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## Hiring Staff with Reflective Capacity

### ***What is reflective capacity?***

Reflective capacity is defined as the capacity to exercise introspection and the willingness to learn more about the fundamental nature, purpose and essence of how we, as humans, experience this world and how our own world-view is impacted by that experience.

### ***Why is it important to hire staff with reflective capacity?***

Working with overburdened families can at times be quite stressful. Home visitors are exposed to a wide array of challenging situations and behaviors that may (1) Trigger an emotional reaction to a parent's behavior based upon the home visitor's own childhood or other past experiences, and (2) Be in conflict with the home visitor's own value system. The capacity to give oneself empathy and contain judgment and reaction is critical to maintaining healthy relationships with families. Staff who feel comfortable sharing their feelings and experiences with a supervisor are more likely to respond in sensitive ways and less likely to project their own uncomfortable feelings onto the family. Self-reflective staff are able to identify and own what they are feeling without blaming the families. The willingness to reflect and participate fully in supervision reduces burn-out and allows a safe place for feelings to be validated and processed. This process supports the ability to move from our own survival strategies, through our limbic response and to the cortex to be able to grow the capacity to imagine what the parent is experiencing while feeling empathy for that experience. Staff with reflective capacity retain families longer and make for a more collaborative work environment. Additionally, their way of thoughtfully responding through "being" instead of reacting is how we would like parents to "be" with their children.

### ***Staff who have reflective capacity:***

- Has an interest in and ability to see things from multiple points of view.
- Takes an "ecological" perspective (i.e., explores a situation broadly). For example, looks beyond the parent-child relationship to look at the child's developmental status and its contribution to the situation; is interested in what other resources the family brings to the situation, wonders what has been tried before, etc.
- Has knowledge of infants, toddlers and attachment. Is able to pay attention to the infant or toddler and the importance of their relationship to the adults who care for them.
- Is self aware: clear about what own values, triggers, etc. are, aware about how these influence their perception and interpretation, and aware of how they impact others.
- Has a balanced and realistic view of relationships including both positive and negative aspects (including one's own relationship with families and others).
- Is comfortable thinking and talking about relationships and personal feelings that arise in relation to those relationships.
- Consistently considers another person's feelings, wants, needs, state(s) of mind, etc. and takes these into account in their responses.
- Has generally a positive approach to other people and the world.

- Assumes relationships can survive negative feelings and attempts to communicate about them rather than withdrawing or rejecting.
- Takes responsibility for their own contributions/reactions/responses to difficult situations.
- Can tolerate ambiguity – does not have to have a solution right away, but can sit with “not knowing” and spend time figuring out what the actual primary problem /issue is before considering options to move forward.
- Understands that others cannot “make” them feel a certain way, rather that the interaction has evoked or triggered an emotional response based upon one own’s past experiences.
- Knows what they need to bring themselves back into balance after a stressful incident or time (*how do they self-regulate?*). What do they do for self-care?

***What to look for on resumes and interactions with interviewers and other staff when evaluating staff for reflective capacity:***

*In evaluating the applicant’s behaviors highlighted below, please keep in mind the role of anxiety of the applicant (your own contributions, reactions, responses), and anchor to the sense of the candidate’s connection to another human).*

- Is their job experience a succession of short-term positions?
- In their job interview, are they successful in connecting with you?
- How do they relate to front-office staff or staff they meet incidentally as part of the hiring process?
- How well do they pick up on non-verbal cues you or others during the interview (it might be useful for you to set some non-verbal cues)
- How promptly do they return phone messages, emails, etc.?
- When you are having conversations with them rather than “questions-and-answers,” are they reciprocal? Do they consider, respond, and connect with you?
- Are they comfortable sharing how they are feeling, i.e. nervous, excited?
- How do you *feel* in their presence?

**Sample interview questions:** We want thoughtful responses from candidates, so it is wise to let them know that they can take their time in responding.

Think of a family that you have had a substantial relationship in the past. I am going to ask you some questions about that family member and your relationship.

- What is the family member's first name?
- Approximately how long were you in a relationship with this person?
- Describe your relationship with this person.
- Think of five adjectives that you would use to describe this person. This might take some time. Once you have identified these five adjectives, I am going to ask you why you chose them.
- I'd like you to think of a time when this person was upset. What was going on inside this person when he or she was upset? What was he or she feeling?
- How did you respond when this person was upset?
- How did it affect you on the inside when this person was upset (*look for tolerance of strong affect, what he or she does when a parent gets really sad or angry*)?
- Why did you choose this person to talk about?
- How would this individual describe you (name 5 adjectives this person would use to describe you)
  
- Outside of work, what experiences in your life have helped you be ready for this kind of work?
- What kinds of things do you do to nurture yourself, reduce stress and maintain a balanced life?
- What do you think it is like to be your supervisor? What do you need to work on?
  
- What relationship in your life is the best model in a general sense for how you would like to approach relationships with families and why (is there a demonstration of good listening skills, good relationship building skills (can say what a collaborative healthy relationship looks like)?)
  
- Think of a specific difficulty you have had with a colleague or supervisor. Please describe what you think was going on in that situation (*specifically, look for ability to see the other person's point of view in a meaningful way as well as describe the breach and what he or she did to repair it*). and how did you resolve it?
  
- Describe a time when you found yourself in a challenging situation and how did you handle it (*look for awareness of the importance of professional boundaries*)?
  
- Present sample scenarios. Look for interest in exploring multiple perspectives, do they suggest looking for the meaning behind the behavior ("what could cause a parent to behave this way?"), are they curious about the situation and seek out additional information, or do they rush to judgment?
  - Scenario sample: You have been working with a family for 4 months who appears to have a flat affect and whom you have never seen smile. Her responses to questions are usually *yes* or *no* answers with no further clarification. On several visits, you thought she might have been crying, but when asked, she tells you *no*. You have had

visits at various times during the day, and her 4-month old baby has never been awake. She has told you that little Ana is a good baby and a good sleeper.

- Ask the applicant, “What do you find yourself thinking about in response to the vignette (what are you thinking might be going on with mom)?” What could be happening for the baby? Are there any thoughts about feelings that come up for the applicant? We would hope for a response that represents the following perspectives (the applicant’s, the parent’s, the baby’s). Plus, we would also want to sense some curiosity and places the applicant want more information.

***The responses should be evaluated on several scales:***

1. How rich and elaborate are the descriptions of other people?  
Unclear or vague descriptions                      Detailed and vivid descriptions  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5
2. How much does the interviewee seem emotionally connected to the people they are talking about?  
Distant/unconnected                      Quite emotionally connected  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5
3. How much does the interviewee seem coherent in what they are talking about?  
Rambling, confusing, contradictory                      Clear and coherent  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5
4. How much does the interviewee seem to feel positively about other individuals?  
Consistently negative                      Consistently positive  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5
5. How much does the interviewee communicate a sense of interest in and understanding of other people’s internal emotional world?  
Acts as if others don’t                      Acts in ways that take  
Have separate ideas/feelings                      into account other’s feelings  
1                      2                      3                      4                      5

***Potential questions to ask when interviewing references to evaluate reflective capacity:***

- Compared to your other staff, how was this person at handling differing viewpoints between themselves and others?
- How would you describe this person's general mood?
- Compared to your other staff, how able are they to be reflective about the job they are doing and how they could do it better?
- How would this person show frustration?
- If this person worked with a range of families/individuals, did this person seem to work better with a certain type of family/individual? If yes, why?
- Compared to your other staff, how successful was this staff at responding to frustrated or upset people? What specific skills did you see?
- What do you think was the hardest part of the day-to-day aspect of doing their job for this person? Why?
- Over time, how did this person's relationships with co-workers change?
- Was this person a worker who would feel comfortable coming to you for support or advice? If yes, can you give an example?
- Describe how this person would react if you offered a suggestion that they had not asked for.