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## TWO

# Reflective Practice

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**R**eflective practice is a fundamental part of the work of a childcare professional. Using the term ‘professional’ presumes a set of standards, competences and achievement goals for you as a member of an industry. One of the most important of these is putting the child at the centre of everything you do and ensuring that their welfare is your top priority in your procedures, practices and behaviours.

This is not just an ideal, as you will see in Chapter 16 on legislation, as you are legally obliged to put the best interests of each child you work with at the centre of all you do in childcare. This means that whenever you look after children in your care, you must be aware of how everything you do impacts on the child and how important it is for you to be responsive to the needs of the child. You are also responsible for ensuring that you understand what it is a child needs to reach their full potential, which will certainly affect how you behave, act and react in your professional life.

An illustration of how complex is this process of putting the child at the centre of everything can be seen in Figure 2.1, which is not exhaustive but shows what is involved in looking at the child as an individual, a learner and a fundamental part of the service you provide.

Never underestimate your role and contribution to the life and well-being of a child, but just as important, never underestimate the complexity of your job and the learning process you undertake in childcare.

Reflection is like a weaving process that takes account of all these interacting factors between the children you care for and the job you do. Being what is called a reflective practitioner is about understanding:

- Your caring responsibilities.
- The worth of your own abilities.
- The limit of your abilities in any given situation.
- The importance of your role in the life of a child.
- Your contribution to the team you work with.

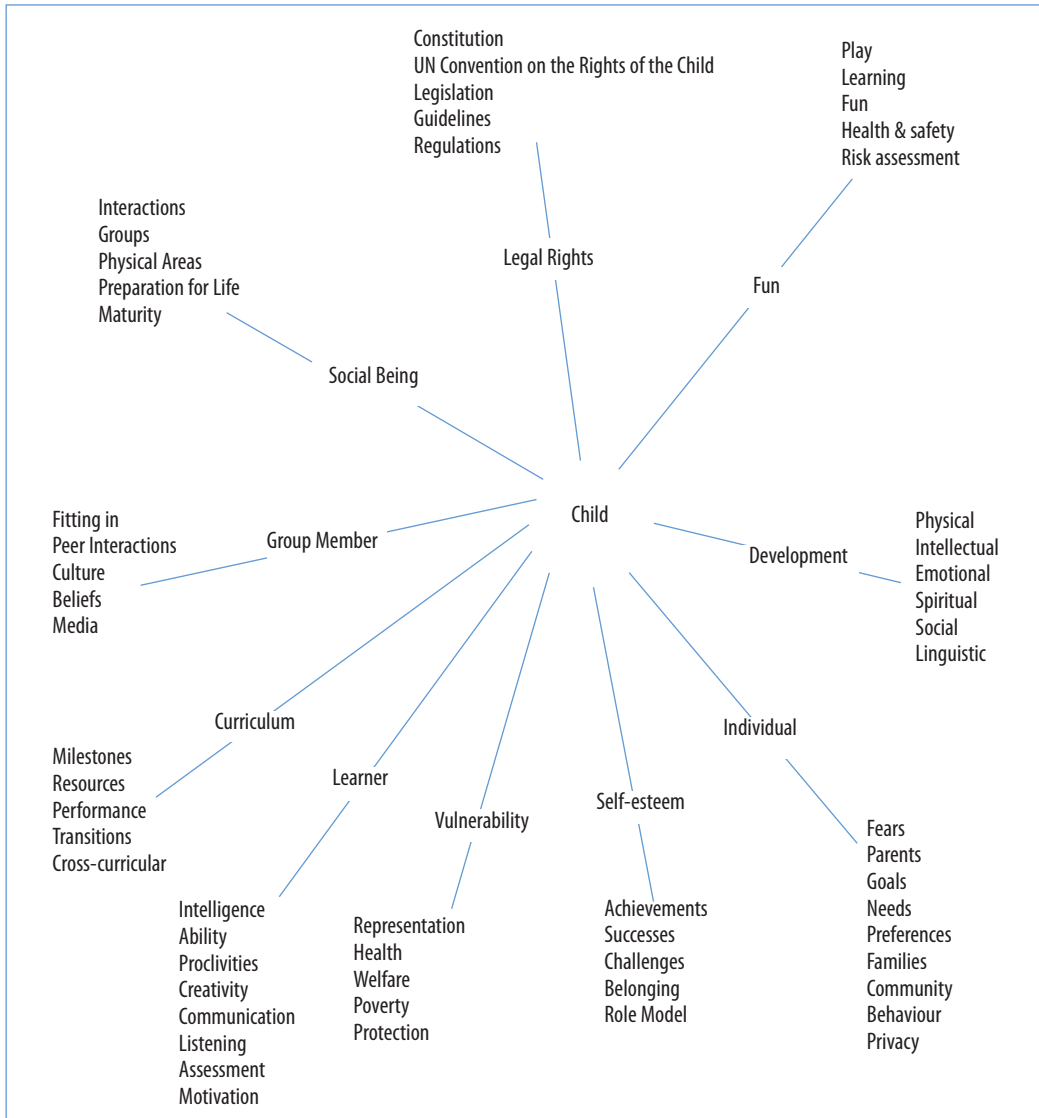


FIGURE 2.1: THE COMPLEXITY OF THE CHILD

- Knowing that challenges change on a daily basis.
- Accepting that you are accountable for your own actions.
- Acknowledging that you are continuously learning.
- Accepting that professionalism means committing to quality performance standards and competences.
- Being open minded and keeping abreast of new methods, advancements and technology in your profession.
- Accepting that childcare is not just a job, but is a constantly evolving concept.

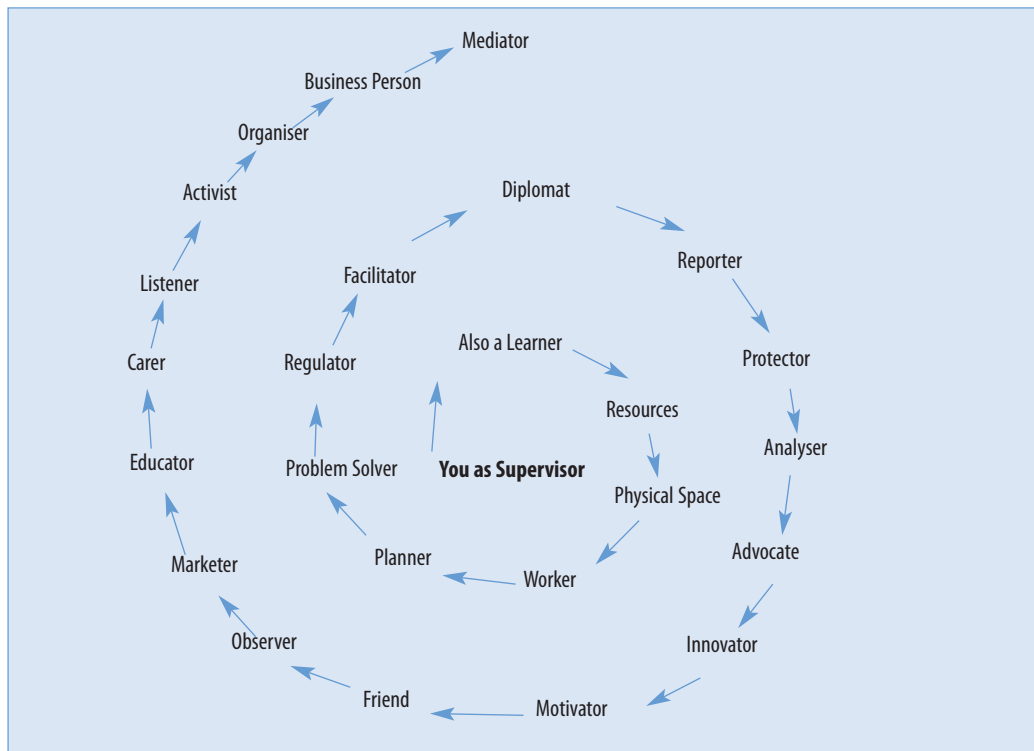


FIGURE 2.2: COMPLEXITIES OF THE SUPERVISOR'S ROLE

While it is necessary to embrace all these complex concepts, it is fundamentally just as important that you are aware of your own strengths and weaknesses in the process of reflection. Knowing your limits and challenges is highly important in an industry where you care for vulnerable individuals.

### *Reflective Portfolio Activity*

1. List five strengths you feel you have.
2. List five weaknesses you feel you have.
3. Ask a friend to complete step 1 and step 2 about you.
4. Ask a family member to complete step 1 and step 2 about you.
5. Compare the three sets of strengths and weaknesses you now have.

You will be surprised at the differences you find in the lists – in particular, you will more than likely find that you have underestimated your own strengths. The difference in the lists is about how we view ourselves more critically than others do. This exercise allows you to be a little more objective.

You now have a realistic and informed picture of your abilities and limitations, but remember, this is based on your own honesty in the process!

There is nothing wrong with having weaknesses – we all have them. The reason they are examined in this way is to acknowledge where you might need to put procedures in place to bypass your own weaknesses. For example, if you are not good at dealing with conflict you may need to get some experience through reading or doing a course that would add to your skills in this aspect of your work. Another thing you may have put on your weakness list could be that you procrastinate (most of us do), so you may need to put a list system in place (you can also use your mobile phone or computer) so that things get done on time. The benefit of actually putting a solution in place to overcome something you are not very good at (to the extent that you would describe it as a weakness) shows a proactive approach, which is expected in managers and supervisors.

Another reason you would look at your skills in the above way is that sometimes you are viewed by others as being better at a skill than you think. If you look at this more closely, it may be a skill that would be useful in more situations than you have thought about. This kind of approach is behind the concept of being a reflective practitioner. Over time, you will learn to put things in logical, realistic sequences, which can inform your next actions.

While working in childcare means working in a caring profession, the process of reflection is about *you* – how *you* did things, what *you* needed to improve on, how *you* might do things differently next time and what outcomes would be affected if *you* changed *your* approach. This can be relevant when you come across a new challenge with a particular child and may not come across the same problem until years later. If you have noted down what you did at the time, you then have something to refer back to for clues on how to deal with the problem or how to go about finding a solution – this is like building your own reference manual.

As part of your Level 6 childcare qualification you are required to keep a journal of your learning experiences and this is the basis of a reflective journal, which every childcare worker and supervisor should keep over their career. It is not just something you do until you get your qualification, but should become a working document for you for all your years in the profession. The notes you take one day may become relevant 10 years down the line.

A fundamental ingredient of meaningful reflection is setting aside the time and space in which to carry it out. You can undertake reflection:

- As you walk home from work.
- As part of a winding-down process.
- In the quiet of the evening.
- On the bus/train as you travel to and from work.
- As part of a structured process in your workplace.

- Using a prompt list, as given in the next example, as a starting point until the process becomes seamless.
- Using a diary or just a notebook, which becomes a working 'live' document.
- On your computer as a continuous narrative about your work.

Over time, a reflection process undertaken in this way will become a therapeutic process that can help you unwind after challenging days or can even be a means of acknowledging what you achieved on any particular day. While children may be a significant part of each day's reflection, there may be times when staff, parents, processes, resources or even procedures become the focus of your thoughts. The concept applies to everything you do in your professional capacity, and by doing this you are becoming an active player in your own learning.

Students often find it difficult to start a journal, as they feel self-conscious about what they write because it will be read by others as part of the learning experience. After qualification, however, for the most part your working journal will only be read by you. This means that over time, you will become more fluent in how you approach what you write. However, until this confidence develops, the following prompts will help you to establish a habit that will serve you well and allow you take an objective view of what you encounter in your work.

This list is not exhaustive and some questions may be more relevant than others for the type of facility you work in. Some of the things you might want to reflect on may not arise in other scenarios, but over time and with practice, you will develop your own style of reflective focus, which will become your consistent style. It is useful to date your journal/diary, as this gives you a contemporaneous record that can be referred back to in a particular timescale (this is especially important in cases of referral to other professionals, as might arise in child protection issues), where your notes may well form the basis of an evidence trail in the future and are effectively dated by the order they have in your journal – other things are written later, which proves that the notes you refer to were taken on the date being quoted.

### *Reflective Portfolio Activity*

#### **Possible prompts for your reflective journal:**

- ▶ What happened in your work today? (Give a summary of the key points.)
- ▶ How did what you have already learned help with your day?
- ▶ Did you notice any relationship between things that happened and what theorists say about the things you encountered?
- ▶ How did what you already know benefit the children you worked with today?

- ▶ Did you learn anything today that could be of use with another child/children you work with?
- ▶ How would you go about trying this out?
- ▶ How did your own personal strengths and weaknesses show in what you did today?
- ▶ What did you learn today that would make you a more effective childcare worker or supervisor?
- ▶ What challenged or worried you in your work?
- ▶ What might you undertake to make your performance better?
- ▶ Is there somebody you can/should consult about what happened?
- ▶ Is there anybody who could help? How would you go about getting that help?

If you start to write as if you were answering these questions in your journal, you will see that in order to answer them, you must be very tuned into what you did – this is what it means to be a good reflective practitioner. The process feels strange and you might feel self-conscious when you first start, but over time it becomes part of what you do and therefore becomes more natural and meaningful for each individual childcare worker.

Used effectively, the reflective journal can be part of your goal-setting strategies for up-skilling and professional development by highlighting what *you* recognise as your learning goals based on actual needs you identify in the process involved. This could help you focus, therefore, on specific skills and courses that are needed immediately and thus give quick returns in terms of the time and effort you put into your own professional development. Over time, you may observe other professionals you work with successfully solving a problem that has been bothering you, and making a note of their methods can be a form of peer learning for you. Alternatively, you can solicit the assistance of a more experienced practitioner in another setting who may be of help in suggesting solutions to problems you encounter.

As a practitioner in childcare, you will be required to consult with other professionals as part of your ongoing work with the children in your care. These experiences become part of a network you might use again in the future, especially if a problem being dealt with happens again. This interaction can give you a new focus on how a problem or challenge might be dealt with in relation to a child. It may well also point to training needed for your staff, which will be of benefit to everybody in your setting. You might need to budget for training to support the professional development of staff under your supervision in order to bring efficiencies to your workplace.

It is also important to remember that your style and the effectiveness of your

reflection will differ throughout your career. You might think slowly and methodically when you start out in childcare, but after a while you will become more confident in your own abilities and observations and your style of reflection will change accordingly.

### *Reflective Portfolio Discussion Activity*

Jennifer is caring for a four-year-old child who is displaying very challenging behaviour that is affecting other children and is very upsetting to watch.

Discuss how Jennifer might feel about dealing with this situation and what her concerns might be in her reflective journal. Think about how she might write about the situation and how she might go about getting advice in each of the following scenarios:

- (a) As a student on work placement
- (b) As a newly appointed supervisor
- (c) As a supervisor with 10 years of experience

As a leader, you should encourage all your staff and trainees to engage in reflective practice and establish times and interaction opportunities that will allow for enriching learning in your setting. If you encourage such a commitment to reflective practice in your service, you will be setting the stage for an informed and committed staff who have much to offer children in your setting for years to come and who feel supported and confident in their practice.

Throughout this book there are portfolio activities for you to undertake and reflect on so that you can become familiar with a range of tasks you will be using in a supervisory position in an ECCE setting. These tasks are designed to make it easy for you to complete the activity, while the process of reflection is up to you, as all reflection will be in your future working life. They should form learning opportunities that you will be able to build on in your setting and to look back on later in your career when you need new direction or understanding.