the Program for infant toddler care

Protective Urges,
A definition…

In every species, there is a fundamental drive in the adults of that species to protect the young, especially the very young. Because they are so vulnerable infants need this protection in order to survive. Protective urges are so strong that they can lead to strong feelings and reactions in adults.

When a parent places an infant in the care of a professional child care provider, the parent's natural urge to protect the child can lead to heightened emotions. Parents bringing infants to child care often have intense feelings about it including trepidation, anxiety, and grief. They may find it difficult to trust the caregiver at first.

Caregivers of infants also experience strong feelings about protecting the children in their care. A caregiver may be so intent on protecting the child that he or she becomes hypercritical of the way the parent cares for the child. The caregiver's heightened emotions resulting from the urge to protect may interfere with the ability to work closely with the parents and to support the child's bond with the family. Thus, there may be two grown-ups, each of which is invested in protecting the infant, who have difficulty sharing the child's care.

Four steps caregivers can take to help them deal more successfully with their feelings about working with parents are:

Step 1: Explore Your Feelings
Step 2: Check out your Feelings with Self and Others
Step 3: Seek the Parent's Point of View
Step 4: Develop an Action Plan

Adapted from: Mangione, P. L., Lally, J. R., & Signer, S.
Protective urges: Working with the feelings of parents and caregivers [DVD booklet].
Sacramento, CA: California Department of Education.