Catalogue of family support skills

Core and field specific family support skills

- **Catalogue systematizes, classifies, presents and describes family support workforce core and field specific skills.**
- Core skills are partnership and collaboration, empathic skills; advocacy and empowerment skills, good listening, problem solving, building trust and confidence and user-friendly communication.
- Model of family support skills presents plausible interaction between core and field specific skills, knowledge, approaches, personal traits and amalgam qualities of family support workforce.

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1. Introduction

As part of the European Union COST Action, The European Family Support Network: A Bottom-up, Evidence-Based, and Multidisciplinary Approach, from 2019 and ongoing, a group of researchers "committed to the development of a standardization framework on family support skills", conducted several studies in order to identify and reach an agreement on the set of skills classifications for family support workforce, required for quality performance. The efforts and results that this group of researchers has come up with are of great significance in the field of family support, given the terminological and conceptual ambiguities in defining competencies and qualifications in family support workforce (Tunstill et al., 2008; Canavan et al., 2016).

So far, several documents have been produced (that can be found at https://eurofamnet.eu/home), including research based on an in-depth systematic review of family support workforce skills; a systematic review of books and handbooks related to workforce skills in family support; a mapping and content analysis of web pages regarding family support workforce skills, and the Delphi study (Burgund et al., 2021; Žegarac et al., 2021; Antunes et al, 2021; Buciuceanu-Vrabie et al., 2023). Based on those findings, including three rounds of the Delphi study[1], a consensus among experts was reached regarding the definition of family support workforce skills and core skills for family support workers across different professions and settings, specific knowledge and approaches necessary to perform core family support skills, and core personal traits and the combination (amalgam) of family support workers' qualities across different professions and settings.

As mentioned, important data sources for the development of this catalogue have included the results of previous efforts and studies conducted by the group of researchers, and also of the review of different skills catalogues, particularly those related to the fields relevant to family support. These have contributed to the identification of different definitions and explanations of core skills for family support that will be explained below.

[1] The Delphi Study was conducted during 2022-2023 to identify, organize and catalogue family support workforce skills. In this study, 31 experts participated in the first round, 27 took part in the second round and 27 experts answered the survey in the third round.

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There are many different approaches and skill frames in the scientific and professional literature, which have led to the catalogue of skills named under different classifications (Berger et al., 2017). A widely accepted view is that catalogues of skills could be divided into three types, based on whether they originate from basic scientific research or practice (Cieciuch and Strus, 2021). Some catalogues were created by academic researchers to describe individual differences relevant from a theoretical point of view (Cieciuch and Strus, 2021). Others were developed by practitioners, policymakers or stakeholders, in order to identify relevant skills in their domains of work. Finally, the third type of catalogues emerges from the collaboration between academics and practitioners, in order to identify the skills that are significant for practice and subjected to intensive scientific research (Cieciuch and Strus, 2021).

This catalogue has been developed in collaboration between academics, professionals, practitioners, and stakeholders, in order to systematize, classify, present and describe family support workforce core and field specific skills in several areas (i.e., social welfare, education, mental health, medicine, and law) in a clear and accessible way. It is intended for professionals and stakeholders that work with families in different areas of work (i.e., health, mental health, social welfare, child protection, early development, education, and justice) to improve skills and knowledge in family support.

2. Definition of skills in family support

A systematic review of literature and previous research has shown that there is no single definition of skills for family support (Burgund et al., 2021; Žegarac et al., 2021). The term “skill” has often been twisted and alternated with concepts such as “competencies,” “interventions” and “techniques” (Žegarac et al., 2021). In order to achieve progress in understanding the phenomenon and apply knowledge to practice, it is important to discontinue the use of the same concepts with different meanings or of different concepts with the same meaning (Cieciuch and Strus, 2021). The terms “skills” and “competencies” differ but they are interconnected as well. The term “skills” refers to an “ability to apply knowledge and use know-how to complete tasks and solve problems” (Cedefop, 2014, p. 227). “Competencies” is a more complex concept defined as an ‘ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities in work or study situations, and in professional and personal development’ (Cedefop, 2014, p. 47). Unlike skills, competencies are a broader term that, in addition to the functional aspect or

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interpersonal qualities, also includes cognitive elements (i.e., utilization of knowledge) and ethical values (Burgund et al., 2021; Žegarac et al., 2021).

The skills for family support could be applied in different fields and approaches, and it is important to distinguish them from other skills used in helping, rights-based or protective contexts. A consensus was reached among experts regarding the definition of family support workforce skills[2] and the most accepted definition after three rounds of the Delphi study is:

"Family support workforce skills is learned ability to work collaboratively while supporting different aspects of family functioning, and the ability to use knowledge effectively and readily while serving families using holistic, strengths, rights and relationship-based approach".

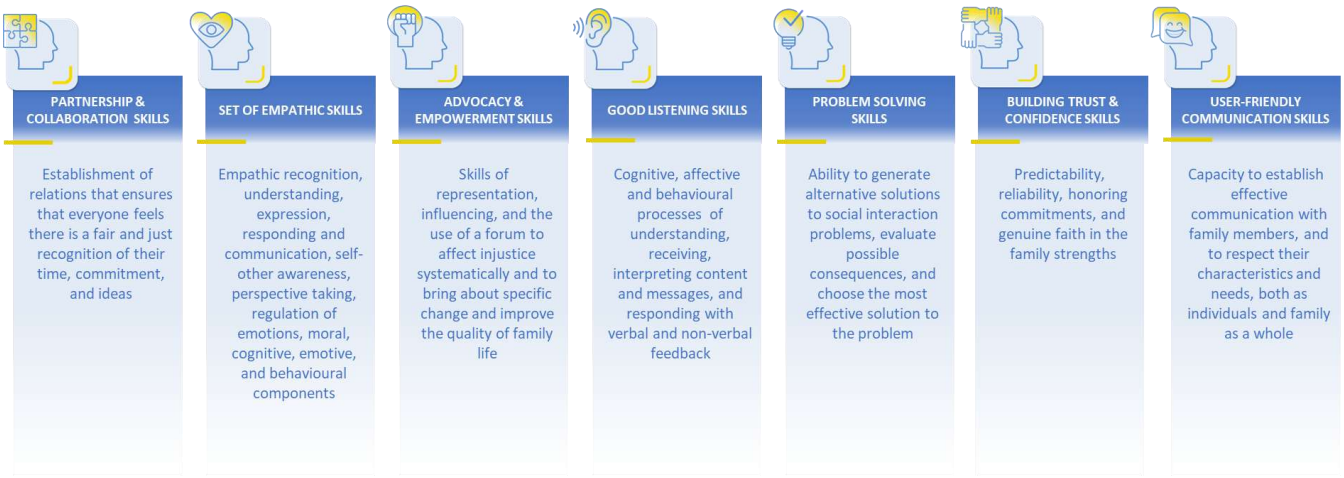
Hereinafter follows the presentation of definitions, explanations, and examples of behaviour for a set of core and field-specific family support skills, necessary knowledge, theoretical approaches, personal traits, and a combination (here mentioned as *amalgam*) of family support workers' qualities across professions and settings (i.e., social welfare, education, mental health, medicine, law), which all together are essential for good-quality, effective and efficient family support.

3. Set of core skills for family support workers across different professions and settings

Professionals that work with families in different settings need to have core skills for helping and supporting families. The set of core skills for family support refers to general skills for a range of professions in various countries.

[2] This definition, in this context, involves not only features associated with the ability, but also with the knowledge for its applications in several family support scenarios, which can be similar to competences according to some cultures/languages. However, in this paper, we will use the "skills" denomination.

Figure 1. *Set of core skills for family support workers across different professions and settings*



The set of core skills for family support is composed of partnership and collaboration, empathic skills; advocacy and empowerment skills, good listening, problem solving, building trust and confidence, and user-friendly communication. These skills will be defined, explained, and illustrated with suitable examples.

3.1. Partnership and collaboration

3.1.1. Definitions and description of partnership and collaboration

Different synonyms for the terms “partnership” and “collaboration” exist in literature: “inter-agency working”, “inter-professional”, “interdisciplinary work”, “multi-agency working”, “multi-professional working”, “inter-agency communication”, “cross-sector collaboration” (Rapport et al., 2004; Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Bell et al., 2010; Redmond and Dolan, 2014; Gastro-Kemp and Samuels, 2022). However, in the family support arena, it is also important to emphasize cooperation with families and all family members, e.g., collaborative approaches in support processes (Andreson and Gehart, 2007; Madsen, 2007).

These terms have often been used in respect to “partnership and collaboration”, but not always consistently. Partnership and collaboration are skills that include families, children, professionals, and communities and scenarios where it is important to work collaboratively to

achieve their growth and change. Partnership and collaboration are professional skills underlying the work with the family to ensure that all participants feel there is a fair and just recognition of their time, commitment, and ideas, vital to sustaining effective teamwork and providing effective and good-quality support to the family (Rapport et al., 2004; Redmond and Dolan, 2014). These skills are related to the partnership and collaboration established and maintained between the public, private, and voluntary sectors, between these sectors and the people who use their services, and between more than one agency and/or individual (Glasby and Peck, 2004; Dalrymple and Burke, 2006).

In order for the family to understand the services provided by professionals as integrated and coordinated, and for them to be treated as they deserve when interacting with the various services and practitioners involved, it is of utmost importance that there is interprofessional collaboration and partnership, including active participation of the family in the entire process of organizing, planning, and providing support (Rodrigo Lopez et al., 2023).

Partnership and collaboration with the family and other significant individuals in the family life, including other professionals, should be developed from the beginning of the work with the family to provide holistic, integrated, and comprehensive support based on their needs (Bell et al., 2010).

3.1.2. Behavioural examples

Being able to establish and maintain effective relationships with the family, other participants and within the team, to develop alliances or associations with all participants to exchange information and enhance the quality of the family support. To express themselves with a collaborative and self-esteem support language, proposing and asking for all participants' opinions and experiences.

3.2. Set of empathic skills

3.2.1. Definitions and description of the set of empathic skills

Empathy is a complex skill that could be defined as the "ability to identify what someone else is thinking and feeling, and to respond to their thoughts and feelings with an appropriate emotion" (Baron-Cohen, 2011, p. 11). When being empathic, someone could "perceive, understand, experience or respond to the emotional state and ideas of another person" (Barker, 2003, p. 141). Literature points out that empathy often involves several skills (Mclever Lopes 2011; Langkau, 2020) that some authors classify as its dimensions or components (Barrett-Lennard, 1981; Morse et al., 1992; Hepworth et al., 2013), which includes cognitive and affective domains

(Hojat et al., 2002). The cognitive domain relates to the ability to understand another person's inner experience and feelings, and to review the outside world from a different perspective (i.e., the other person's perspective), while the affective domain relates to entering into the emotional experience of another person (Hojat et al., 2002). The set of empathic skills involves empathic recognition, understanding, expression, responding and communication (Barrett-Lennard, 1981; Hepworth et al., 2013), self-other awareness, perspective taking, regulation of emotions, moral, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components (Barret-Lennard, 1981; Morse et al., 1992).

By relying on these skills, a cyclic multi-dimensional model of empathy has been developed, composed of three stages: (1) understanding and recognizing the other person's emotions, (2) communicating this understanding with empathy, and (3) recognizing that this has been understood (Barrett-Lennard, 1981). Kindness is important for the empathy skill, caring for others and their well-being, originating from perspective-taking and empathic concern for their well-being (Chernyshenko et al., 2018), which leads to valuing and investing in close relationships (McIver Lopes, 2011).

3.2.2. Behavioural examples

Being able to recognize, understand, experience, and respond to the feelings and thoughts of family members in an empathic way.

3.3. Advocacy and empowerment skills

3.3.1. Definition and description of advocacy and empowerment skills

Advocacy and empowerment involve a set of skills intended to achieve change and improve the quality of life of the family, where the role of the family and of the helper is widely recognized. Advocacy is related to the skills of representation, influencing, and the use of a forum to affect systematically injustice and to bring specific change (Schneider and Lester, 2001; Hepworth et al., 2013). These skills involve policy analysis, group facilitation, oral and written communication skills, negotiation and mediation, and analysis of multidimensional and systematic information. For advocacy to be effective, it is important that a rational and planned approach exists and incorporates the following steps (Hepworth et al., 2013)

- Analyze the problem or condition;
- Systematically gather information and complete an analysis of the people, structure, system, or policy to be changed;

- Assess both the driving forces that may promote change and the forces that may conceivably resist or inhibit change;
- Identify specific goals, eliciting a broad range of viewpoints from within the client group;
- Carefully match techniques or strategies toward the desired outcome;
- Make a feasible schedule for implementing the plan of action;
- Incorporate in the plan a feedback process for evaluating the changes that the action stimulates.

Empowerment means that professionals and other individuals that work with families are being able to support, give power to - empower family members, prevent emerging problems, acquire, or regain the capacities to interact with the social environment, and expand the resources available to meet the needs of the families with their active participation. By being empowered, families acquire power to control their life and surroundings, get resources that will increase their spiritual, political, social or economic strength (Teatar, 2010). In that process, it is of great importance to conduct a proper evaluation of the family, which encompasses an assessment of interactions within the environment and its influences on family members. This will help identify if and where interventions are needed to enable family members to restore their power, satisfy their needs and fulfil their rights and goals (Kondrat, 2010). When empowering families, professionals work on building the capacities of their members through the use and mobilization of their role and power to change and/or improve problematic situations (White and Epston, 1990; Carter, 2000; Hepworth et al., 2013) and their position in the social environment. Empowering involves providing knowledge, skills and resources to families and helpers to involve them in active decision making, in having control and support of children's learning and development in a more positive and impactful way (Singh, 1995; Rouse, 2012; Kambouri et al., 2022).

3.3.2. Behavioural examples

Being able to challenge, promote, represent, plead, push for, or achieve positive change in the family life through active involvement and strengthening of family members and to empower their voice and influence in the community.

3.4. Good listening

3.4.1. Definition and description of good listening

Good listening is a skill related to appreciation, understanding, and showing interest for others, which is very significant for different types of conversation with families. Good listening is one of the fundamental skills for facilitating the co-orientation process that family members undergo (Schrodt, 2009). It is considered as an empathic and at the same time rational process (Rhodes, 1993), which occurs within a dyadic system and helps define that system. It is important that professionals and other helpers that work with family members are completely open and aware of what is happening in the family and around it (Lipari, 2010). Good listening skills entail that we adopt and process verbal, other signals, and information we gather from family members, which enable us to fully understand their meaning in the communication. Good listening is a complex term that consists of three types of processes: a) cognitive processes such as understanding, receiving, and interpreting content and relational messages (Imhof, 2010); b) affective processes, such as being motivated to pay attention to those messages (Weaver, 1972); and c) behavioural processes, such as responding with verbal and non-verbal feedback (Weger et al., 2010).

3.4.2. Behavioural examples

Being able to perceive, hear and appreciate verbal and nonverbal behaviours of family members, to have an empathic attitude and willingness to listen that increases attentiveness to others in the conversation.

3.5. Problem solving

3.5.1. Definition and description of problem solving

Problem solving skills refer to the ability to develop cognitive and behavioural strategies to better understand and systematically manage problems together with family members (Elliott et al., 2004). It is intended to help families adapt to their environments and alter environments to meet the needs of family members adequately (Hepworth et al. 2013). It is used to obtain the best answer to the unknown or make a decision subject to some constraints (Woods et al., 1997). Problem-solving skills refer to the collaboration of professionals and family members, including information sharing and joining forces and efforts to reach a solution to a problem. They are closely linked to collaboration, teamwork types of behaviours, and kinds of taskwork behaviours (Andrews-Todd and Forsyth, 2020; Andrews-Todd et al., 2022) in order to find alternative solutions to problems, assess possible consequences, and choose optimal resolutions (Spivack et al., 1976).

3.5.2. Behavioural examples

Being able to generate alternative solutions to social interaction and other problems, evaluate possible consequences, and choose the most effective solution to a problem.

3.6. Building trust and confidence

3.6.1. Definition and description of building trust and confidence

In order to provide good-quality and effective family support, it is important that mutual trust and confidence between family members and helpers exist, as well as constant readiness for exchange and learning in both directions (Moran and Canavan, 2019). Trust and confidence are composed of three levels, which are susceptible to development: predictability, dependability, and faith (Rempel et al., 1985). Building trust and confidence is related to a set of skills that are used to establish mutual trust and respect since the first contact with the family members, although it is a long-term process that needs time to be established (Žegarac, 2017). It is the outcome of engagement and acceptance of the helper by the family members, but also can be secured by the full information regarding what was planned and agreed (Žegarac, 2017). To build trust, keep it and respect it, family members and helpers need to maintain quality relations and achieve positive change (Adams and Christenson, 1998; Adams and Christenson, 2000).

3.6.2. Behavioural examples

Being able to build trust and confidence with family members without judgment, with reliable and honouring commitments, genuinely believing in family strengths, and in the possibility of constructive change and growth.

3.7. User-friendly communication

3.7.1. Definition and description of user-friendly communication

User-friendly communication refers to the family workers' capacity to establish effective communication with all family members, and to respect their characteristics and needs, of individuals and of the family as a whole. User-friendly communication is characterized as a positive relationship with family members, where there is empathy, mutuality, and inter-dependence (Herber, 2000), as well as the utilization of professional jargon-free family-friendly language and manners of expression (Gilligan 1991), which improves well-being, stronger resilience, and being able to join the family (Herrera-Pastor et al. 2020).

3.7.2. Behavioural examples

Being able to establish and keep user-friendly communication with family members showing empathy, being non-judgemental, welcoming, and accessible.

3.8. Summary of Core Skills and their behavioural examples

The summaries of core skills and behavioural examples as well as operational examples are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Core skills for family support workers across different professions and settings*

CORE SKILLS	BEHAVIOURAL EXAMPLES	OPERATIONAL EXAMPLES
PARTNERSHIP AND COLLABORATION	Being able to establish and maintain effective relationships with the family, other participants and within the team, to develop alliances or associations with all participants to exchange information and enhance the quality of the family support. To express themselves with a collaborative and self-esteem support behaviour, proposing and asking for all participants' opinions and experiences.	A mother from Magras family contacts a psychologist since the family is having difficulty coping with her 15-year-old daughter growing up. She wants the psychologist to advise her on what she can do to make the daughter and her father fight less. The psychologist invites the entire family to a meeting, where she agrees with the family members to work together to create the desired outcomes, with all participants contributing their share to the solution, which they have yet to create together. The psychologist also recommends to the family a social worker for their 14-year-old son since it turns out that the boy has developed a serious behavioural problem in school, and to join a parent support group. She offers the family contacts for other services and discusses with them referral options, after which she consults her colleagues from other departments, and together they continue to work on the desired outcomes.
SET OF EMPATHIC SKILLS	Being able to recognize, understand, experience, and respond to feelings and thoughts of family members in an empathic way.	John listened with attention to the mother of a family, who explained to him how difficult it was to be a single parent. As she spoke, he understood clearly what she was saying and could imagine himself in that

		situation, and responded non-verbally and verbally to her with acceptance and understanding. The mother cried as they spoke for the first time in years, and she had the feeling that John understood her deeply.
ADVOCACY AND EMPOWERMENT SKILLS	Being able to challenge, promote, represent, plead, push for, or achieve positive change in the family life through actively involving and strengthening family members, and to empower their voice and influence in the community.	Rosa is the social worker engaged for the Costa family and she encourages and reinforces that the parents should participate in a parenting programme. She always talks with the parents to learn how everything is going and also introduces them to a family association in which they get involved a few weeks later.
GOOD LISTENING	Being able to perceive, hear and appreciate verbal and nonverbal behaviours of family members, and having an empathic concern and willingness to listen which increases attentiveness to others in the conversation.	Mara listened and observed attentively the father of a family who did not let the mother and son speak. As the conversation continued, she realised that they too had something to say, with the waving of the son's hands and the mother's misty eyes.
PROBLEM SOLVING	Being able to generate alternative solutions to social interaction and problems, evaluate possible consequences, and choose the most effective solution to a problem.	Alan had to organize services for Frank, the youngest 7-year-old son from the Fritch family. He knew that Frank had a disability, and the appropriate school was 30 km away. The family was not able to take him to the school. After thinking and looking for information and dialoguing with various services and with the family, Alan and the family discussed different potential steps and outcomes for the child and family, and jointly created a plan.
BUILDING TRUST AND CONFIDENCE	Being able to build trust and confidence with family members without judgment, with reliable and honouring commitments, genuinely believing in family strengths, and	After several meetings with Katharine, the Novak family decided to express their concerns about a complex conflict with their extended family, which was seriously disrupting their way of life. Katharine was waiting for the Novak family. It was the

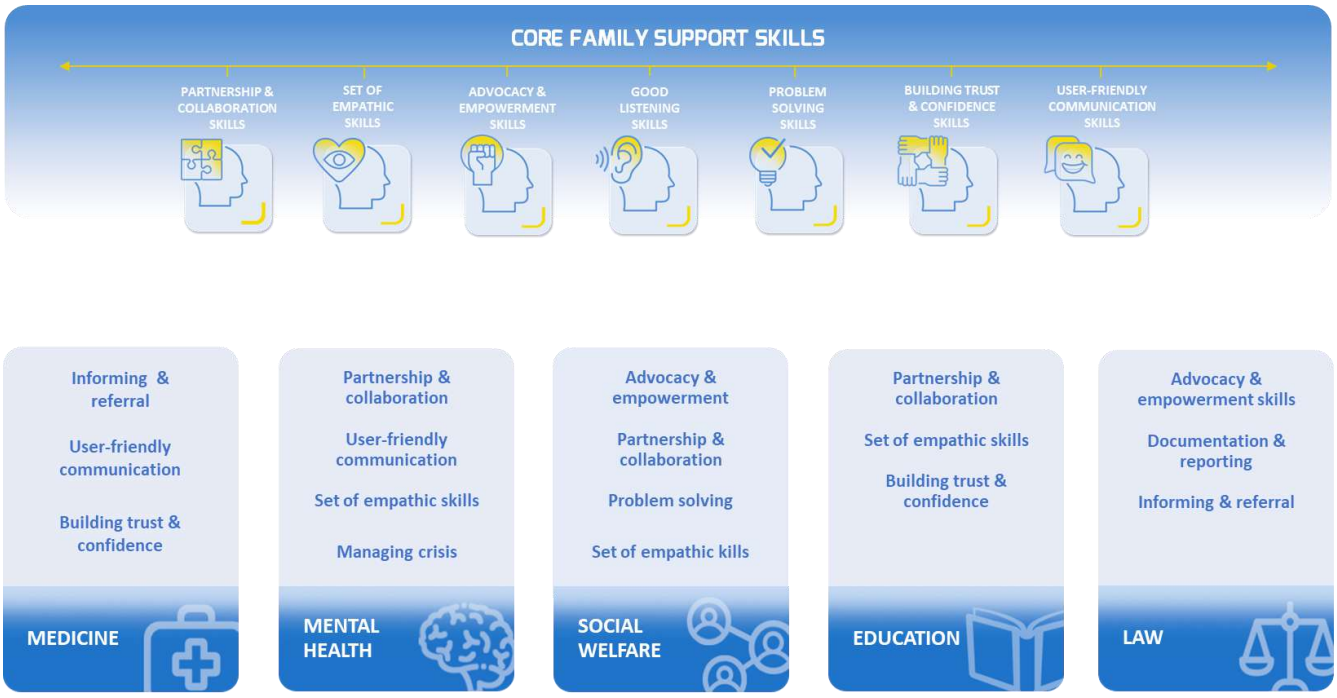
	in the possibility of constructive change and growth.	seventh time they would meet. This visit was important, because they trusted Katharine and came to ask for support in managing a situation that worried them.
USER-FRIENDLY COMMUNICATION	Being able to establish and keep user-friendly communication with family members showing empathy, being non-judgemental, welcoming, and accessible.	Victoria does not wait for the families to enter her school office. She always meets the families in the waiting room and starts talking to them there, always greeting them with a big smile and asking them how they are doing. She strives to be understandable in conversation and to enable all to participate, if necessary, also through the use of supporting media (e.g., culturally appropriate leaflets, music, visual material).

4. Skills of family support workers across different professions and settings

As professionals work with families in a variety of settings and have different educational backgrounds, further efforts focused on the most important core skills for family support workers in specific areas. Based on the findings of the Delphi study, a set of field-specific skills for family support workers was outlined as the most frequently identified in the areas of social welfare, education, medicine, mental health, and law (Figure 2).

These skills were defined and explained in the previous chapters, examples of behaviours were given for all except three skills (that is, informing and referral, managing crisis, documentation and reporting). These skills will be defined and explained at the end of this chapter.

Figure 2. *The set of core and key field-specific skills for family support workers*



In the field of social welfare, the following skills are central: advocacy and empowerment skills, partnership and collaboration, the set of empathic skills, and problem solving.

In the field of education, these are the crucial skills: partnership and collaboration, the set of empathic skills, and building trust and confidence.

In the field of medicine, the key skills are: informing and referral, user-friendly communication, and building trust and confidence.

In the field of mental health, these skills are decisive: partnership and collaboration, user-friendly communication, the set of empathic skills, and managing crisis.

In the field of law, the following skills are essential: documentation and reporting, informing and referral, and advocacy and empowerment skills.

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4.1. Managing crisis

4.1.1. Definition and description of managing crisis

Skills for managing crisis refer to the ability of family workers to mobilize advantages, resources, and strengths of family members to overcome situations of crisis and improve their ability to deal with problems. According to the theory of crisis, every person has their own mechanisms for overcoming a crisis, but it can happen that sometimes some events are too overwhelming for a person and these mechanisms cannot provide help, so that persons find themselves in a state of crisis (Teater, 2010). Although this experience is stressful for a person, it can be an opportunity for growth and development as well (Roberts, 2005). A prominent factor is to have persons that can provide support to the family, that should be able to identify, assess and intervene to lower the intensity of the crisis and to return family members to their previous level of functioning, as fast as possible, and to lower the negative effects on mental health (Stevens and Ellerbrock, 1995).

Some of the themes that are relevant to managing crisis are access, advocacy, communication, continuity, and coordination of services for the families in crisis (Lester et al,. 2004). Managing crisis refers to three periods: before, during, and after crisis. Managing crisis skills are related to the “ability to apply intervention to prevent immediate crisis from becoming long-standing problems” (Roberts, 2000, p. 127)

4.1.2. Behavioural examples

Being able to identify, mobilize, and use advantages, resources and strengths of family members in overcoming a situation of crisis and to improve abilities for overcoming and solving problems.

4.2. Documentation and reporting

4.2.1. Definition and description of documentation and reporting

Documentation and reporting refer to providing clear, concise, comprehensive, accurate, objective, and timely documenting and family reporting. This is a significant skill, but it is also the professional duty of helpers that provide support to families. Documentation and reporting involve skills related to handling information, clear communication, and engagement and inclusion (Žegarac, 2015).

These skills are important for providing guidelines to family workers and partnerships between family members and other services (Žegarac, 2015). These skills also leave a written

record of how a certain service/organization was involved in providing support to a family and on the continuation of that support. This leads to the creation of material on the family that can be used afterwards during procedures regarding the protection of the family members' rights and interests, which can be used in investigation and by other services with the family consent (Goodwin, 2019). Documentation on a family should contain all the relevant information about family members and data on assessment, planned and conducted interventions, and services provided. It should also include clear recording of the family's and children's views on all relevant aspects of the interventions and of the family work. It is important that a relationship is built, and that trust exists between family members and other services so it could be explained when, why, and under what conditions information is shared. At the beginning of the work, the family support worker should explain to the family members how information will be used, and when it will be shared with other experts and community services. He/she should also inform them of the need to give consent regarding information sharing, to declare exceptions to the requirement, so that the issues of confidentiality and privacy are adequately addressed.

4.2.2. Behavioural examples

Being able to clearly, concisely, comprehensively, accurately, objectively, timely, and effectively transmit thoughts, ideas, and agreements in the required format (i.e., through the written word) in documents that are related to families, as well as to provide confidentiality and privacy during gathering, keeping, and sharing of data.

4.3. Informing and referral

4.3.1. Definition and description of informing and referral

Helpers, including professionals that work with families, need to give different kinds of information to family members, to refer them to services or to other people within the system of support (Devaney et al., 2022). In literature, it is often indicated that family members need to be provided with relevant and accessible information (Mitchell and Sloper, 2000). Informing and referral skills are associated with the ability to provide family members with different kinds of information regarding the following topics: information about their child's and other family members' conditions, services and financial benefits, the rights of family members and how they can support their child's development in the best way. This skill requires good coordination, interprofessional and intersectoral cooperation. Information is important for family to understand the difficulties and changes that the family members and the family are going through. It can contribute to a sense of control, problem solving, and decision making (Mitchell and Sloper, 2000; Trevithick, 2012). For informing and referral to be of quality and useful to family members,

family workers need to know how to present information, what is the relevant content for one family, what is the best way to deliver information to family members, and how to organize information for a certain family.

4.3.2. Behavioural examples

Being able to quickly, relevantly, and correctly inform and refer family members to other services and professionals, while acknowledging family and individual needs for certain information. Providing timely, accurate, sufficient, and tailored information to other services and professionals to which the family is referred, while respecting privacy and confidentiality.

5. Set of specific knowledge necessary to perform core family support skills

For an effective performing of the core family support skills it is necessary that workers who work with the families in different settings have a set of specific knowledge. Here we will present knowledge that is crucial for family support, and necessary to perform core family support skills: knowledge about the family life cycle, dynamics and stresses, the social context, poverty and discrimination, child development, and the services and systems of support.

5.1. Family life cycle, dynamics, and stresses

The family life cycle comprises of the developmental stages through which a family, as a whole, must pass since a family is a system that moves through time. These developmental stages have an effect on the family's psychosocial health, with positive and negative consequences for the dimensions inherent to the family's health and well-being and serve as resources in circumstances where the family has to adapt to a new situation or express the need to deal with these areas (Barnhill, 1979). The family life cycle model defines eight stages of family development, all of which address nodal events related to the comings and goings of family members over time (Carter and McGoldrick, 1988)

i. Unmarried young person - "free shooter";
ii. Initial family period, from the wedding to the pregnancy with the first child;
iii. Family with a small child - the eldest child up to 2 years;
iv. Family with preschool child - the eldest child up to 6 years;
v. Family with school child - the eldest child up to 13 years;
vi. Family with adolescent child from puberty until the child leaves the house;

vii. Post-parental family (“empty nest”), married couple remains without children;
viii. Family that is getting old - nearing the end of the life cycle.

Each of these development stages of family life encompasses certain tasks (i.e., practical, emotional, relational) that family members resolve as possible crises and challenges that they can encounter in a certain stage and while transitioning to another one. During family life, stages of stability and change are shifting, while predictable and unpredictable development events are happening, and all these reflect on family functioning. These events represent horizontal (i.e., development) dimensions of the family system, while family tradition, relationship patterns, stances, expectations, and taboos represent vertical (historical) dimensions. When these two dimensions intersect in the family system, anxiety and stress increase, which are the largest in transitory dots, i.e., while transitioning from one phase of the life cycle to another, due to the complexity of family systems, which always face multiple dimensions simultaneously (Carter and McGoldrick, 1988). Family stress is defined as the “disturbance in the steady state of the family system” (Boss et al., 2017, p. 2) that leads to change (Masarik and Conger, 2017). How and to what extent family will adapt to stress, depends on the actual challenges that family members encounter, unresolved difficulties from previous phases of the life cycle, and previous generations (Carter and McGoldrick, 1988; McKenry and Price, 2000).

Knowledge of the family life cycle, dynamics, and stresses is significant for providing and securing family support, because it enables the creation of preventative and specific interventions, hypothesizing about the problems in family functioning, concentrating on family strengths, and systematic understanding of change within the family. In the context of family life cycle, it is also important to take into account the cultural and social context of the family and different family constellations, which provide a developmental path of the family that must not be generalized and understood as given for all families (Meyer, 1990).

5.2. Social context, poverty and discrimination

In order to perform with adequate skills for family support, it is important for family workers to acquire and apply knowledge on social context, poverty, and discrimination. In a social context, there can be factors that impact the availability and the way in which families will use and access support and help services. Previous research findings have shown that family access to services is influenced by: a lack of knowledge about services (McKay and Bannon, 2004), stigma, distrust of professionals, lack of social support (Hoagwood, 2005; Owens et al., 2002; McKay and Bannon, 2004), socioeconomic status, racial and ethnic variations (Kataoka et al., 2003), insufficient insurance coverage (Diala et al., 2000; Kataoka et al., 2003), and provider-related

obstacles such as lengthy waiting lists (Chow et al., 2003). When talking about the social context, it is important to take into account challenges that families are confronted with, such as increasing family diversity, work and family life, reconciliation, and securing children's well-being while fighting against rising poverty among families with children (Dolan et al., 2020). Policy models towards the family and children poverty and social isolation as an individual responsibility and implicate "a lack of individual educational competencies of parents" (Schiettecat et al., 2014, p. 10), although they are the result of unequal opportunities or structural inequalities (Dolan et al., 2020). Poverty is defined as a normative and ideological construct (Mestrum, 2011), not a neutral concept (Schiettecat et al., 2014). Discrimination is considered as unequal treatment towards a person or a group, based on their personal experience, the consequence of which is inequality in accessing and achieving certain rights and services (Thomsen, 2017). It can have different shapes and be present in different spheres of family members' lives. The literature indicates numerous consequences of poverty and discrimination on the family life (Lister, 2003; De Boyser, 2010; Gornick and Jäntti, 2012), so the support of the family should be directed at the prevention or reduction of these consequences (Spratt, 2009; Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020). Family workers help, support, and direct families that live in poverty and/or are discriminated against or are at a risk to achieving different rights, and taking into consideration attitudes and knowledge that workers have about poverty and discrimination is fundamental to giving them the necessary support (Lavee and Strier, 2018). When providing support, it is important to appreciate the social context and all above-mentioned obstacles that could influence the family's well-being (Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020).

5.3. Child development

Knowing theories and relevant ideas on child development, family support workers can foster the development of children and provide the appropriate and necessary support, in different ways, while they are growing up. Knowledge of these theories is an essential foundation for effective family support, and it is also necessary for professionals to be familiar with the specifics of family support.

Within child development, childhood is considered as a period where fastest changes and development occur (Taylor, 2004). Childhood experience has significant impact on self-experience, relations with others, and on the problems that we confront during our lifetime (Taylor, 2004). Development is considered epigenetic and the stages of development are not completely fixed, and include the potential for adaptation (Thomas, 2000). Development happens with the influence of the following factors: genetic material, the environment in which growth takes place, and individual's adaptive capacity that involves cognitive, emotional, and

social development (Thomas, 2000). From the beginning, children are moving through certain phases of development (i.e., infancy, childhood, and adolescence), each with specific tasks and involving different turning points in the development (Taylor, 2004; Dolan et al., 2006). Turning points in child development could be expected, normative, as well as unexpected (i.e., sudden) (Dolan et al., 2006). To improve the development, well-being, and safety of children and youth, it is critical that family support workers use their skills to provide good-quality and effective support to families and promote child development at the various stages and turning points that can lead to some difficulties.

5.4. Services and systems of support

The knowledge of services and systems of support is essential knowledge required to perform in family support. Family support is considered as a "set of activities and approaches to practice that stimulates positive informal social networks by integrated support programmes that combine statutory, voluntary and private services and duties" (Žegarac, 2017, p. 45). They have usually been secured in the family household and community, and have been characterized by flexibility, timeliness, and collaborativeness (Žegarac, 2017). Also, family support services involve the mobilization and development of formal and non-formal resources and support networks. Children's and families' needs determine the extent and nature of the services provided, so the first task in that procedure should be for family members to identify needs and for family workers to recognize the role and strengths of family members (Dewaney, 2013). It is significant for family support workers to know and to organize, provide and advocate for family support services and to support different aspects of the family functioning (Burgund, et al., 2021; Žegarac et al., 2021). Systems of support are an important element in the assessment of the needs, strengths, problems, and in the planning of support services necessary for the family to overcome the problem (Hepworth et al., 2013). Support involves all activities that professionals are dealing with, while the process of receiving and giving support involves information that enables family members to be seen and understood in the community (Cobb, 1976). It can be informal, when sources of support are extended to family, friends, and neighbours. It could also be semi-informal, when the source of support is the voluntary sector, neighbourhood-based community and voluntary organisations, while it is considered formal when support is provided by professionals, institutions, and services (Gilligan, 2000; Join-Lambert, 2016).

There are four main types of support (Pinkerton, 2000):

- Concrete support that involves practical acts of assistance between people;

- Emotional support that involves acts of empathy, listening and generally ‘being there’ for someone when needed;
- Advice support that involves a combination of information giving and sharing judgments;
- Esteem support that involves focusing on how the person respects another’s worth and communicates that to them.

6. Specific approaches necessary to perform core family support skills

For effective performance of the core family support skills, it is essential for workers from different settings to know a set of specific approaches such as: the whole family approach, strengths-based approach, relationship-based approach, and child-centred approach.

6.1. The whole family approach

The whole family approach relates to the direction of support towards the family with the intention to enable family members to promote their strengths and competencies. It actively involves family members in all the procedures, develops interventions for the family as a whole taking into consideration all of its members (not just the children), directs towards priorities and goals that define the family by itself, instigates and acknowledges the family’s choices and improves the quality of life for each family member (Turnbull et al., 2006; Dewaney et al., 2022). This approach is based on collaborative and partnership relations, between family members and family support workers on all system levels, namely in regard to cultural and other differences and needs for types and kinds of support by family members (Žegarac, 2017). The family is considered a part of a broader social system and the whole family approach acknowledges the factors in its environment that might influence the well-being of family members, with a special emphasis on empowerment, working in partnership, and strengthening formal and informal social networks (Devaney et al., 2022). The whole family approach is based on the following beliefs: in the child’s life, the family is the constant and not the professional, the family knows best what is necessary for its members, while family members could be helped most effectively by supporting the family as a whole. It highlights the importance of the family choice and decision-making in the provision of services, and also that family support workers must show respect and appreciation for the above mentioned (Dempsey and Keen, 2008). With this approach as a starting point, family support workers aim to engage parents, children, young

people and extended family and social networks to overcome intergenerational and multiple needs and difficulties. Their aim is to involve family members in active decision making and problem solving, without neglecting the individual needs of the members, with a focus on the family as a whole, instead of focusing only on individual family members (Hughes, 2010), recognizing parents as experts, as the ones who know their children and their needs best (Frost and Dolan, 2012).

6.2. Strengths-based approach

The strengths-based approach is based on the idea that family support workers focus on strengths, resources, and abilities of the family members rather than problems, deficits, and labels, in order to contribute to achieving development and prosperity (Kondrat, 2010). All families have a spectrum of strengths. According to this approach, strengths could be framed within a triangle with three points: C for competence, capacities, and courage; P for promise, possibility, positive expectations, and potential; and R for resilience, reserves, resources, and resourcefulness.

The basic principles underlying this approach are (Saleebey, 2009, pp. 15-18):

- Each individual, group, family, and community has strengths;
- Trauma, abuse, illness, and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity;
- Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change, and take individual, group, and community aspirations seriously;
- We best serve clients by collaborating with them;
- Every environment is full of resources;
- Caring, caretaking, and context care are essential to human well-being.

By starting from this approach, family support workers should focus on “what families successfully do” and on “viewing the positive behaviours of all clients by helping them see that problem areas are secondary to areas of strengths and that helpful solutions can come out of what they do well, based on successful strategies they use daily in their lives to cope with a variety of important life issues, problems, and concerns” (Glicken, 2004, p. 3). Also, they holistically, collaboratively, proportionately, and in multidisciplinary ways explore strengths, resources, and abilities of family members. The risk is perceived as an enabler, not as a barrier,

since it enables families to explore their opportunities, since it enables families to explore their opportunities and understanding the risk is essential to its effective management (Baron and Stanley, 2019). This helps family members use their strengths, abilities, resources, and possibilities in the best manner to achieve the set objectives.

6.3. Relationship-based approach

It is essential for family support workers to know and to rely on the relationship-based approach and on the relationship between family members and helpers as the foundation of good-quality practice with families and as a central aspect of their work (Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020). Creating positive helping and supporting relationships is key to improving outcomes and achieving goals when working with families (Cameron et al., 2013; Herrera-Pastor et al., 2020). This approach perceives and acknowledges family relationships, including the ones with family support workers, in a context where relationships are created and maintained, whereby the centrality of the relationship is key (Ruch, 2009).

The core characteristics of this approach are:

- Recognizing that each inter-personal encounter is unique;
- Understanding that human behaviour is complex and multi-faceted;
- Focusing on the inseparable nature of the internal and external worlds of individuals and the importance of integrated psycho-social as opposed to polarized individual or structural responses to social problems;
- Emphasizing ‘the use of self’ and the relationship as the means through which interventions are channelled (Wilson et al., 2008).

There is an understanding that emotionality is one of the characteristics of this approach because special attention is given to emotions and reactions of family members in relationships with the helpers (Bower, 2005). Starting from this approach, while applying family support skills, family support workers tend to establish and maintain relationships with family members from the first meeting, in order to improve the well-being of each family member and provide comprehensive support. Research data indicates that certain skills, necessary for applying this approach in the field of relationship-based early intervention, have similarities with family support skills discussed in previous chapters, such as: listening carefully, demonstrating concern and empathy, promoting reflection, observing and highlighting the parent/child relationship, respecting role boundaries, responding thoughtfully in emotionally intense interactions, and

understanding, regulating, and using one's feelings (Edelman 2004; Gilkerson and Ritzler, 2005).

6.4. Child-centred approach

To perform family support skills, it is important to focus on children and their needs, feelings, and requests in order to ensure their safety and well-being (Canavan et al., 2016). Family support involves providing and promoting well-being of each family member, including children. It is indicated in literature that a significant part of family support includes protecting children, promoting their well-being, and guaranteeing their rights, but on the other hand, when support is focused on children, family support is encompassed and provided as well (Devaney et al., 2022). In child-centred approach, children are considered as the centre in the family system and community resources, and that all the helpers' activities (assessment, planning, interventions) start with and are directed towards the children (Toros et al., 2013). Based on this approach, it is vital to actively involve children (adapted according to their age, maturity, and other characteristics) and to develop communication skills and acquire knowledge on different techniques tailored to children (Gearon, 2014). It is important to understand child experience and provide feelings of acceptance and respect, as much as of other family members, working with them but not for them (Toros et al., 2013).

7. Set of core personal traits of family support workers' qualities across different professions and settings

In order for family support workers to effectively perform skills and provide suitable and good-quality family support, it is important to possess core personal traits, which are considered congenital or acquired early, and which can be developed and improved through experiences, learning and layered self-development. These are integrity, commitment, and flexibility. These personal traits will be presented and explained below.

7.1. Integrity

As a personal trait, integrity is described in different ways and often identified with terms such as moral conscientiousness, moral accountability, moral commitment, and moral coherence. There is an understanding that integrity is a moral virtue, and as it is closely related to headings of conscience and good character (Audi and Murphy, 2006). It shows that integrity relates to

moral soundness, moral courage, will, and willingness to do what should be done. Two meanings of the term “integrity” are discussed in literature: integrational sense (i.e., integrity as a certain kind of unity in character) and aretaic sense (i.e., integrity is identified either with specific moral virtues or with moral virtue in general, that involves moral and other commitments) (Audi and Murphy, 2006). It is important for family support workers to possess integrity and to adhere to a coherent set of moral principles in working with families, as part of trustworthiness and doing their best (Schauber ,1996).

7.2. Commitment

Commitment is defined as caring deeply and willingness to act to overcome concerns connected with the work and to do as planned (Schauber, 1996). There is an understanding that commitment is an attitude that involves strong desire, willingness to exert high levels of effort conducting work, believing in, and accepting the values and goals of the work (Mowday et al., 1982). There are three types of commitment discussed in literature: affective commitment (relates to emotional attachment and involvement in the job), continuance commitment (awareness of the costs of work), and normative commitment (feeling the obligation to continue employment) (Meyer and Allen, 1990). A connection has been demonstrated between commitment and work-related characteristics and employee performance, satisfaction, and stay/leave job decisions (Ferris, 1981). For family support workers, the possession of commitment to support and help the family is essential for providing good-quality services.

7.3. Flexibility

Flexibility is considered as the ability to adjust one’s behaviour to interpersonal demands of a wide range of interpersonal situations and is one of personality characteristics (Paulhus and Martin, 1988). It implies that family support workers have a wide range of interpersonal responses and readiness to quickly adapt to different situations when working with families. Their responses and reactions should be adapted to the needs of family members and to the context.

8. Set of combination (amalgam) of family support workers’ qualities across different professions and settings

It has been demonstrated that a certain set of family support workers’ qualities is extremely important and necessary for providing support and help to families, but these qualities cannot

be named either skills or personal traits, so we have named them a combination (amalgam) because they represent a blend of different features (skills, personal traits, qualities) important for family support. Thereby, it is important for family support workers across different professions and settings to possess the following amalgams: ethical stance and conduct, empathy and compassion, engagement with family members and professionals, management of emotionally demanding situations, and non-judgmental stance. These amalgams are presented and explained below.

8.1. Ethical stance and conduct

Ethical stance and conduct involves ethical knowledge, skills, and values that adjust the work of family support workers to the needs, interests, values, and objectives of family members (Attewell, 1990; Mattingly et al., 2002).To achieve an understanding and application of ethical stance and conduct, and to facilitate making ethical and moral decisions, it is especially significant for family support workers to know bioethical principles, such as autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice (Gray and Webb, 2010). This involves the presence of challenges in the application of the ethical stance and conduct that can occur from the following needs: the need to balance different viewpoints, the need to address family issues while maintaining an individual focus; and the desire to promote genuine collaboration with different members of the system (Graham, 2005).

8.2. Empathy and compassion

Empathy and compassion encompass a set of different skills and personal qualities that are important for family support workers to possess since they have a significant role in interpersonal relations. A set of empathic skills were discussed previously while describing core family support skills. This amalgam is considered as part of the personality of family support workers that enables them with sensitivity to perceive the internal frame of reference of the other person, while also having accuracy and emotional components and meanings that are related to it, as if one were with the other person, but without the loss of the *as-if* stance (Rogers, 1959). Empathy is considered as the process of putting oneself in someone else's shoes and understanding the feelings and thoughts of another person and communicating this with that person (Hogan, 1969). Compassion is "an interpersonal process involving noticing, feeling, sensemaking, and acting that alleviates the suffering of another person" (Dutton et al., 2014, pp. 277-304). When we are compassioned, three important interrelated subprocesses are happening: noticing the suffering, feeling empathic concern, and acting to alleviate the suffering (Kanov et al., 2004).

8.3. Engagement with family members and professionals

Engagement with family members and professionals is an amalgam that enables family support workers to ensure active engagement of all participants in the work with families, which leads to better outcomes for the family (Xu et al., 2017). This involves the willingness of family support workers to recognize and actively involve family members in different roles. Engagement is influenced by family and parental factors and professional characteristics of family support workers (Kemp et al., 2009). Research data has shown that obstacles in engagement with family members and professionals could be: parents' fears, family resistance, conflicted family support worker's role, responsibility between ensuring child safety and supporting family reunification, and poor relationships between children's original and extended families (Michalopoulos et al., 2012; Schreiber et al., 2013). On the other hand, engagement with family members and professionals incites positive associations with family workers' competencies that are included by professionals, using effective communication skills, and having more emotional or concrete support for parents. It is important for family support workers to develop engagement with the family members because it can contribute to family members feeling empowered, supported, respected, and understood (Alpert and Britner, 2009).

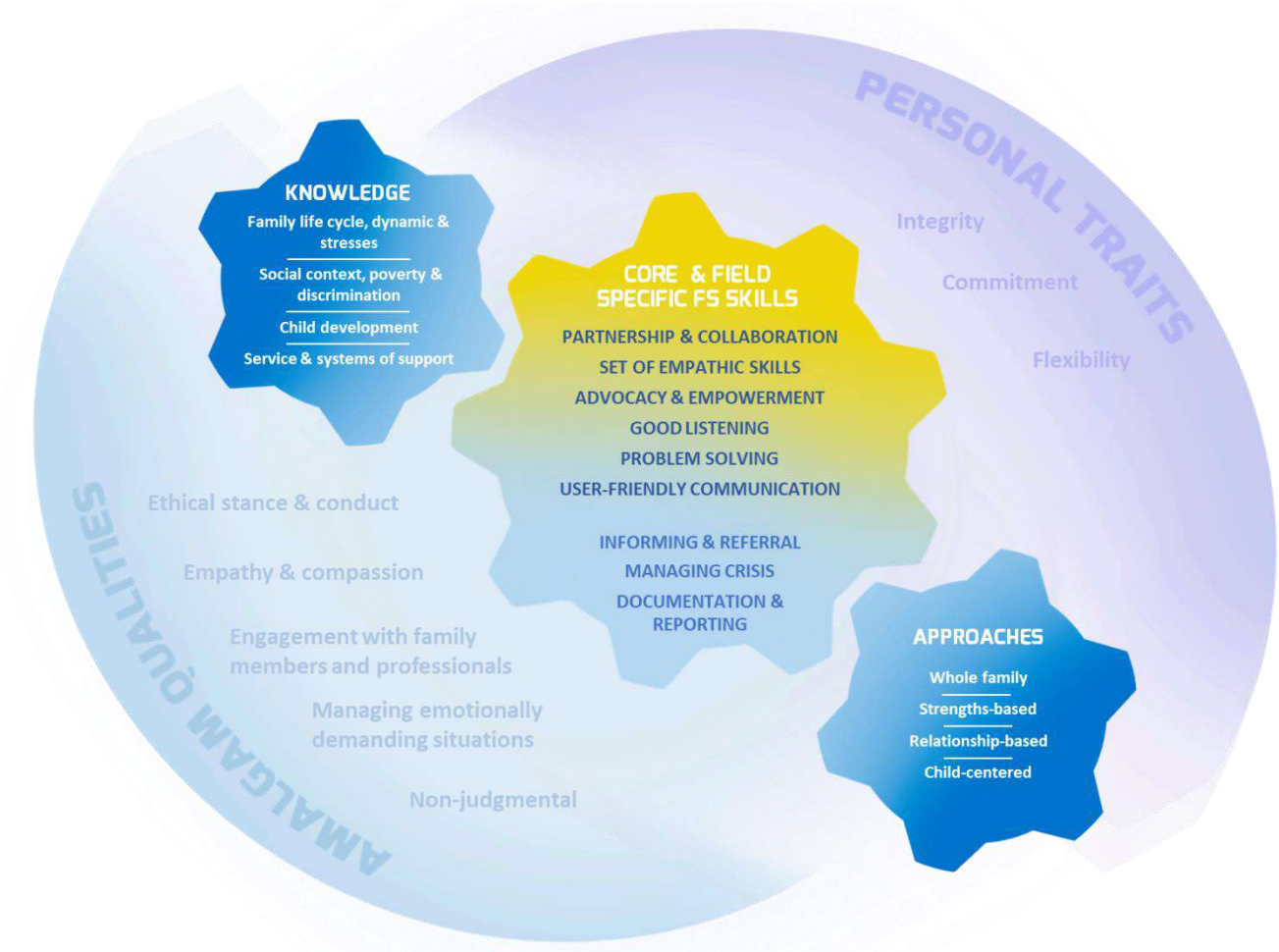
8.4. Managing emotionally demanding situations

To provide effective and high-quality family support, good management of emotionally demanding situations when they appear is important, and an integral part of working with families (Carminati, 2021). Managing emotionally demanding situations refers to working with emotions, and management of feelings, particularly in situations that are emotionally exhausting, and providing emotional support intended for bettering emotional well-being in relationships between different family members (Erickson, 1993; Simpson and Acton ,2013). This amalgam includes cognitive, somatic, and expressive actions directed at changing one's inward feelings and outward expressions (Hochschild, 1979). Working with emotions and managing emotionally demanding situations bears the risk of burnout for family support workers and it is important for them to possess skills, personal traits, and qualities necessary for burnout prevention and self-care (Grandey, 2000).

8.5. Non-judgmental

The non-judgmental amalgam is related to unconditional positive regard, accepting and acknowledging family members without condemnation and critics (Johnston, 1999). From a non-judgemental perspective, family support workers provide supportive interventions adapted to family members that must not be experienced as threatening, alienating, or demeaning. Such a position encompasses a low-key, local, non-clinical, unfussy, user-friendly approach.

Figure 3. *Model of family support skills*



9. Conclusion and recommendations

The presentation and systematization of definitions, explanations, and examples of behaviour for a set of core family support skills, necessary knowledge, theoretical approaches, personal traits, and a combination (amalgam) of family support workers' qualities across professions and settings (social welfare, education, mental health, medicine, law) are of considerable importance

for further development and improvement of family support in different areas. Content described in this catalogue seems to be essential for good-quality, effective, and efficient family support. It can be used for family support workers to identify, understand, apply, and improve their family support practice.

This catalogue may not elaborate on all important skills for family support practice. It is possible that other communication, relational, technical, and organizational skills are used by professionals and paraprofessionals in various areas of family support that did not emerge as critical in our previous work. The skills presented here have crystallized as core, regardless of professional background and practice area, in addition to the listed specific combinations of key skills in medicine, social welfare, education, mental health and law as fields of family support practice.

The development of a catalogue for family support skills provides a basis for further research, for broadening current and acquiring new knowledge on essential skills of family support workers, which contributes to further development of competencies for the family support arena. It is also significant to present and explicate other significant family support skills, such as skills of collecting, selecting, analyzing and interpreting information during risk and strengths assessment, decision-making and facilitation skills, planning, selection and implementation of interventions, teamwork and self-care skills, to name a few. Knowledge about protective factors and resilience of the family and surroundings, family diversity, child development and parenting styles is also fundamental. Future research on family support skills and competencies should be directed towards more comprehensive research of the above-mentioned skills and knowledge, since they were merely described here, but their influence in the quality and effectiveness of the family support practice requires further research. It is also relevant to embrace the voices of families and children in this knowledge base. This further opens up space for the improvement of pre- and in-service training of professionals and paraprofessionals, and the improvement of policies and practices in working with families.

The catalogue can be further used to popularize the field for practitioners, academics and researchers, advance training programmes and professional competencies, in addition to advocating for good-quality family services and support. The catalogue prospectively provides a basis for further research to improve practice and policy in the field of family support skills and for the professional development of practitioners.

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