

## Keeping the baby in mind: Promoting the reflective functioning of parents in the context of home visiting.



The Minnesota Coalition for Targeted Home Visiting  
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### Plan for our time together

- What is reflective functioning and why does it matter?
- The development of reflective functioning
- Parenting and reflective functioning
- Strategies for promoting reflective functioning
- Reflective functioning for home visitors
- Next steps...

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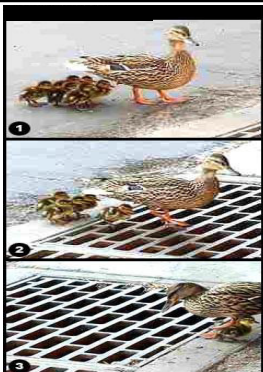
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**What is reflective functioning?**

**Why does it matter?**

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### What is reflective functioning? (aka 'mind-mindedness', 'mentalization')

- The capacity to **recognize "mental states"**—feelings, thoughts, intentions—in self & others:
  - *I'm find myself dreading this home visit.*
  - *I wonder why this mom seems so angry?*
- The capacity to **link mental states to behavior**, i.e. how a person **thinks and feels shows up in their behavior**:
  - *I think I'm irritable because I'm so behind in my paperwork.*
  - *I wonder if that mom 'no shows' because she is worried that I will judge her.*

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*Reflective functioning is a basic human capacity—it is what allows us to make sense of the people in our world.* Arietta Slade (2002)



*Reflective capacities underlie the development of social relationships and others that are key to our survival.* Arietta Slade (2005)

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### Reflective Practice as a Way of Being

- A "portable lens" for observing interactions and our own reactions;
- Acknowledging that "feelings" are an important source of information;
- And that all behavior has meaning—*What is this child (or parent) trying to tell me?*




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### We must allow ourselves...

- Not to **know**
- To be **surprised** or **confused**
- To **wonder why** :
  - *Why I reacted the way I did?*
  - *Why I handled a situation the way I did?*
  - *Why the parent is reacting this way?*
  - *What was going on with the child or parent?*




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### Reflective Functioning, then...

- Is the necessary capacity for attunement to the thoughts, feelings and intentions of **ourselves and others**—
- Which allows us to read, interpret, and respond empathically to the cues of others,
- And is necessary for self-regulation.

***Keeping the baby in mind***: a critical skill for healthy parenting.




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### FLINK = Feeling and Thinking

Reflective functioning is:

***The capacity to think about feeling and feel about thinking***

Arietta Slade, (2005)




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### Reflective Functioning Essential to the Development of Self-Regulation

- Exploring the meaning of other's actions is a precursor of children's ability to label and find meaningful their own psychological experiences;
  - *I wonder if you're upset with me for rescheduling our appointment.*
  - *Sometimes kids get frustrated when they have to wait their turn!*
  - *Mom gets worried when you don't listen to her words—she wants you to be safe.*
- This underlies the capacity for affect regulation, impulse control, self monitoring, and the experience of self-agency.

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### Reflective functioning: How do we know it when we see it?

- Does the child give clear cues?
- Does the parent accurately read and respond to the child's cues?
- Does the parent connect the child's behavior with 'internal states'? (*He's crying because he's hungry, tired, etc.*)
- Does the parent connect her own behavior to her own internal states or experiences?
- Does the parent demonstrate curiosity about what underlies her child's feelings and/or behavior?

Consider CHEEERS, for example:

- **C**ues, **H**olding, **E**mpathy, **E**xpression, **E**nvironment, **R**hythm & reciprocity, **S**miles (mutual enjoyment)

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### Implications of reflective functioning for home visiting, regardless of curriculum

*Without an emotional understanding of the child, parenting skills are of little use, and remain empty recipes that bear little relation to the child's internal experience and needs.*



Arietta Slade (2002)

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### Reflective functioning in mothers can mediate the negative impact of ACEs on parenting behaviors...

Which makes sense because:

- RF helps a parent “connect the dots” between her own ‘mental states’ and her experiences;
- View her child as having his or her own separate ‘mental states’;
- And use this understanding for self-regulation and the ability to respond intentionally to her child rather than just react.



Kolomeyer, et al. (September, 2016). Mothers' Adverse Childhood Experiences and negative parenting behaviors: Connecting mothers' difficult pasts to present parenting behavior via reflective functioning. *ZERO TO THREE*

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### Parenting is a ‘brain thing’: Neurological mechanisms underlying parental sensitivity

- **Executive functioning**—attention control, working memory, flexible task-switching
- **Emotion regulation**—recognizing infant emotions and responding contingently
- **Reward/motivation**—infant cues motivate parental behavior and the caretaking response is experienced by the parent as rewarding. Involves dopamine & oxytocin pathways.
- **Parental thoughts**—preoccupations/habits, empathy and positive thoughts. Includes motivational-reward pathways and complex brain networks involving empathy.




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### “Interpersonal neurobiology”; mindsight, mentalization, reflective function Siegel (2014)

We can understand the experience of another person through the mirror neurons in the cortex which are a part of the “resonance circuits” which integrate various regions of the brain. These complex circuits enable a representation of the intention of another person, resulting in mimicking behavior (imitation) which simulates the internal state of another (interpersonal resonance).




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### The roots of empathy and reflective functioning

This 'resonance circuitry' is the foundation for attuned communication between the parent and the child which allows the child to feel 'felt' by the parent, creating the state of "being with," central to secure attachment and optimal brain development.

Daniel Siegel (2014)




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**What are some factors that may get in the way of the parent's ability to "reflect" or use their "reflective capacity?"**

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### Fluency: Integrating reflective functioning into practice




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### Fluency: Integrating reflective functioning into practice

- Holding my mind (feelings, thoughts, reactions) at the same time I hold your mind—reflective capacity.
- My ability to think and feel about my own experiences AND extend that same interest to the thinking and feeling of another person while interacting with them.
- *Wondering—how is the other person hearing and understanding the information I am trying to convey?*
- *Offering what you sense and observe as well as responding to what they show you with their words, body language, lack of response.*
- *A tool to take someone's perspective and then interact in that person's perspective that will help that person understand themselves better and help them make use of you as a support and collaborator.*




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### Four Components of Fluency

1. **Be fully present with** the other person.
2. Use words and nonverbal communication to **acknowledge and contain feelings** so the person feels understood and is helped to think more about their own feelings.
3. Use words that **make sense of the other's experience**.
4. **Reduce judgment** by being interested in the other's behavior and intentions so *they* can understand more about their own behavior and intentions.

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### Complexity of Reflective Issues in Home Visiting

(Davies, 2014)

The home visitor working on behalf of the child and their family is challenged to take into account the differing mental and emotional perspectives of:

- The infant or toddler
- Other children in the family
- The parent(s)
- Other significant caregivers
- Other professionals
- Own internal perspective

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### Home Visitors Always have Multiple Clients

- The “primary” client is the relationship between child and caregiver.
- “When we attend to the baby, but not the parent, we can convey to the parent that she is not worthy of our attention.
- “When we attend to the parent, but not the baby, we can convey to the parent that the baby is not worthy of her attention.”
- Instead, home visitors are asked to “walk down both sides of the street.”

(Davies, 2014)

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### The Challenge of Keeping the Baby in the Lens— *What about the baby?*

- While we say the “client” is the “relationship between the parent[s] and the baby, the chaos and crisis in the parents’ lives make this challenging!
- Resisting getting stuck on the parent’s roller coaster (easier said than done!);
- Pulling the conversation back to the baby:
  - I wonder what that was like for the baby?*
  - Where was the baby when you had that argument*”
  - How do you think your stress might be affecting the baby?*




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### Helping parents build reflective capacity




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### Three interrelated goals for promoting reflective functioning: Slade (2002)

1. Helping the parent to reflect on the emotional, internal life of the baby, even before birth;
2. Helping the parent to reflect on his/her own internal experience of parenting, even before birth;
3. Helping the parent to understand the dynamics of her own and his/her baby's affect as a means for problem-solving and developing sensitive, responsive caregiving.

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### Steps to Build Reflective Capacity in Parents

1. Observing interaction: "I notice that..."
  - When you start raising your voice, she stops listening
  - In your family, everyone talks at the same time
2. Checking for consensus: "Is that the way you see it? Is that an issue for you?"
3. Mentalizing the moment: "What do you think Ann is feeling now?"
4. Generalizing: "Dad feels this, mom feels that- do you recognize this as something that happens at home?"
5. Reviewing: "So what happened?"

Mentalization Based Family Treatment (MBFT)  
(Aisen, Fonagy et al, 2011)

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### Building Reflective Capacity

- Invite parents to think about their own dreams and expectations for their child; also invite them to consider how their own feelings might affect those of the child.
  - *What do you imagine your child will be like at 3, 6, adult etc.?*
  - *What are your dreams for your child?*
  - *What's it like for the baby when you're so upset with your mom?*
- Promoting the baby as a unique, separate person:
  - *Hi, Maya. Hi, Maya's Baby! (to belly of pregnant mom)*
  - *Talking for the baby—Mom, talk to me. I missed you!*




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### Additional Ways to Support Development of Reflective Capacity:

- Encourage parents to take a "fresh look" at their "hot moments"—*What is it like for your child when you are so frustrated?*
- Facilitate wondering—*I wonder what your baby needs right now?*
- Hold the parent in your mind—*I've been thinking about you and...*
- Restrain from "problems solving" for the parent—*What have you thought about to fix that situation?*
- Help reinforce that we can take a perspective that there is something to be understood, not controlled, in most moments of crisis—*If behavior is communication, should we listen or discipline?*

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### Use questions to lead parents to their own solutions

- *Parents often need and ask for specific suggestions for problems that arise as they encourage their children's emerging skills.*
- *Professionals can help a parent solve a problem first by asking questions,*
- *Then by asking what else has worked or helped with the child in the past, before giving suggestions.* (Roggman, et al.)
- **Don't just do [or say] something, stand there and listen [and observe]!** (Variation on Sally Provence, MD)

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### "Connecting the dots" between past, present, and future...



Drawing on what the parent knows and feels promotes empathy, reflective capacity and self-efficacy (**You can CHOOSE what kind of parent you want to be.**)

- *Do you remember a time when someone comforted you when you were hurt?*
- *What was that like for you?*
- *What would you like that to be like for your child?*
- *You seem to know what she needs—how did you learn that?* (finding the Angels in the Nursery)

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**Empathy:** *I have to know how I feel  
before I can know how you feel.*



How many of the parents  
with whom we work have  
had the experience of  
someone empathizing  
with them?

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### **Provide a 'Holding Environment' for the Parent**

- Observe, listen and respond with empathy;
- Nurture the parent to better nurture and respond to the child;
- Show interest in the parent's feelings, behaviors and past experiences as they dramatically influence a parent's ability to provide sensitive and responsive care;
- **Hold hope that success/change is possible.**

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Five powerful words for giving parents the  
experience of "being held in the mind of another":




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### ***Being Held*** (Weatherston, 1999)

#### A well-held baby:

- Feels safe in his/her parent's embrace
- Is confident that his/her physical needs will be met
- Is confident that his/her emotional needs will be met




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### **'Holding' can feel like mothering...**

- *The interventionist does the things that mother does: protects, nurtures, notices, sustains, and supports. When she/he does it well, mothering/parenting care improves and there is greater hope that the infant will flourish.* (Winnicott)
- *Respectful and consistently, the interventionist listens carefully, remains attentive to each parent's needs, identifies with the parent, allows feelings to be expressed and offers an empathic response.*
- *Within the safety of this relationship, parents feel well cared for and secure, held by the interventionist's words and in her mind* (Pawl, 1995)

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### **Because we are human....**

*...it is not possible to work on behalf of human beings to try to help them without having powerful feelings aroused in yourself.*

Jeree Pawl




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## What happens in your mind while you are with a parent or child:

Professional continually questions their own and other's internal mental state:

- What is happening now?
- Why are they saying this now?
- Why are they behaving like this?
- Why am I feeling as I do now?
- What has happened recently that may justify the current state?



Mentalization Based Family Treatment (MBFT)  
(Aisen, Fonagy et al, 2011)

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## The Professional Being Held (*Parallel process!*)

(Weatherston, 1999)

*"Certain that my professional needs would be met, I was able to watch and listen and consistently respond. Knowing that I could depend on the consultant/ supervisor's guidance and support, I was able to offer the same to the parent/child."*

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## Parallel Process

### • Definition:

- The relationship experiences that the parent and professional have together that can affect the parent-child relationship and the way that the parent interacts with the child.



### • Benefits of reflective supervision/consultation:

- Professionals can nurture reflective parenting skills and relationship- based collaborative approaches to parenting in a holding environment where discussion of **all** emotions is safe.
- Allows early interventionists the opportunity to experience the same type of support they provide to families and children, all the while learning to problem-solve the challenges they encounter in their work with them.

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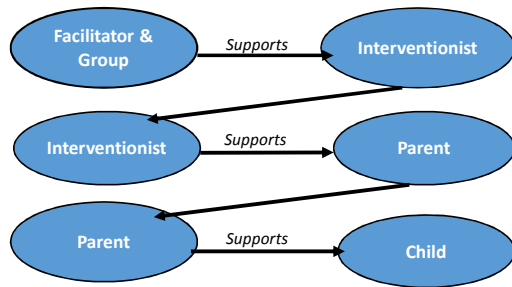
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### Parallel Process in Early Intervention




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What it might  
actually feel like:




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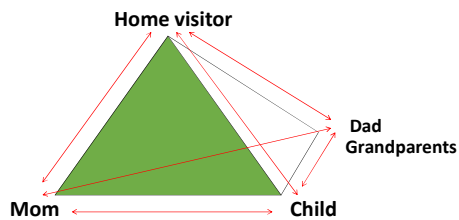
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### Attending to All the Relationships: The Perspective Pyramid




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### Important questions for helping us to reflect: Taking multiple perspectives

- What's it like to be this mom?
- What's it like to be this dad?
- What's it like to be this child?
- What is the meaning of this child to this family?
- What's it like to be me (the home visitor) in this situation?
- What does my presence mean to this family?




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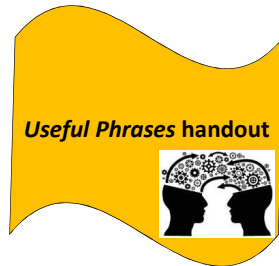
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### Useful Phrases, and a little role play...




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### Benefits of Taking Time to Reflect

- Gives meaning to the experiences
- Can create a habit of appreciating ourselves
- Can create a sense of closure
- Fosters life-long learning skills
- Builds relationships among co-workers
- Acknowledges the hard work you are doing




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Learning to do reflective practice is a developmental process

So, be patient with yourself and the process!




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KEEP  
CALM  
AND  
REFLECT  
ON

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## Reflective Activities to Use with Caregivers

### Two Person Drawing

Directions:

1. Identify 3-4 emotions you feel on a regular basis. Write them on the lines below.
2. Pick a color to represent each feeling or emotion and color in the box next to each emotion word.
3. Label each of the “people” with a different role (mom/partner, dad/at work, etc.)
4. Color in the “people” on the page by use the colors to represent how much of each emotion you feel like you are in that role.

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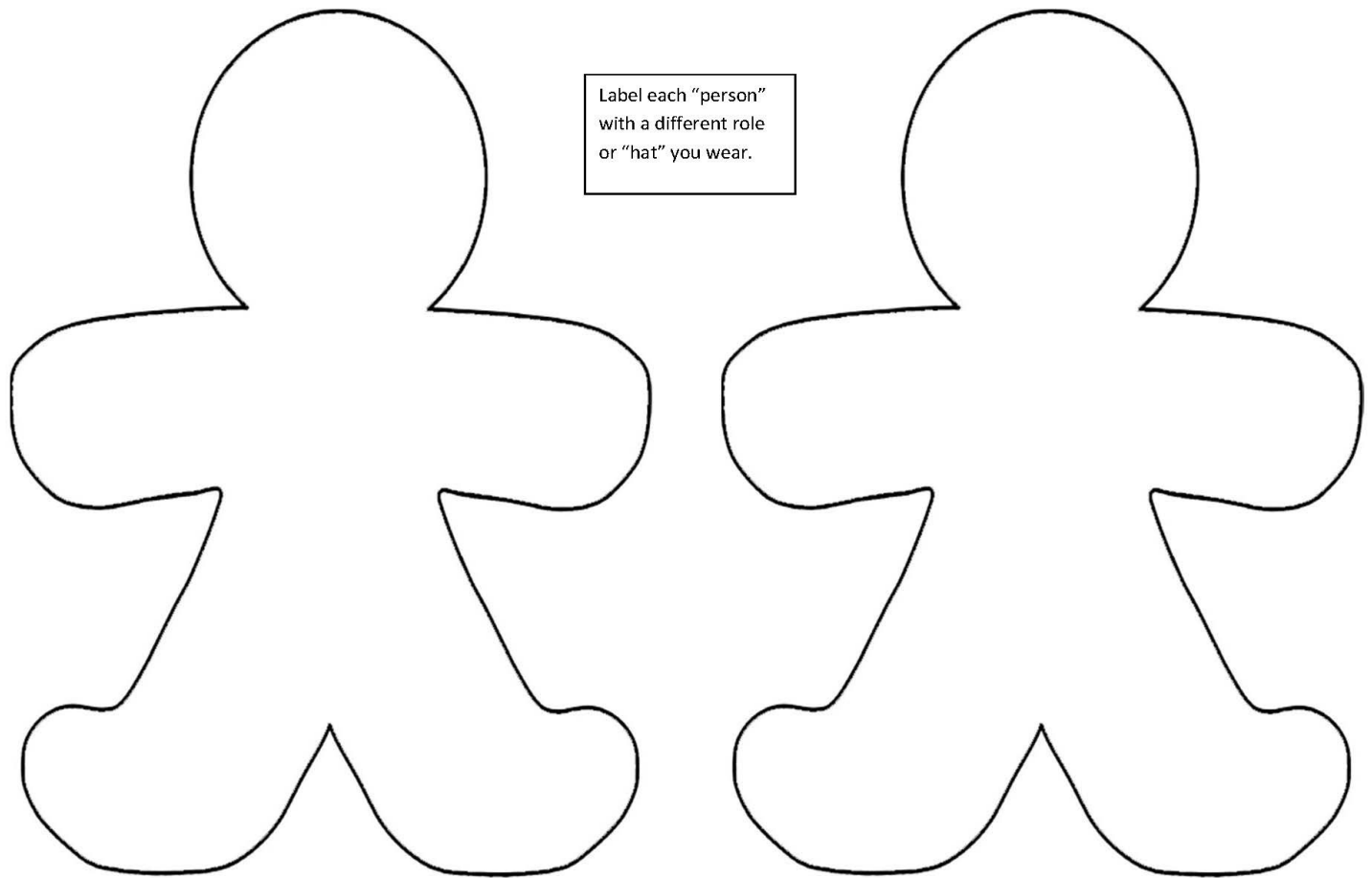
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## Reflective Activities to Use with Caregivers

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### Follow Up Discussion Questions:

- Share about the colors and feelings you picked and how much/location of the feelings in each role
- Compare and contrast the colors between the two roles
- Which color would you like to increase/decrease? What effect would that have on you while you are in that role to have that change?
- What contributes to each of the feelings you have colored?
- Are there any feelings missing? Any feelings you didn't use?

### Quotes Activity:

Directions: collect quotes and put them in envelopes, pick one out and then talk about what it means to the parent and how it might be interpreted by them.

- "Do unto others as you would have others do unto others." Jerree Pawl
- "How you ARE is more important that what you DO."
- "Everyone needs help from everyone." Bertolt Brecht
- "Children spell love T-I-M-E." David Wagner
- "Peace. It does not mean to be in a place where there is no noise, trouble, or hard work. It means to be in the midst of those thing and still be calm in your heart." (unknown)
- "Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love." Bruce Perry
- "When a flower doesn't bloom, you fix the environment in which is grows, not the flower." Alexander Den Heijer

## Reflective Activities to Use with Caregivers

### Using Symbols to Reflect

- Collect small toys from kid's meal, thrift stores, garage sales, etc.
- Have the parent/home visitor choose items to represent each person in the family (or children on their caseload)
- Ask them to place them in a rectangle container of sand
- Ask them to share about each item they picked and who it represents
- Ask about the placement of the items
- Think about who is close to whom, who is far, what is in the way of them connecting?
- Any changes they would like to see made in the family? Or would make it feel better as they look at it? What would have to happen for that change to happen?



### Basketful of Questions

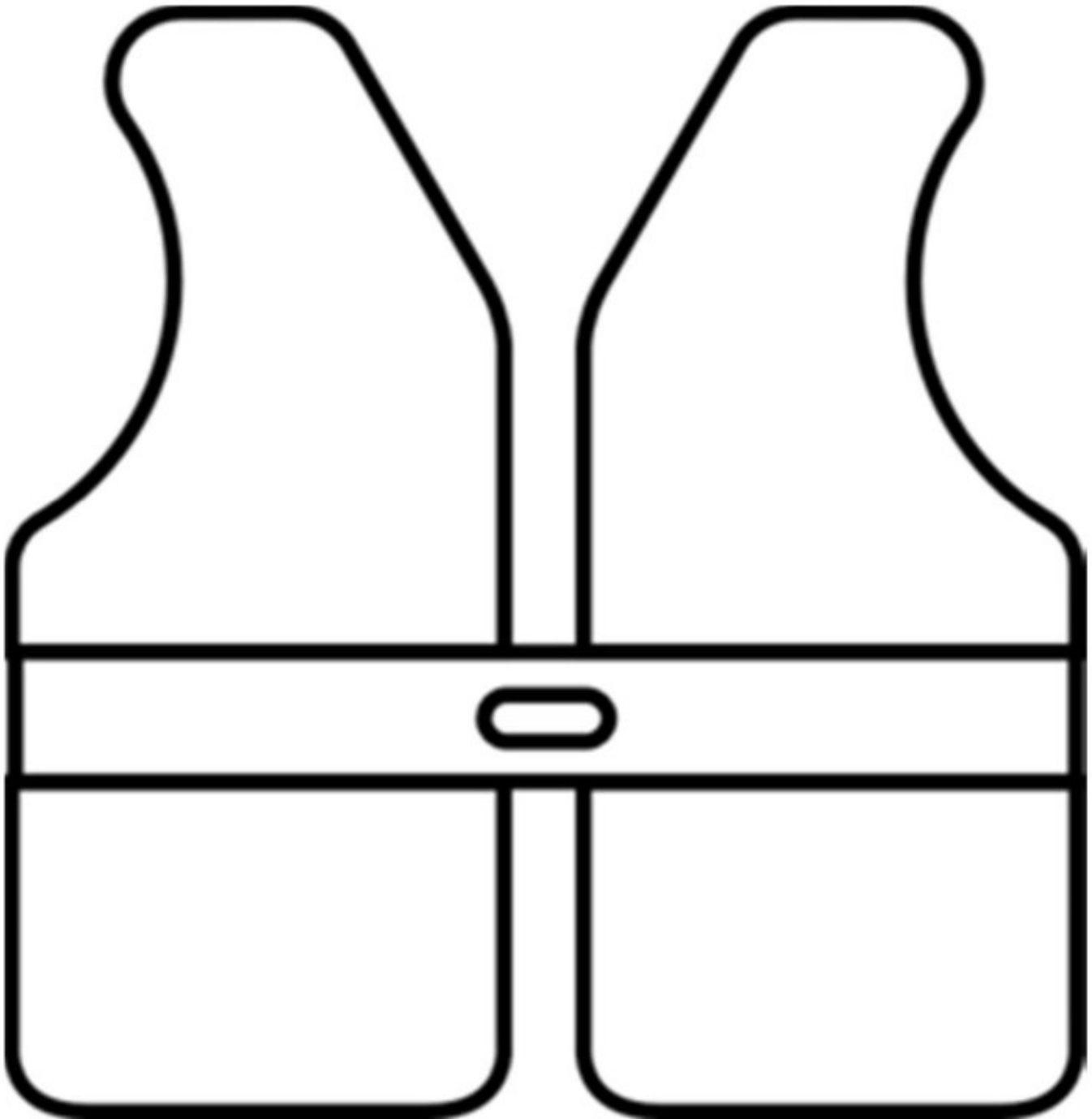
Directions: put the questions on notecards and place them in a basket. Take one out and talk about it. Ask the parent how their child might answer the questions.

- Describe a good day
- Describe a bad day
- I find it easy to be with my child when \_\_\_\_\_
- I find it difficult by with my child when \_\_\_\_\_
- Talk about child/parent who reminds you of someone else in your life
- Name three things you think your child does well
- Name three things you do well as a parent
- When I feel stressed it helps when \_\_\_\_\_
- What is your "hot button" behavior? What feeling do you have when your child does that? How does it impact your relationship?
  - What were your parent's "hot buttons?" What would have happened if you did those behaviors?

## Reflective Activities to Use with Caregivers

### “Lifejackets”

- Sometimes it feels like we need someone to throw us a “lifejacket” because we are drowning in our role of “parent/caregiver/etc.”
- What are the signs that you are “drowning?” (think about the physical, emotional, verbal, relational, and mental/thoughts)
- Write on the lifejacket the coping skills or strategies that help you “stay swimming” even when it feels hard to keep going.



## Useful Phrases in Relationship-based Work

- *I have been thinking about you since I saw you last...*
- *How has it been going with \_\_\_\_\_?*
- *What's going well about being a parent right now?*
- *What's the hardest part of being a parent right now?*
- *What do you enjoy most about \_\_\_\_\_(child)?*
- *What do you find most challenging about \_\_\_\_\_(child)?*
- *What's it like for you when that happens?*
- *What do you think that's like for [the child]?*
- *What do you think she's trying to tell you when she does that?*
- *Let's see if we can figure this out together...*
- *I wonder why....*
- *What's your hunch about why...?*
- *What's it like for you when....?*
- *What kinds of things have you tried? And how has that gone?*
- *What has been most helpful?*
- *Tell me more about that...*
- *How do you know when....?*
- *When does this usually happen?*
- *What does it look like when....*
- *How do you cope when you're feeling stressed?*
- *Where do you get support?*
- *Tell me about a time when things seem to go well.*
- *Why do you think he reacts that way?*
- *I hear you asking for help, but I worry that if I give a suggestion you might feel like I am criticizing or judging you—will you tell me if it feels like that?*
- *What do you think that was about?*
- *Can you give me an example?*
- *And what have you tried?*

### Strategies for Active Responding: Reflecting Back

- Paraphrasing—*I hear what you're saying. It can be so hard to function when you're not getting enough sleep.*
- Reframing—*I wonder if he might be hungry—what do you think?*
- Normalizing—*I've had that happen to me and it is so frustrating!*
- Rotating the perspective—*I wonder what it's like for your baby when the two of you are arguing.*
- "Compassionate mirroring"—*Matching and reflecting back what the parent seems to be feeling--As you tell me about your morning, I can feel my energy draining. Is that how it is for you? As I hear how happy you are about that, I feel encouraged too.*
- Talking for the baby as a way to encourage perspective-taking—*Hey, I need you to pick me up-I miss you and want to be with you!*
- Talking to the baby to provide indirect compliments—*Look at you growing--Someone's taking awfully good care of you*