Skills Required to Work Effectively with Families

The focal system (family) is comprised of two or more subsystems (individual family members). To work effectively with families, one must have the necessary skills for interacting with individuals, including:

• **Active Listening**

  A worker should pay full attention when an individual is speaking, taking note of content, body language, and listening for indirect messages.

• **Clear Communication**

  A worker should be able to send clear messages to a receiver. The worker must also be able to understand incoming communications and ask for clarification when needed. The ability to ask questions, summarize, and reflect back improve the quality communication.

• **Empathy**

  A worker should be able to tune in to another’s feelings, while displaying and conveying accurate empathy.

• **Establishing Rapport**

  Warmth, genuineness, openness and honesty help set the stage for valuable interpersonal interactions.

• **Cultural Competency**

  Workers should “respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals” (NASW Standards for Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice).  

• **Ethical Behavior**

  Workers should behave in a manner that is consistent with the NASW Code of Ethics.  
A family is also more than the sum of its subsystems; synergy creates a special type of group with its own history, structure, value, and context. Thus, in addition to the skills required for working with individuals, one must also be able to work effectively with groups. Some of these skills include:

• **Knowledge About Group Goals**

Simply stated, a group goal is the place that a group would like to be. A worker should seek to understand the family’s goal from their own perspective.

• **Establishing Trust**

Trust is a foundation of all healthy relationships. A family group will be more apt to work with a worker who they trust and respect. Workers should note that higher levels of trust may need to be established to work with families that are relatively closed systems.

• **Ability to Recognize Group Processes**

As an individual outside of the family system, a worker is in a unique position to recognize patterns of communication, participation, leadership, decision-making procedures, conflicts, and problem-solving, and to share these observations with the family.

• **Ability to Work in a Group**

To establish a working relationship with a family means to temporarily become part of their group. The worker must be able to change and be flexible, as each and every family will have different structures and patterns of interaction.
Working effectively with families builds on the skills required for interacting with individuals and groups. Additionally, workers must be able to:

- **Understand Healthy Families**

  Communication, support, respect, trust, shared activities, and family traditions all characterize healthy families. For a more comprehensive list, please see Traits of a Healthy Family by Delores Curran. Or ask the family what they perceive as a healthy family.

- **Understand Different Perspectives**

  Each member of a family may view their family in an entirely different way. A worker’s understanding of these various perspectives can shed light onto family dynamics and roles. Insight can be gained by meeting with family members on an individual basis.

- **Understand the Nature of Change**

  Social systems theory recognizes the interrelatedness of all things. If one family member changes, the other members will necessarily react, whether it be pressure to revert to old patterns of interaction or undergoing a corresponding change. Additionally, if an entire family group changes, the systems around them will also respond and change.

- **Model Desired Behaviors**

  One way a worker can teach a new behavior is to model it for the family group. For example, if the goal of the family is to develop healthy conflict resolution skills, the worker can demonstrate appropriate techniques during family sessions.

To summarize, the family is a special type of group made up of individuals. The skills required to work effectively with individuals apply equally to work with groups and families. Awareness of group processes can further inform work with families. Once again, in brief, the skills are:

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