Family Life Education: The Practice of Family Science

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Family Life Education: Wisdom in Practice

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anie is the mother of a preschooler. She is enrolled in a multisession parent education program that she has been mandated to attend by the county child welfare services. Her daughter, Miley, is currently living with a relative. Janie must pass the class as a condition of regaining custody. Janie says she loves her daughter and desperately wants her back. She comes to all the classes, but isn't very engaged. When Janie does say something in class, it is often inappropriate. Her presence is beginning to have a negative influence on the overall atmosphere of the class. At the end of the class it will be the instructor's responsibility to determine whether she has successfully passed.

Imagine that you are the family life educator facilitating this program. What would you do in this situation? Is there a single "right" response? Do current research and theory provide you with enough information to guide you to a clear solution? What additional information might you need? What exactly is the problem that you are trying to solve? Are there multiple perspectives that need to be considered and balanced? Are professional ethics or personal values part of the equation? Problems like this one often arise in practice. To come up with a creative, practical, and principled solution requires experience, reflection, understanding, ethics, purpose, and deliberation—what we refer to as *wisdom in practice*. In this chapter we provide an overview of wisdom in practice and discuss how family life educators and other family practitioners can apply it in their work.

The Strengths and Limits of Evidence-Based Practice

In recent years, evidence-based programs and practices have been heralded as the gold standard for youth and family programs and services (Axford & Morpeth, 2013; Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013). Although this rapidly growing body of scientific knowledge provides a good foundation for practice, it is only a small piece of what is needed to deal with the dilemmas that are a part of everyday family life education and practice. As the above example illustrates, educational practice sometimes involves having to make critical decisions or solve difficult problems that are unpredictable, complex, and may not have a single, right answer. A growing number of professional disciplines, including medicine (Woolf & Atkins, 2001), social work (O'Sullivan, 2005), education (Vanderven, 2009), nursing (Cathcart & Greenspan, 2013), and psychology (American Psychological Association, 2005), have called on practitioners to make greater use of what is referred to as *evidence-based practice*. It has commonly been defined as "making decisions about how to promote health or provide care by integrating the best available evidence with practitioner expertise and other resources, and with the characteristics, state, needs, values and preferences of those who will be affected" ("Defining Evidence-Based Behavioral Practice," 2014, para. 1). As reflected in this definition and in most conceptualizations, evidence-based practice comprises three overlapping elements: (a) scientific evidence; (b) client needs, preferences, and context; and (c) practitioner expertise and experience. The area of common intersection is considered the center at which effective practice and positive outcomes are most likely to occur (American Psychological Association, 2005). A glimpse into other professions supports the notion that going beyond research findings and empirically tested procedures is critical for the development and implementation of effective practice. The field of nursing, for example, recognizes that effective practice results from multiple forms of knowledge (Benner, 2000) and that the most ethical and tailored treatment for patients is achieved when experience, science, and values are integrated into a continuously developing, dynamic practice (Tarlier, 2005). Similarly, scholars have noted that even as our empirical knowledge base grows there is still room for systematically incorporating professional expertise in order to provide optimal care that is both relevant and effective (Baker, 1974; Eisikovits & Beker, 2001). This notion has trickled into related fields of professional practice. For example, child and youth workers are increasingly acknowledging their work as a *craft*; even though it is supported by scientific knowledge, it is often idiosyncratic and a function of unique situational contexts (Eisikovits & Beker, 2001). The need to draw on additional knowledge, perspectives, and expertise not captured through empirical research is equally necessary for practitioners working in family life education and other family-related professions (Garfat, 2004).

What constitutes research evidence for effective family programs and practices has grown considerably in recent years. In contrast, the other two components of what constitutes evidence-based practice (i.e., practitioner expertise and client context) have received much less attention. For instance, models of evidence-based practice refer to *practitioner expertise*, yet little research has examined what this actually entails, how it is developed, or how it is best applied. Similarly, context and client needs, values, and preferences are a central part of most evidence-based practice models. However, exactly how such characteristics should be assessed, taken into account, and weighed as part of the client–practitioner relationship has not been well delineated.

The Art of Practice: What Science Doesn't Tell Us

Although empirical studies can inform us about the types of families or individuals who benefit, on average, from certain programs or practices, most practitioners understand that the majority of people with whom they work do not adhere neatly to the average (Mitchell, 2011; Small, 2005). A common reservation about evidence-based programs is the assumption that one size fits all. A family's past experiences, cultural background, values, and household norms can color the way programs are received and interpreted by participants, ultimately affecting program outcomes (Larson & Walker, 2010; Mitchell, 2011). Practitioners who interact with families firsthand are uniquely positioned to gather information on what might be most appropriate and effective, beyond what has been shown, on average, to produce positive outcomes. Such a role can be challenging to practitioners who must balance multiple work-related tasks alongside numerous individual clients' needs, situations, and goals at any given moment (Larson, Rickman, Gibbons, & Walker, 2009).

For example, the parent educator dealing with the situation outlined at the start of this chapter may have evidence that the average parent who successfully completes the program will, on average, show significant increases in parenting skill. But what about a parent like Janie, who deviates from the average? Without taking into account her distinct circumstances and needs, it is not likely that Janie's participation will lead to the same successful outcomes. Although there are no guarantees, the educator who personalizes a program to account for Janie's unique needs and circumstances increases the chances that Janie's participation will lead to more positive outcomes.

One of the ways practitioners and organizations standardize their approach and ensure that they are adhering to current research and theory is to have research-based rules and guidelines that they follow. In the vernacular of evidence-based programs, this is referred to as the need to *maintain program fidelity*. Although there are certainly benefits to following research-based guidelines or maintaining program fidelity, there are times when an overreliance on rules and regulations can impede good practice. Schwartz and Sharpe (2010) argued that too many guidelines can inhibit the ability of professionals to use creative strategies and make wise choices because their thinking is narrowed and a predetermined solution is expected. For example, teachers who have been asked to teach to standardized tests so that their school will be evaluated favorably may produce higher test scores, but they are prevented from using their experience and skills to promote students' deeper understanding and application of the material.

Clear guidelines can be useful for executing specific tasks, such as instructing parents in a family life education program on how to use evidence-based techniques such as time outs or parental monitoring. However, they may be less helpful when it comes to dealing with unpredictable or challenging situations that arise in the course of everyday practice or program delivery. Family practitioners who possess not only scientific knowledge, but also the skills and reasoning processes to assess and weigh the values, preferences, and situational factors faced by their clients, are much more likely to be effective, especially in situations where rules and research do not provide an obvious response.

Practical Wisdom

In recent years, scholars across a number of professional disciplines have suggested that part of the solution to the research–practice gap may be found in what has been referred to as *practical wisdom* (Haggerty & Grace, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2005; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). The concept of wisdom has had a long history, going back more than 2,000 years. It has been defined in a variety of ways, beginning with religious and spiritual traditions that view spiritual practice and commitment as the path to wisdom (Fox, 2007). In contrast, developmental scholars have viewed wisdom as an optimal endpoint in the process of human development that may be attained with age and experience (Bluck & Glück, 2004). Erikson, for example, theorized that wisdom was the final ego strength that emerged in the last stage of adulthood as a result of positively navigating life's challenges and accepting one's life circumstances (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986). From this perspective, wisdom is something that is rare and attained by only a few exceptional individuals (Baltes & Smith, 2008). A third perspective on wisdom has its roots in philosophy, viewing it as process of quality judgment that can guide personal and professional decision-making, problem solving, and action (Schwartz, 2011; Sternberg, 2004).

The above approaches to wisdom constitute three of the most common types of wisdom discussed in the literature and might be termed *religious–spiritual*, *developmental*, and *practical* wisdom, respectively. It is this last type of wisdom, practical wisdom, that is most relevant to professional practice and family life education and the focus of this chapter. We define practical wisdom as the ability to take thoughtful, practical, and ethical action in response to important, difficult, and uncertain situations. Practical wisdom entails a mix of ethics, creativity, and problem solving. Building on the work of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, Schwartz (2011) described practical wisdom as involving "the moral will to do the right thing and the moral skill to figure out what the right thing is in any particular situation" (p. 4). O'Sullivan (2005) argued that wisdom in practice is valuable because it provides "a willing-

ness and exceptional ability to formulate sound executable judgment in the face of uncertainty" (p. 222) and is supported by a profound understanding of circumstances and the variability of solutions available to address a given dilemma. For most practitioners, the idea that their practice would benefit from wisdom is an obvious notion. By bringing wisdom to our practice we can more effectively address the inherently complex situations that arise in our work, while being better able to promote positive, desirable outcomes for the greatest good (Smith, 2011).

It is important to point out that not all situations of practice require practical wisdom. There are some situations in which a "right" answer may be fairly easy to ascertain. Such close-ended problems might best be described as *puzzles* (Treverton, 2007). Like a crossword or jigsaw puzzle, puzzles have a definite answer. In order to solve the problem a person needs to have the necessary information and a willingness to commit the time and effort to pursue the solution. For example, if we suspect the possibility of child abuse, notifying child welfare authorities may be the correct and legal response. In contrast, some problems are *mysteries* (Treverton, 2007). These are difficult, "messy" problems that usually lack a perfect solution. They are not just technical issues requiring practical problem solving but also moral/ethical dilemmas that involve balancing competing goals, values, and perspectives. Many of the most difficult challenges of family life practice (and life, more generally) are mysteries. They have no "right" answer because the answer depends on many dynamic factors, both known and unknown, as well as the ethics by which we work and the values our clients hold. Knowing what career path will make a child happy and successful in the future is a mystery. It is impossible to identify a path that will guarantee employment, let alone a lifetime of enjoyment and happiness. Because problems that are mysteries usually lack a perfect solution, the end result may simply be the best we can do with the information and resources available in light of difficult and uncertain circumstances.

Given the variable nature of youth and family programs, family life educators may be particularly likely to encounter mysteries that call for practical wisdom. Research, rules, and standardized practices have a central place in the delivery of family life programs because they serve to address clear-cut questions and general goals. However, most programs also operate in gray areas where there is not always an obvious solution or even a single, clear understanding of the problem or desired outcome. Programs typically involve a variety of people with differing needs, skills, and values, as well as multiple program goals that must be achieved with limited resources, staff, and time. Such an environment creates uncertain circumstances within which a wide range of decisions and judgments must be regularly considered and weighed. Moreover, within the course of delivering programs, dilemmas regularly occur without warning, and practitioners must respond in real time without the benefit of a reference book that can supply a definitive answer (Toth & Manly, 2011). Practical wisdom, as a guide to thoughtful, principled judgment and action, may provide a powerful process for helping practitioners respond to such complex situations as they arise in their work.

A New Model of Wisdom in Practice

For the past several years we have been studying practical wisdom in order to better understand how people make wiser decisions in their everyday lives, in professional practice and when working with and raising children. This research builds on the work of contemporary behavioral scientists as well as philosophers across the ages. We began by conducting interviews with highly respected adults and professionals. More recently, we have created several competence-based protocols for assessing wisdom in practice. From this body of knowledge we have been developing a model of wise practice. The model is composed of six components that can help family life educators and other practitioners make wiser decisions in their professional practice The six dimensions are (a) reflection, (b) purpose setting, (c) problem framing, (d) perspective taking, (e) knowledge, and (f) balance. In Box 3.1 we list some of the assumptions underlying the model that have guided our work.

Components of Wisdom in Practice

Reflection. A cornerstone of wise practice is the need to be calm and reflective when faced with a difficult problem or decision (Ardelt, 2008). Being reflective means approaching problems deliberatively, stepping back from the situation, and making the time to actively think without distractions. Although the ability to think quickly on one's feet is certainly a valuable trait to have, it is also important to recognize that it is often best not to simply react when the issue is a difficult and important one that needs thoughtful consideration.

Among the biggest distractions to our ability to reflect are our emotions. We almost always make better, more thoughtful decisions when we are cool, calm, and collected (Roets & Van Hiel, 2011). When upset, we often experience strong emotions, signaling that something is worthy of concern. This can be a good thing when we need to respond quickly, like when we are in danger or a saber-toothed tiger is about to attack. But the world we live in today often makes strong emotions counterproductive. They can lead us to respond rashly, resulting in ill-advised decisions made in the heat of the moment. Emotions can also make us fearful, and our fear can get in the way of us focusing on the problem, considering multiple options, and clearly thinking it through (Roets & Van Hiel, 2011). It can lead us to say or do hurtful things that may make the situation worse. When we are faced with a significant challenge in our work, recognizing our emotions and then waiting until they have subsided and we are able to think clearly about our response is more likely to result in a sensible, caring action. In addition, when we are calm, we are better listeners, with an enhanced ability and willingness to understand the perspectives of others (Roets & Van Hiel, 2011).

Box 3.1. Assumptions About Practical Wisdom

Being Smart and Being Wise Are Not the Same Thing.   *Most of us can think of someone we know who may be very smart but who is often unwise.*
Wisdom Falls Along a Continuum.   *Like creativity or intelligence, some people display wisdom more often than others, but all of us possess the potential to exhibit it on occasion.*
We May Be Wiser in Some Areas of Our Lives Than in Others.   *Some of us are wise in our jobs but struggle in relationships, or vice versa. Even historical figures often considered "wise" have been found to be less wise in some areas of their lives.*
Wisdom Is a Deliberative Skill.   *To act wisely usually takes effort. Wisdom develops from desire, effort, experience, time, and personal growth. By pursuing it we are more likely to gain it.*
Wise Responses Usually Reflect Unique Aspects of a Situation.   *Wise acts take into account the needs, capacities, and goals of those involved, as well as the broader context in which decisions and actions take place. Wise responses are also culturally and historically grounded.*
Providing Wise Guidance to Others Is Usually Easier Than Applying It to Ourselves.   *When handling personal challenges, our judgment may be influenced by our emotions, biases, or past experiences, sometimes making it difficult to act wisely even when we know better.*

It is not only our emotions that can cloud our thinking and keep us from making the effort to reflect thoughtfully. Most of us possess other biases and deep-rooted beliefs that can lead us to *react thoughtlessly* rather than *respond thoughtfully*. For example, we may have "bureaucratic"-type biases such as "We just don't do things that way here" or a "resource"-type reaction, such as "We just don't have the time or money." Sometimes deep-seated political beliefs can also impede our ability to listen carefully or think objectively (Haidt, 2013).

The ability to recognize and manage our emotions and recognize personal biases so that they do not impede our ability to listen and reflect is an important skill to develop. Equally important is the need to cultivate our socioemotional intelligence so that we can interpret and deal with the emotions and behaviors of others. A simple first step in this process is to pay attention to your own emotional cues: When you feel your blood pressure rising or have an immediate negative reaction to a situation or individual, recognize these as signals that you are not as clear headed or objective as you can be. Then, after you have control of these feelings, respond by more thoughtfully considering the presenting situation.

Purpose setting. In the book *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865/1965), Alice comes to a fork in the road where she finds the Cheshire Cat sitting in a tree. She asks the cat which road she should take. The Cheshire Cat tells Alice, if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. Like Alice, the same can be said when it comes to wise practice: Without some clear goal in mind, some larger purpose to guide the problem-solving process, it is a lot less likely that we will reach a wise solution. A wise purpose relates to optimal outcomes, what we would ideally like to achieve if we are successful in addressing a problem. The importance of purpose in wise practice was discussed by Aristotle over 2000 years ago. According to Aristotle (2003), practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, was the master virtue through which all other virtues were organized. In order to act wisely one must have a clear sense of the purpose or aim (what Aristotle called *telos*) of the particular activity or problem. Without a purpose to guide one's actions, it is impossible to know what the right thing to do is in a given situation (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). When it comes to practice, a wise purpose often has a number of important features, which we describe in the sections that follow.

Purposes are principled and ethical (Bassett, 2005; Kunzmann, 2004). A wise purpose is consistent with our moral and ethical values. It is about doing the right thing for the right reason. Most moral/ethical purposes ensure that no harm comes to others and that, if they are accomplished, a greater good is realized.

A useful strategy for identifying higher level purposes that are principled and unselfish is to choose a purpose and then ask, "What is the purpose of this purpose?", then "What is the purpose of this next purpose?", and so on, with each purpose leading to a higher one (Nadler & Chandon, 2010). For example, you might ask, "What is the purpose of implementing a parenting program?" A reasonable reply might be, "In order for parents to have a repertoire of effective parenting strategies." In response to that answer, you might ask, "What is the purpose of parents having a repertoire of effective parenting strategies?" A higher purpose answer would be "So that children will grow up to be socially, emotionally, and academically capable." If your higher purposes have to do with the good of families or humankind, you are on the right track. If, on the other hand, your highest purposes are related to things like, "because it's something we have always done," "keeping my job," or "making my agency look good," you will probably want to rethink your purpose.

Purposes focus on positive aims (Kunzmann, 2004). A wise purpose is more about achieving hopes and possibilities than avoiding fears and dangers (Nadler & Chandon, 2010). For example, rather than focusing on how to prevent a client from spanking his or her child, we might try to help him or her identify the conditions that evoke such a response and develop more effective, less punitive discipline strategies that have fewer negative repercussions and greater long-term success.

A strategy for keeping focused on positive aims is to state your purposes as a positive, non-measurable goal. With so much emphasis on doing good evaluation, we sometimes lose sight of the notion that *planning* for effective solutions requires different, but equally valid approaches. Save the "improves" or "more" or "less" for your evaluations, but begin by stating as your purpose what you ideally hope will happen (e.g., "Parents will have a repertoire of effective discipline techniques" or "Janie will become engaged in the program").

Purposes are unselfish. A wise purpose gives priority to a client's or student's best interests rather than one's own needs (Bassett, 2005). It is about contributing to some greater good (Sternberg, 1998). The well-known biblical story of King Solomon and the two mothers who each claimed the baby as their own is a good example of this. When Solomon proposed cutting the baby in two and giving half to each mother, he wanted to see which mother was more concerned about the baby rather than herself.

Identifying unselfish aims also means initially choosing purposes that address the most regular or encompassing situation first (Nadler & Chandon, 2010). Although you will want to eventually address special conditions or situations rather than leave them out, it is usually best not to begin there. In other words, start with the "whole" before moving to the exceptions. In the scenario involving Janie, if you began with the purpose of redesigning the program to meet Janie's needs, you would do so at the expense of the other parents' learning and needs.

Problem framing. Another important step in coming up with a wise response is making sure you have identified the problem correctly (Arlin, 1992). The concept of *problem framing* is analogous to framing a picture. The frame puts a clear boundary around what is part of the picture and what is not. Similarly, framing a problem involves figuring out which factors are part of the problem and which ones are not, and this can guide our actions toward a solution that is relevant and useful (Heath & Heath, 2013). There are several things to consider when it comes to framing a problem.

First, problems should be framed with your purpose(s) in mind. Although it might seem counterintuitive to clarify the purpose before framing the problem, problem framing becomes easier when we can specify what it is we hope to achieve. With a clear purpose or set of purposes in mind, some aspects of the problem will naturally come into focus and others will fade. For example, if our purpose is to facilitate a successful parenting program where all parents learn, including Janie, we might want to address Janie's disruption of the group with her while also helping her meet her goal of getting her child back.

Second, problems are usually more complicated than they appear. Like a patient who comes into a doctor's office complaining of a certain symptom, called the *presenting problem,* an experienced doctor does not accept the patient's statement as the only possible ailment. The doctor is likely to explore other options through questions, tests, pokes, and prods in order to discover the underlying issues that are causing the patient discomfort. The same is usually true with problems of practice that require wisdom. The presenting problem—the problem as initially experienced—is often only the tip of the iceberg. We need to expand our thinking in order to identify the larger underlying issue we are trying to solve (Bassett, 2005). For example, recall the vignette at the beginning of this chapter regarding Janie. At first glimpse, it may appear that the primary problem facing the parent educator is deciding whether to pass Janie at the end of the parenting class. However, it might be better to conceptualize the problem as a series of smaller ones, some known and some yet to be known. For instance, is the class an appropriate one for Janie? Are there other alternatives available? What might be some ways to better engage Janie in the class? By working to understand the problem in all its complexity we also open up the solution space and increase the possibilities for how the overall situation might be addressed.

Third, our emotions can distort the problem (Kahneman, 2011). There is a tendency to define a problem on the basis of our initial emotional reaction. However, when we become angry or frustrated, the problem often becomes about our feelings and how we can make ourselves feel better rather than the conditions that led to those feelings. Moreover, our emotions can narrow our thinking, making it more challenging to consider multiple points of view (Roets & Van Hiel, 2011). For example, a teen enrolled in an after-school program responds to a youth worker's question, "How was school today?" with a surly remark. Feeling angry about being disrespected and responding with a harsh rebuke might be a normal reaction. However, if we take a moment to remain calm, listen carefully, and strive to be compassionate, we might consider that the problem could be more about how the teen is *feeling* than how she is *acting*. Perhaps something happened at school today that upset her. Not jumping to conclusions and patiently considering an issue from multiple perspectives makes it more likely that we will see the problem in the best possible light and come up with a solution that gets to the heart of the matter.

Finally, complex problems evolve over time (Arlin, 1992; Hannigan & Coffey, 2011). Although we may believe we have solved a particular problem at one point in time, many problems, especially the most challenging ones, often need to be revisited. Even when they appear fairly straightforward, problems may change as the situation changes or the people we are working with change. Consider the example of Janie. The long-term problem may be whether she has learned enough to pass the parenting class, but the short-term issues center around how to help her become more engaged in the program and less disruptive to her co-participants. If we are successful at solving these initial problems, by the end of the program the long-term problem may look a lot different.

Perspective taking. There is an old folk tale about a group of blind men who encounter an elephant. The first man touches the elephant's side and says to his friends, "This animal is like a wall, solid and flat." "No," says the second man as he feels the elephant's tusk. "It's like a spear, sharp and smooth." Finally, the third man who has his arms wrapped around the elephant's massive leg says, "You are all wrong, this animal is like a great tree." Like the blind men in the tale, there is a tendency to see problems or issues from a partial, unique perspective. Although there is usually some truth to a particular, singular point of view, there often are also limitations. When we have only a partial understanding of an issue, our ability to wisely respond is limited (Greene & Brown, 2009).

A majority of practice-related challenges can be viewed from multiple perspectives. One of the most significant points of view belongs, of course, to those with whom we are working. Whether or not we agree, it is critical that we try to understand where they are coming from and how they see the issue. By putting ourselves in their shoes we can gain insight into the reasons for their behavior and the feelings that motivate it. For instance, if we are to find a way to help Janie become more engaged in our program and improve her parenting, we need to understand how she views the situation. Are there underlying personal issues that make it difficult for her to be more attentive in class and open to learning? Does she feel out of place and awkward? Is she resentful because she has been mandated to attend? Gaining answers to such questions will enhance our ability to more effectively work with Janie and increase her chances of success.

The decisions we make regarding our clients, colleagues, and ourselves are not made in a vacuum. Consequently, expanding our perspective also involves considering how others might be affected (Ardelt, 2008; Sternberg, 2001). For example, part of the dilemma faced by the educator facilitating Janie's parenting program involves how to help Janie while taking into account the best interests of the other parents in the program. The educator's challenge is to devise a solution that can meet Janie's needs, but not at the expense of other parents. Also, if such a solution cannot be found, the educator must decide whose interests will take precedence.

Knowing which perspectives need to be considered is also related to our purpose. When we have a better understanding of where we would like to end up, then it becomes clearer which points of view need to be taken into account as well as which people and policies might be affected by any actions taken. To reach a good solution we may need to include additional perspectives. For example, perhaps the relative currently caring for Janie's child can provide insight into Janie's motivation and some of the barriers that are hindering her progress.

When we understand another person's perspective, abilities, and limitations it is easier to find common ground and develop solutions that everyone can get behind—solutions that will lead to long-term learning and positive change. Considering the point of view of others who are involved also demonstrates to them that we really are trying to be fair and that we do care. This usually results in less defensiveness and more openness to what we have to say or offer as practitioners.

Knowledge. Wise practitioners draw on at least three types of knowledge when addressing difficult issues in their work: (a) formal knowledge, (b) informal knowledge, and (c) self-knowledge. *Formal knowledge* (Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2002) is the information produced by researchers and other experts and is usually found in scholarly and professional books and articles or conveyed through formal courses and other educational media. Formal knowledge is necessary for our work as family professionals, but it is not sufficient.

Informal knowledge (or *tacit knowledge*; Polyani, 1976) comes from our personal experiences and observations of those with whom we work, such as our students, clients, and colleagues, as well as ourselves. For family practitioners, informal knowledge also involves understanding the environment in which we work. This might include knowing the informal and formal policies and power dynamics of your organization, being aware of relevant resources in the community (e.g., people and organizations), and understanding how to make connections to these resources.

Self-knowledge also is an important aspect of wise practice (Ardelt, 2008). It involves being aware of and honest about what we know and what we do not. We all have areas where we may be lacking in formal knowledge, experience, understanding, ability, or objectivity. Wisdom involves knowing our intellectual, professional, and emotional limits. For instance, sometimes personal issues (e.g., being under a lot of stress) can make it difficult to be fair, objective, or able to respond in an effective way. Wise practitioners are aware of their limitations and are willing to seek out other sources of knowledge, support, guidance, and perspective, such as the latest research or the insights of experienced colleagues. By bringing together these three forms of knowledge, we are in the best position to make wise choices about which principles and strategies are most likely to work for a particular client or student in a particular situation.

Balance. Balance is central to both contemporary and ancient views of practical wisdom (Aristotle, 2003; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010; Sternberg, 1998) and is at the core of what it means to be a wise practitioner. In cognitive terms, balance involves systems thinking and the ability to deal with multiple ideas at the same time, including knowledge, concepts, purposes, and perspectives that may sometimes appear contradictory (Best & Holmes, 2010; Shaked & Schechter, 2013). Many of the most important practice decisions involve balancing research-based knowledge with personal experience; weighing conflicting principles or rules; juggling client, personal, and organizational values and ethics; and choosing between options that are equally appealing or undesirable. We are often trying to find the right balance for a particular situation. For example, when a student or client reveals to us in confidence a serious problem that might put them or someone else in danger, we have to balance discretion and trust versus safety and care.

Balance is critical to all of the dimensions of wise practice discussed in this chapter. Wisdom emerges through the successful balancing of these various dimensions. For instance, earlier in this chapter we discussed the importance of reflection and the benefits of being detached and objective in situations that require a wise solution. However, in some situations being completely detached and objective may not be the wisest response. Sometimes detachment needs to be balanced with empathy and compassion. For example, being too emotionally close to a client such as Janie may undermine our ability to make good, reasoned decisions that are in the parenting group's best interests and, more important, those of her child. On the other hand, if we are too detached and cold, we may fail to truly understand Janie's perspective or needs. This may also negatively affect her relationship with us, undermining our ability to develop the trust, comfort, and respect needed to help her engage in and benefit from the program. Similarly, consider the dimension of *purpose*. Often, the kinds of problems that require a wise response also have competing purposes, all of which may be valid and worthy. Those of us who work with parents or children must constantly struggle with this balance. In the short run, we may want to keep a child safe or well behaved, but sometimes this short-term goal conflicts with long-term developmental goals, such as promoting autonomy, responsibility, self-regulation, or learning from experience. Pursuing the right balance in any particular situation can be difficult, but when it is done thoughtfully and intentionally, we are at our wisest.

Putting It All Together

Although we have presented the six dimensions of wisdom in practice as distinct, independent components, they are highly interrelated. For example, the *purposes* we identify will influence how we *frame the problem* and the *knowledge* on which we will need to draw. Similarly, the *perspectives* that should be taken into account are related to knowledge needs, purposes, and the problem frame. We would also like to note that the order in which we have presented dimensions of the wisdom in practice model might suggest that the process is a linear one that should be followed in a specific step-by-step order. Our research thus far does indicate that *reflection* is usually the first (and last) step and necessary to initiate the process. *Purpose setting* also seems to be an important early step in the wisdom process because it guides how one approaches other dimensions. Because we are still studying the process of wisdom in practice, we are reluctant to draw any definitive conclusions other than to acknowledge that it is likely not a linear process but a more interactive, dynamic, and recursive one. In Box 3.2 we have included questions that can help guide practitioners as they directly engage in the process of wisdom in practice.

Box 3.2. Questions for Guiding Wisdom in Practice

Ask yourself...

• **What do you need to do to reflect thoughtfully rather than react thoughtlessly?**
     ○ Can you take some time, or at least a deep breath, before responding?
     ○ What feelings, thoughts, or personal biases might be getting in the way?
 • **Can you identify a strong, clear purpose or purposes?**
     ○ Does your purpose flow to achieving some greater good that has to do with the well-being of families or humankind?
     ○ Is your purpose principled and ethical?
     ○ Does it focus on the positive and the ideal?
 • **How can you frame the problem so that it is consistent with your purpose?**
     ○ What are some of the ways that the problem can be framed?
     ○ Is it possible that you are oversimplifying the problem?
     ○ Are your emotions or biases distorting the problem?
     ○ Is this an evolving problem? If so, how might it change as the issue unfolds?
 • **What perspectives need to be taken into account?**
     ○ How can an understanding of these perspectives help you better understand the motives or concerns of those involved?
     ○ Who or what else might be affected by the problem or its solution?
 • **What knowledge is needed to understand the problem and develop a solution?**
     ○ What can current research and theory contribute to your understanding of the issue?
     ○ What informal knowledge is needed to complement the science?
     ○ What contextual information can you personally gather to inform the situation?
     ○ Are there others who can provide insight or help you think through the situation?
     ○ What don't you know?
 • **Are there values, purposes, perspectives, or other factors that appear to be in conflict?**
     ○ How much weight should be given to each? Which ones come first?
     ○ Are there any personal or professional principles that can guide you regarding which should be given greater priority?
     ○ How should you balance research knowledge with personal experience?

Reflection revisited. Wisdom is not a final destination to be reached but a journey that must be constantly pursued. There is an old adage that says, "Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from poor judgment." Similarly, the way we become wiser in our practice is by continuously learning from our experiences, especially our mistakes. This requires that we take time to reflect on our experiences and decisions. Being reflective also involves a willingness to admit and accept that sometimes we make mistakes. Such learning can be significantly enriched when we involve others in the process (Eriksen, Dahl, Karlsson, & Arman, 2014). Discussing our experiences with an impartial colleague or mentor can bring an emotionally detached and objective ear that can prove especially helpful. Through dialogue with others we can learn from their insights and experiences and develop a collective knowledge that supersedes our own. Without such critical self-reflection we cannot take full advantage of what can be learned from our experiences, as well as the experiences of others. In Box 3.3 we provide a list of guiding questions that can help family professionals learn from their practice and further develop their practical wisdom.

Box 3.3 Questions for Reflecting on and Learning from Practice

Ask yourself...

- How did the situation make you feel?
- Did your feelings or biases get in the way of being objective and clear headed?
- Did you *react* emotionally rather than *respond* reflectively? What could you have done to be more reflective?
- How did your feelings change from the time the problem first occurred to the present?
- What went well, and why?
- What did not go as hoped, and what were the likely reasons?
- Do you think you tried to solve the right problem?
- What were some other ways you might have framed the problem?
- In developing a solution, did you aim for the right purpose?
- Were there other purposes that should have been considered?
- What aspects of the solution contributed to whatever success was achieved?
- Did you accurately take into account the perspectives of the right people? If not, who or what was missing?
- Was there information you know now that would have been useful then?
- If you were faced with a similar experience in the future, what would you do differently?
- What were the most important lessons you learned from this experience?
- What are some ways can you integrate these lessons into how you approach your future practice?

Conclusion

Because wisdom is most needed when we are faced with difficult, important, and uncertain matters, family practitioners should remember that these "mysteries" of practice do not always have a perfect and happy solution. Often, all we can do is our best under the circumstances and learn when to accept the outcome, even when it feels imperfect. However, by consciously reflecting, identifying the higher purpose, creatively framing, considering multiple perspectives, identifying needed knowledge, and balancing all of these elements, we are likely to find wiser and more satisfying solutions than we would otherwise. Also, if we regularly reflect both on how we have succeeded and where we have fallen short, we will become progressively wiser in our practice.

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Key resources related to this chapter can be found at
http://www.ncfr.org/fle-practice-family-science

Discussion Questions
1. Briefly summarize the main dimensions of wise practice.
2. What are some examples of the kinds of problems or challenges you might face in your work where wisdom would be helpful?
3. How do wisdom and research complement each other in effective family practice? What are the strengths and limits of each?
4. Are there parts of the wisdom process model that you think you do well? Are there dimensions of the model that you need to further develop? How might you go about this?

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