



Family support workforce skills: Journeying towards a Catalogue

Report on the stakeholders' workshop on family support skills



- ▶ A family support workforce skill is a novel term which is intuitively recognized among academics, practitioners and researchers in various fields of family support. However, it seems that it is challenging to make clear distinctions, connections and interrelations with skills in other helping practices.
- ▶ When discussing family support skills, participation, strengths' perspective, empowerment, co-creation, relationship of mutual trust between family and professional(s) are regularly addressed. These seem to form a network of contexts and concepts for development of skills in family support practice.
- ▶ The structured group discussion with stakeholders, researchers and academics produced a list related to the family support skills clustered in six interrelated groups: strengths' perspective, traits and instrumental, communication, relationships and organisational skills which will inform the creation of a catalogue of family support skills.



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Context

This report presents key findings from stakeholders' workshops on family support skills. The workshop was held at the University of Algarve, Faro Portugal, on 28th of June 2022. The aim of the workshop was to open a process of collecting, mapping, organizing family support skills in an interactive dialogue with stakeholders and researchers from the field.

Workshop participants were seven academics and five stakeholders, from the European family support organisations.

Process

During the workshop, consensus building activity was used to explore and establish agreement on the description of the skills used in family support practice and its constituent characteristics. The consensus methodology involves the "use of a structured approach to arrive at a single statement, or set of statements, that all participants accept; or to identify any central tendency and spread of opinion regarding an issue" (Duncan, 2006:401).

The participants considered the question: What kind of skills professionals needs to have in order for families to feel and be supported?

Each participant was given time to work on formulating and articulating his/her comprehension which were written on sticker papers. Individual statements on family support skills were represented as:

- a co-creation process with families;
- a way to understand the changing needs of different families in order to empower them and ensure trust in the process of help and support;
- professional tools and capacities used in different organizational and institutional contexts;
- concrete skills - such as empathy, organization, planning skills and responsibility.

The stickers were then placed on the white board and the participants were guided to discuss, explain and negotiate their views about the specific skills. Some of the skills appeared several times, e.g., empathy was repeated 9 times, active listening 6 times,

teamwork, communication skills, listening and respect 4 times, responsibility, flexibility adaptability, trust, knowledge, problem solving, co creation and collaboration 3 times, and planning, reflection, non-judgmental, willingness, empowerment, positivism and patience 2 times.

The group process was used to encourage interactions and argumentation, while modifying and revising statements through negotiating the meaning. The facilitator directed the discussion so that participants could clarify their ideas, enabling grouping of the related statements around a broader category. The group was guided toward eliciting, refining, reviewing and confirming the answers into clusters. The process of sorting, negotiating and regrouping was repeated within the group until the consensus on how to name a particular category was reached.

Results

The products of the group discussion were clustered in 6 groups:

- strengths' perspective (e.g., empowerment, positive approach, resilience)
- traits (e.g., empathy, responsibility, flexibility)
- instrumental skills (e.g., also named technical, e.g., problem solving, digital literacy)
- communication skills (e.g., active listening, reflection, giving information)
- relationships skills (e.g., collaboration, relation building, respecting coworkers)
- organisational skills (e.g., teamwork, planning)

These findings correlate with the findings of the systematic literature review (Zegarac, et al., 2021) where the skills for family support were categorised into professional qualities, instrumental skills, and specific knowledge. We could argue that traits and strengths could be considered as qualities of professionals, while relationships skills and communication skills could be considered as instrumental skills. The consensus building arrived at an additional group of organisational skills that are general and could apply to different settings beyond family support.

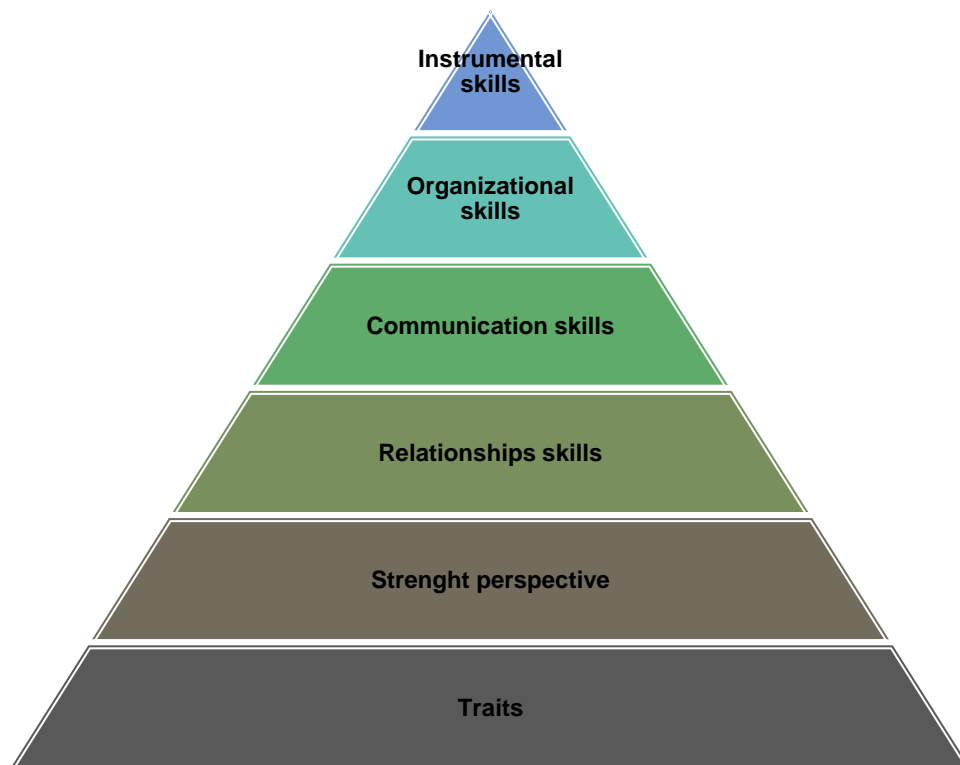
The process indicated that experts tend to recognise both traits and a strengths perspective as important and integral parts of family support skills. Negotiation and reflection about the skills that are clustered as showed above, spontaneously led the group to further discuss the interconnections between these categories. It was agreed that some of the skills

are interrelated, some of them could belong to both clusters and some are considered as core skills. This led to a variety of possible formations which were illustrated through several diagrams, as preliminary ideas how to conceptualize the relationship between categories.

The Pyramide of Family support skills

In the pyramid representation (Figure 1), the group placed traits and strengths' perspective in the base of the pyramid, while the relationships and communication skills are set in the centre. Instrumental and organisational skills are at the top of the pyramid, indicating how more fundamental skills can be put into practice. The rationale for this hierarchy was that skills are built on the traits and strengths and some of the skills, such as relationship and communication skills, are fundamental and more complex.

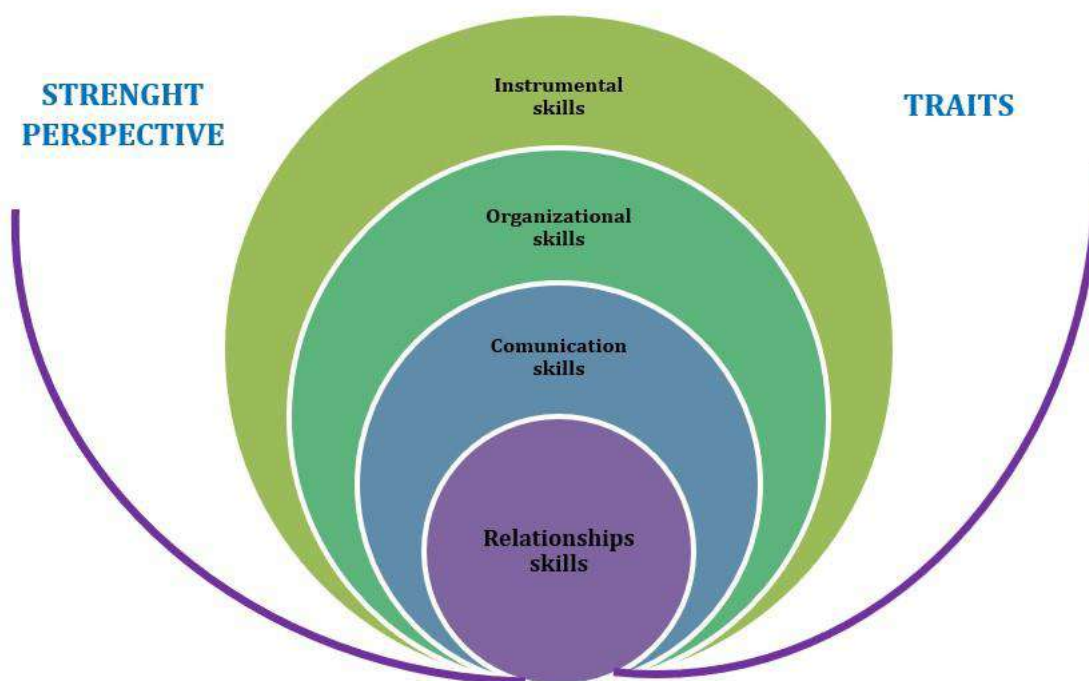
Figure 1. *The Pyramide of Family support skills*



The Onion diagram of Family support skills

In the Onion diagram (Figure 2), skills are positioned in concentric circles, showing the layers of the complete system, and the dependencies among parts. Relationship skills are at the very core, followed by communication skills, then organisational and instrumental skills. In this representation, strengths' perspective and traits are not included, since they are not dependent upon the other components in the onion diagram. They are rather preconditions for skilful family support practice.

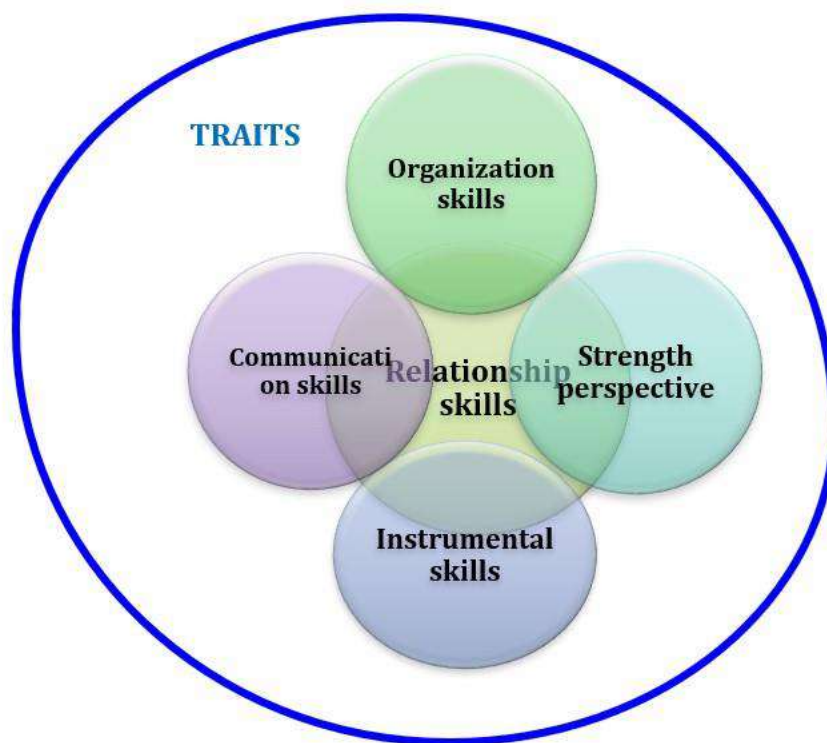
Figure 2. *The Onion diagram of Family support skills*



The Venn diagram of Family support skills

Intersection of skills was portrayed in Venn formation (Figure 3), where the relationship as core skills were positioned in the centre around which strengths' perspective, communication, organisation and instrumental skills partly overlap. Traits, as a broader concept, represent the foundation and a prerequisite for developing and performing other groups of family support skills.

Figure 3. *The Onion diagram of Family support skills*



The visual representations can be viewed from different standpoints, where each of them only partially reflects the complexity of the system. Hierarchy perspectives poorly explain the position of complex skills that combine other skills; Onion structure does not recognize

overlapping of skills, as well as relationships with strengths' perspective and personal traits. It seems that the Venn diagram captures this complexity in a more promising manner, but further deliberation is needed. It could be argued that theoretical and professional knowledge and experience of individual participants informed different perspectives on family support workforce skills, while the group process helped integrate these perspectives towards as future family support skills categorisation.

Next steps

The stakeholders' workshop findings and products will inform and inspire the next steps in cataloguing family support skills. The process of generating, debating and negotiating of ideas from this workshop is embedded in the Delphi study with a panel of family support experts from Europe, to be conducted in autumn 2022. In this way, we expect to form a valid foundation for further conceptualization of family support skills.

Concluding messages from the workshop

- There is a need for communication and exchange between different sectors and professions working in the family support practice and research in order to better identify, elaborate and synergize core and other skills and their use in different family support settings.
- A need has been recognized to establish sound definitions and classifications regarding skills in family support. It is also necessary to clarify interrelations between key qualities for the best possible family support practice. This will enable development of programs for advancement of professionals' and paraprofessionals' skills.
- It is crucial to reach and acknowledge voices of all relevant actors: families, children, practitioners, activists, policy makers, researchers and academics in the field, in order to develop common understanding of skills needed for genuine family supportive practice.