



It's the season for New Year's Resolutions, and all the advice tells us to *reflect*, to think about where you've been and where you want to go. As you think about the direction for your mentoring relationship and your hopes about where your mentee can go in life, *reflection* takes on a greater meaning.

In a recent article for the Trauma-Informed Care Consortium, Dr. Tina Adkins from UT talked about the theory of exactly how it is that

parents, foster parents, and other key adults transmit *attachment*, which is defined as a deep and enduring emotional bond that connects one person to another across time and space. Researchers have found that the adult's ability to practice *reflection* in regard to the child is a large factor in the process of transmitting attachment. She writes about *mentalization* which "involves the ability to look inside the mind of another (while simultaneously looking inside your own mind) and understanding behavior in relation to mental states such as thoughts, feelings, desires etc. It is the skill of being able to see yourself from the outside and your children from the inside."<sup>1</sup>

Of course, this practice is not the same as deciding we know what is inside our mentee's head. Instead, we listen carefully without judgment and use active and *reflective* listening to check out our perceptions as we come to know our mentee more deeply. The Ophelia Project training manual offers these tips for *reflective listening*:

When practicing reflective listening, the mentor should not be thinking "What can I do for my mentee?" but rather steer the conversation to obtain more information to the following questions:

- How does my mentee view himself and the situation he's in?
- How can I help her work toward a realistic solution?
- How can I help him get his needs met?
- How can I keep the conversation going in order to gather more information from her?

When the mentor shares his opinions, judgments or advice on solutions, a message of dependency rather than independence is conveyed, thus limiting the mentee's ability to develop critical thinking skills. The role of the mentor is to help the mentee grow from experiencing the consequences of her decisions. Mentors play a key role in offering guidance and encouragement as mentees work toward plausible decisions.

A reflective listener should also listen for the feelings, not just the content. Listen for the emotional tone that the mentee is expressing, such as fear, anger, frustration, disappointment, embarrassment, or excitement. An effective reflective listener not only responds to feelings and non-verbal cues, but also listens for what the mentee is saying about himself rather than the situation, incident or others involved.

For example, if your mentee says, "I am worried that my parents might be getting divorced," what is the mentee really saying about herself here? The reflective listener would focus on the "I'm worried" rather than on the divorce situation. A mentor response such as "It can definitely be scary..." would be more effective than "Maybe they will not get divorced..."

When a mentee receives responses at an emotional level, he will feel as though he is being understood on a deeper level. He will be encouraged to share more.