to see that the obstacle was their own discomfort, rather than the parents’. They moved from hesitancy to confidence in using the ARC. In parallel fashion, the supervisor gained confidence in her capacity to help staff sort through a troubling situation without the pressure to “fix it” for them.

Staying Regulated During Stressful Conversations

Mindful Self-Regulation helps the supervisor stay regulated during administrative supervision, when she needs to state a program requirement and ask the staff member what support they need to meet the requirement. She noted that the FAN has helped her pause and try to see what the home visitor sees, which allows her to empathize with the staff’s situation while not necessarily changing the program standards. Her growing capacity for perspective taking has helped build relationships with the staff and create a safer space for them.

Sustaining the FAN Reflection Process

Moving forward, the supervisor’s goal is to keep staff connected to the FAN in a fun, engaging, and meaningful way. Her plan has several elements. First, all staff will complete one FAN Learning Tool each month during reflective supervision. The supervisor has found that the FAN tool reflection often evolves into a deeper conversation about the work and notes “my best supervision sessions use the FAN.” Second, the program will have quarterly reflective group discussions guided by the FAN as part of its Continuous Quality Improvement Process. During this forum, the staff will check in on the FAN process—what’s working and what’s not working; focus on a

clinical topic related to the FAN, such as how to bridge from feelings to other aspects of a visit; or discuss a family using the FAN framework. Third, the FAN Self-Reflection Tool will now be used as part of the annual evaluation. The supervisor and supervisee will review the tool together, name strengths, and identify areas of growth. This review process will be used to guide professional development. The supervisor is moving into the FAN train-the-trainer program to consolidate her mastery of the FAN by teaching others.

Closing

FAN is now a shared framework for engagement in relationships and for reflective practice within the Taos First Steps program. The supervisor summarized it this way, “There is Mindful Self-Regulation to ‘know thyself;’ Empathic Inquiry to name the big feelings and create a holding space; Collaborative Exploration to listen and see another’s way; Capacity Building to build confidence; and Integration to connect the dots.” The staff and supervisor embody the qualities of reflective capacity and work each day from this base to support the well-being of young children and families.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the devotion and excellence of the Taos First Steps Team. Their willingness to look in the mirror and also see through the lens of another made this possible. We’d like to also acknowledge the support of New Mexico Children Youth and Families Department, the program funder, and Holy Cross Hospital, fiscal agent.

Linda Gilkerson, PhD, is a professor and executive director of the Fussy Baby Network. She is the developer of the FAN and works with the Fussy Baby Network team to support its national and international sites in launching Fussy Baby Network programs or infusing the FAN into existing programs and systems of service. Her scholarship and program development focus on relationship-based, reflective practice. She is a long-time Board Member of ZERO TO THREE.

Jaci Imberger, RN, is the program manager for First Steps in Taos, NM, where she leads her team in infusing the FAN into their home visiting program. With her colleague Jana Bailey, she started the grass roots coalition Latch On to support breastfeeding mothers. Ms. Imberger received her Infant Mental Health Level 2 endorsement and is a Circle of Security Parenting facilitator. She brings extensive nursing experience to her role as a program manager and reflective supervisor.