



## Session 3

# Core Principles of Working with Families at Risk



SOS CHILDREN'S  
VILLAGES



# Session 3: Core Principles of Working with Families at Risk

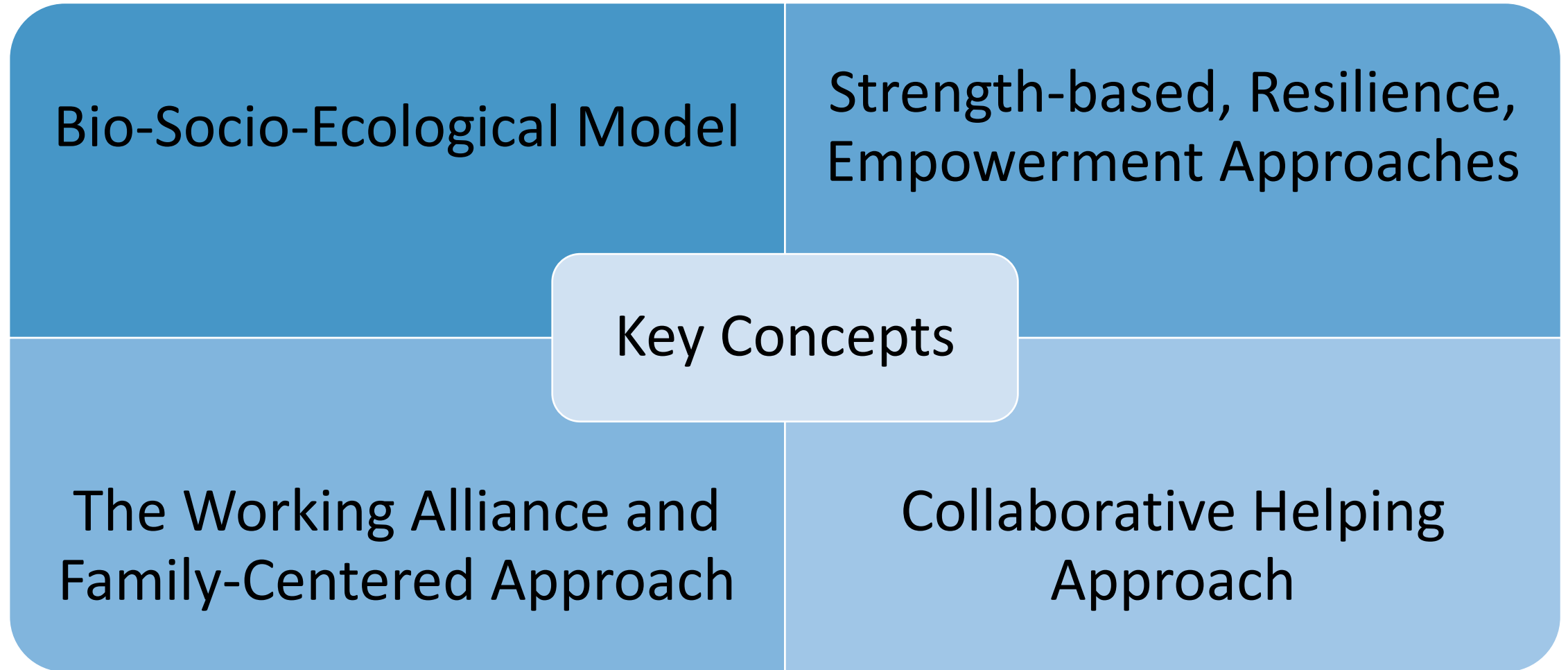
## Speaker



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University School of Social  
Work*



# Approaches for Strengthening Families at Risk

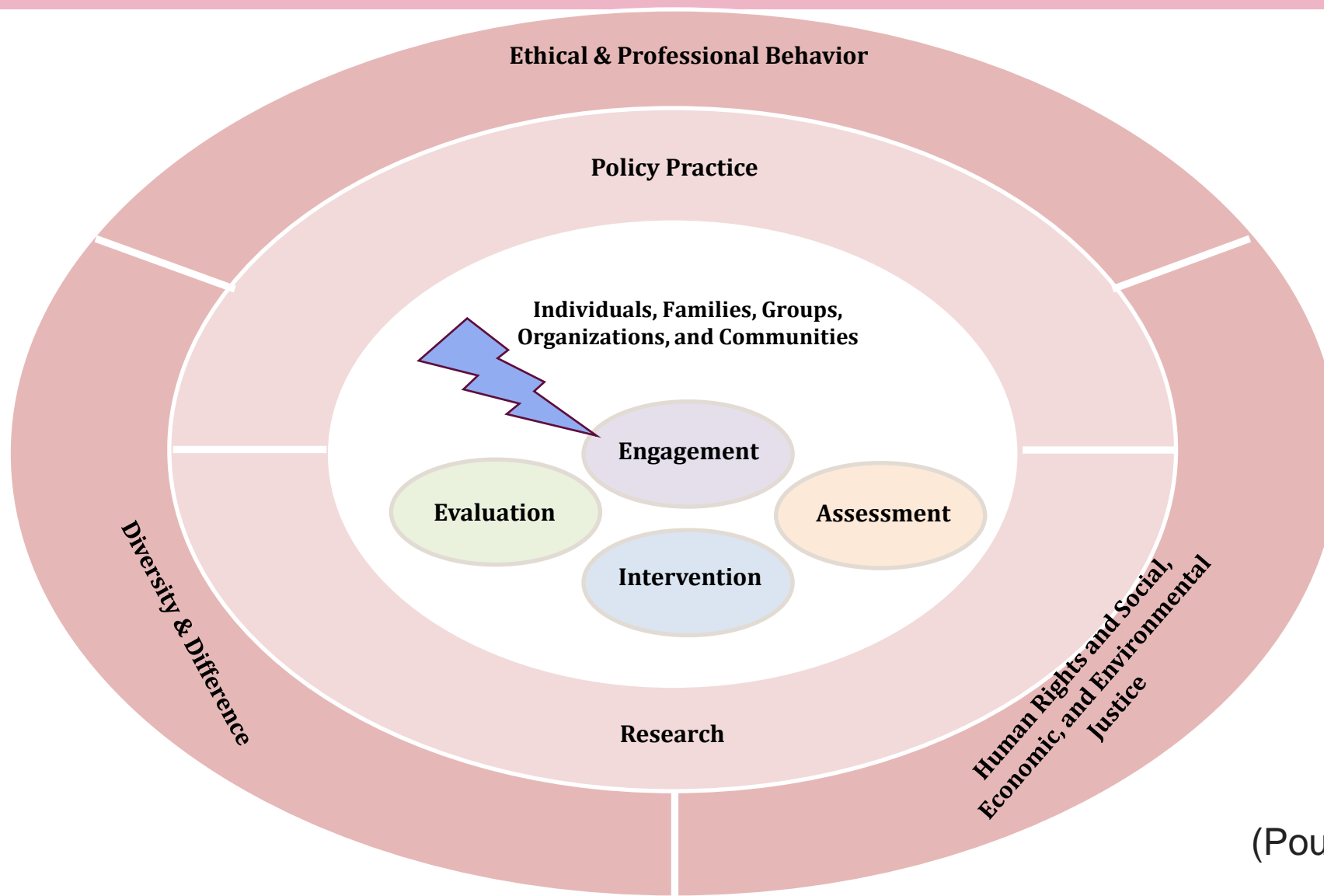


# Key Qualities of Effective Social Service Workers

What qualities, skills, or abilities do you have that support your work with families or people at risk?

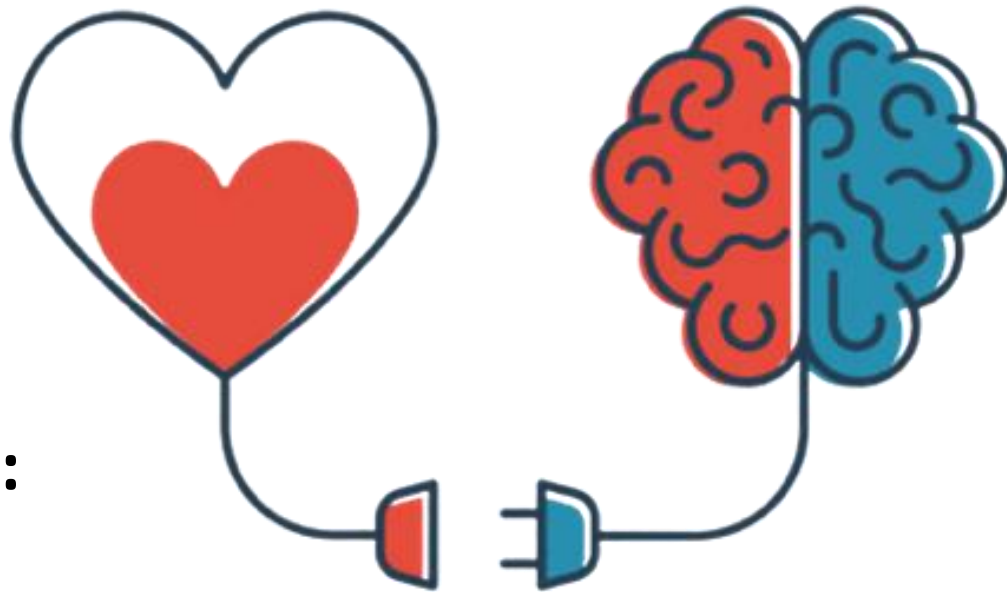


# The Core Social Service Workforce Competencies Map



(Poulin & Matis, 2015)

# Heart-set and Mindset



## **Relational Skills:**

- Active Listening
- Empathy
- Cultural Competence
- Communication Skills, etc.

## **Technical Skills:**

- Assessment
- Data analysis
- Case management
- Crisis interventions
- EBP interventions, etc.



Client Linda: Two Narratives

# The Case of Linda

Linda, a client at a local mental health clinic, is well-known among the staff. She is a single parent with three children, each from different fathers who are not in their lives. Linda's background includes growing up in an abusive, alcoholic family and multiple foster homes. She has a long history of drug use, experiences severe mood swings, and has an explosive temper. Known as a "frequent flyer" for her routine crisis calls, clinic staff are concerned about her parenting and describe her as a "help-rejecting, hostile borderline in denial."

Adapted from: Madsen, 2013



# The case of Linda - Reframe

Linda is a trauma survivor whose childhood was a constant battle for survival. Often overwhelmed by feelings of shame and humiliation, she sometimes turns to substances to cope. Stemming from her own traumatic experiences and her parents' failure to protect her, Linda is extremely protective of her children. She has had many negative interactions with helping professionals, contributing to her volatile and challenging behavior with clinic staff. Despite these challenges, the staff recognizes the intensity of Linda's emotions as an opportunity to enhance their skills in helping clients with strong feelings.



Adapted from: Madsen, 2013

# The Power of Perspective Shift

- Reframing "problematic behavior" as a "trauma response" shifts our view from judgment to understanding.
- Language shapes how we perceive clients. Describing Linda as a "trauma survivor" fosters empathy.
- Compassionate language enhances our connection and support, strengthening therapeutic relationships.
- Empathetic communication is key to engaging with families facing challenges.



# Families at risk in larger systems

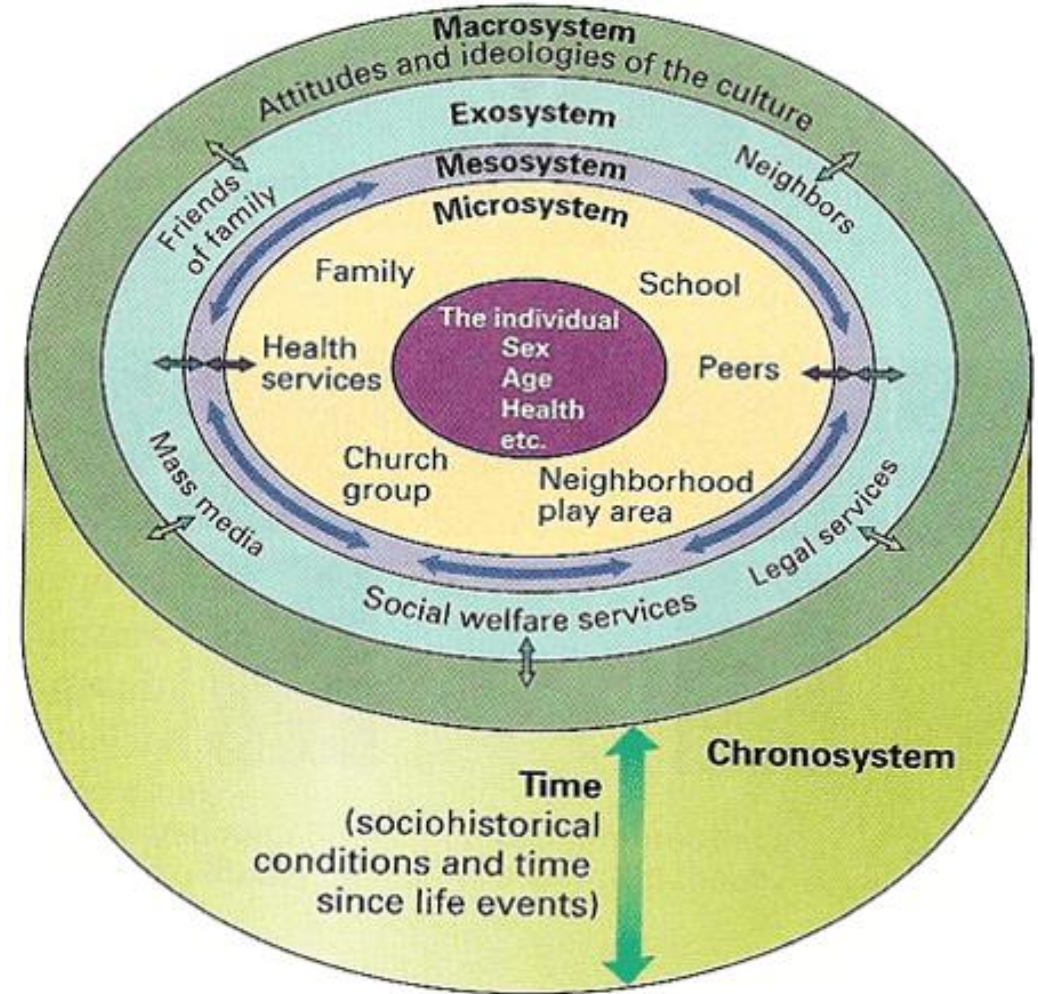
- Families often engage with larger systems in problematic ways.
- They may feel powerless in influencing these interactions.
- Some families maintain autonomy, while others, like Linda's, feel dominated by external decisions.

(Colapinto, 1995)



# Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Systems Model

- Provides a framework to understand multifaceted influences on at-risk families like Linda's.
- Analyzes interactions from immediate surroundings (microsystem) to broader societal attitudes (macrosystem).
- Helps social workers identify challenges and opportunities, showing how systems affect family needs and services.
- Guides targeted interventions addressing both individual and systemic factors.



# Strength-based, Resilience and Empowerment Approaches



resilience  
empowerment  
strengths

- **Resilience:** Linda's family can adapt and recover despite challenges, focusing on their strengths.
- **Strength-Based Approach:** Recognizes positive elements, like support from friends or family, to help improve their situation.
- **Empowerment:** Highlighting strengths allows Linda and her children to actively participate in setting goals and seeking support.
- **Adaptation & Growth:** Challenges become opportunities for growth, strengthening relationships and coping skills.
- **Supportive Relationships:** Building supportive connections, both within and outside the family, fosters resilience and empowerment.

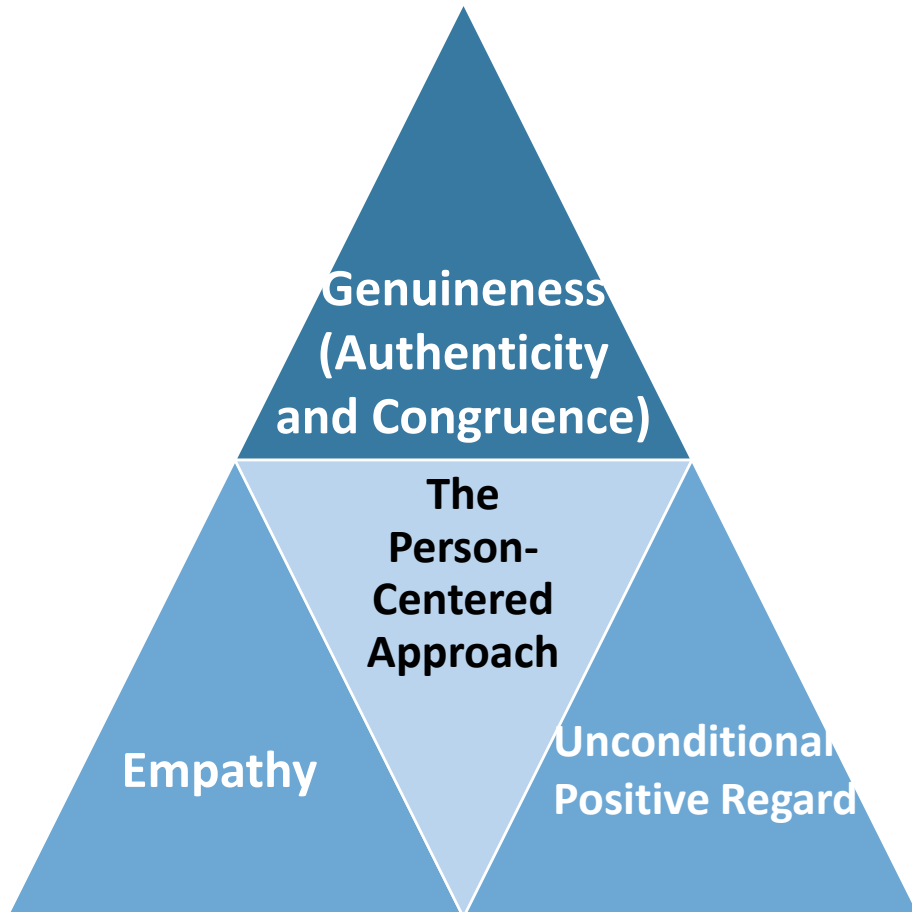
# The Working Alliance

- The Working Alliance is a collaborative relationship between a client and a social service worker, characterized by the quality and strength of their interaction, aimed at achieving well-being goals.
- The Working Alliance is dynamic and ongoing, rooted in mutual collaboration between the client and the social worker. It is based on clearly agreed-upon goals and tasks to achieve desired outcomes.

(Adapted from Egan, 2013)



# Client-Centered Approach (Carl Rogers)



- When the helping professional is genuine, accepting, and empathic, the client:
- Understands and integrates repressed aspects of themselves.
- Becomes more like the person they aspire to be.
- Gains self-confidence, self-direction, and self-expression.
- Develops greater understanding and acceptance of others.
- Copes with life's problems more effectively and comfortably.

(Rogers, 1967)

# Importance of interpersonal skills: Insights from Research

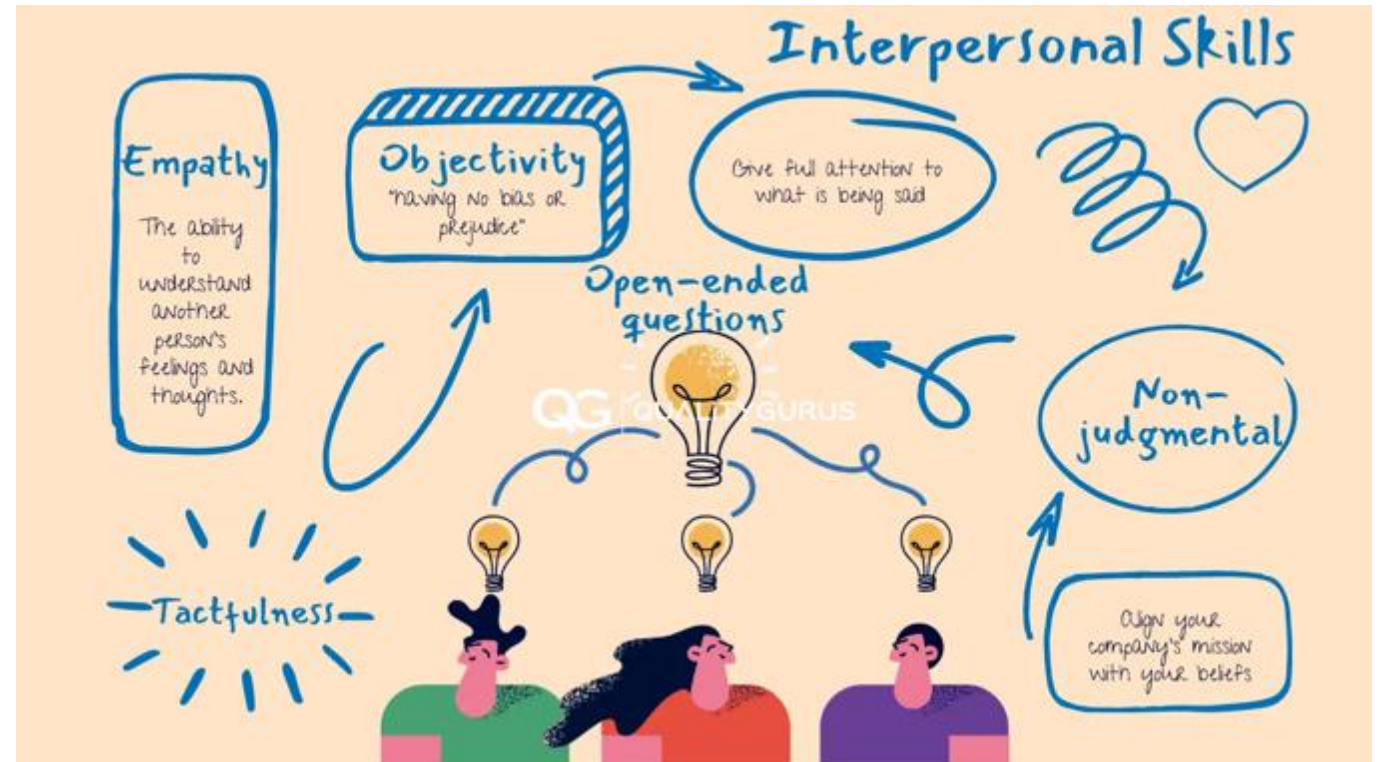
- Research shows that client outcomes vary significantly based on social service providers' interpersonal skills, not age, experience, or theoretical orientation.
- Some social service providers with low levels of empathy and interpersonal skills may actually harm their clients, rather than just being ineffective.
- It matters both **what** you do and **how** you do it.



(Miller & Moyers, 2021)

# Eight Interpersonal Skills of Effective Social Service Workers

- Accurate empathy
- Acceptance
- Positive regard
- Genuineness
- Focus
- Hope and expectation
- Evoking
- Offering information



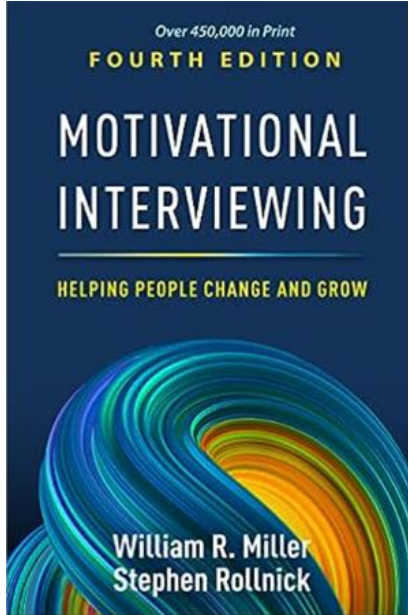
(Miller & Moyers, 2021)

# Mastering Interpersonal Skills for Better Client Outcomes

- Experience alone doesn't improve client outcomes; **deliberate practice** does.
- Deliberate practice involves intentional activities aimed at enhancing skills through repetition and refinement.
- Regular feedback/ supervision combined with deliberate practice improves both interpersonal skills and client outcomes.
- Interpersonal skills critical for effective client engagement can be developed through this focused practice approach.

(Miller & Moyers, 2021)

# Master Motivational Interviewing (MI) Skills

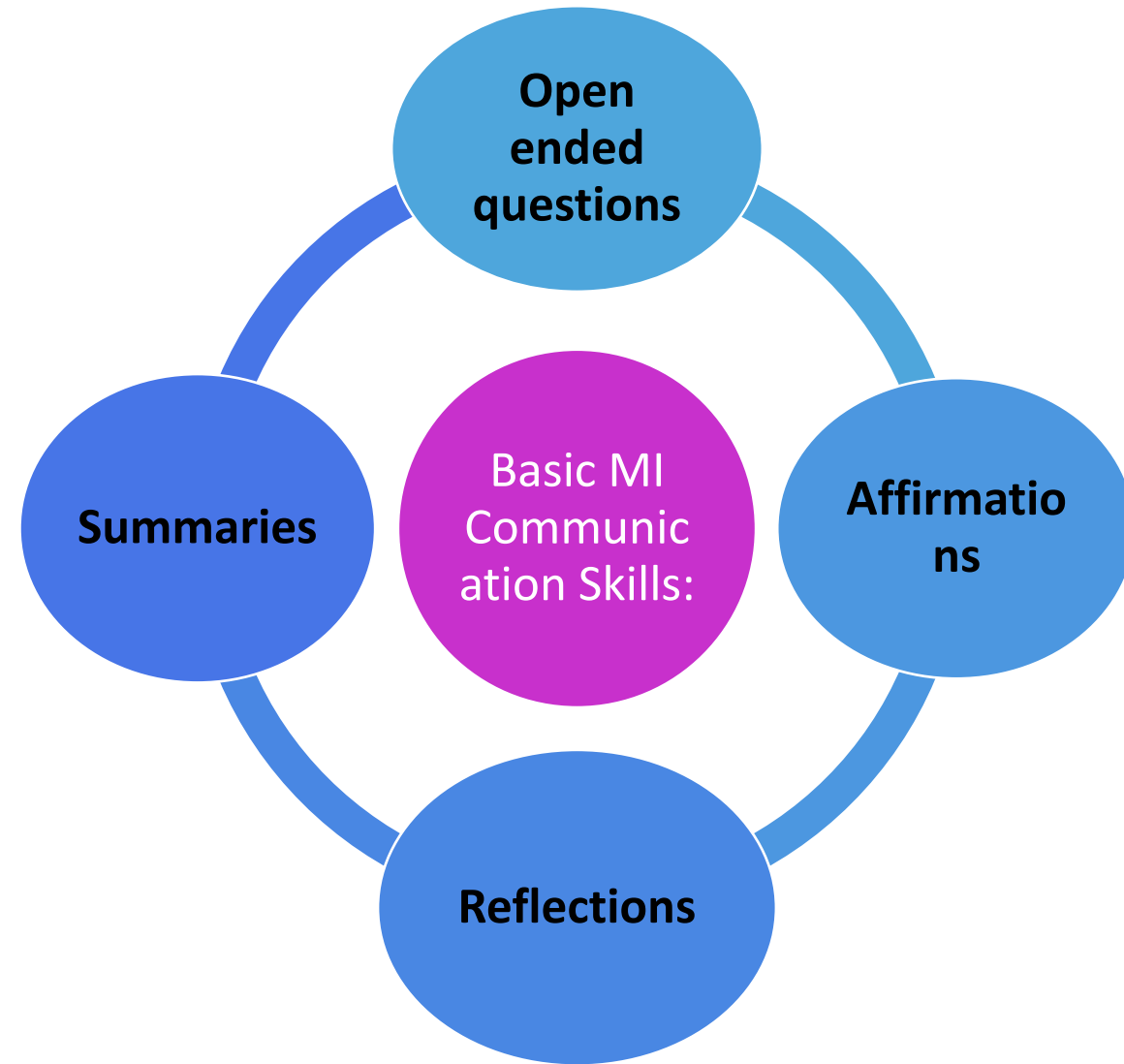


*“Motivational interviewing— a particular way of talking with people about change and growth to strengthen their own motivation and commitment”*

(Miller & Rollnick, 2023)

*MI is a collaborative conversational style for strengthening a person’s own motivation for commitment and change*

(lay definition, Miller & Rollnick, 2013)



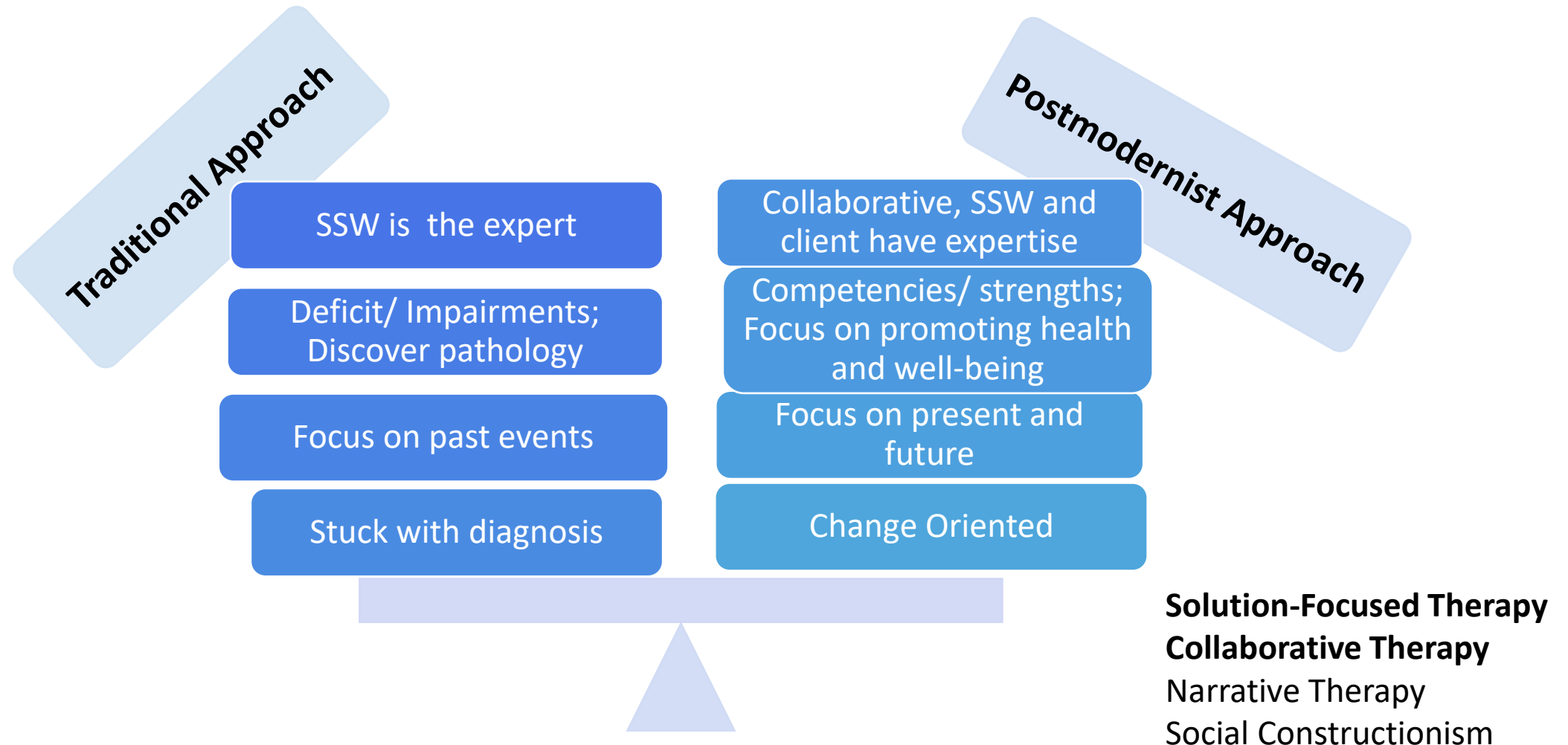
# Effective Social work practice with families: Research data

- Integrates clients' views on relationships, goals, and methods
- Tailors services to clients' cultural backgrounds and preferences
- Focuses on future-oriented strategies rather than problem causes
- Highlights clients' strengths and resources
- Utilizes hope to drive positive change
- Adapts methods to align with clients' beliefs about change

(Bertolino & Schultheis 2015)



# Traditional vs Postmodernist Approaches in Working with Families



# The Importance of Relational Stance (Collaborative Therapy)

- Shift the focus from "*who*" we are with clients to "*how*" we are with them
- Prioritize *how* services are provided, not just *what* is provided.
- Reduce hierarchy; collaborate with families, not just as experts.
- Families embrace suggestions when they feel understood and supported.
- Avoid patterns that fuel resistance.

## **Critical Principles**

- Not-knowing - curiosity
- Respectful listening
- Shared inquiry
- Collaboration
- Transparency
- Non-hierarchical
- An emphasis on strengths

(Madsen, 2007)

# Effective Practices for Working with At-Risk Families: Never get in a power struggle



"Dancing" Vs. "Wrestling"

# Becoming an “Appreciative Ally”

- Align with clients to make them feel supported—like we are "on their side.”
- Maintain our own values and beliefs while working with clients.
- Actively seek qualities in each client that deserve respect and appreciation to enable meaningful work.
- Strive to understand the context of a client’s actions with curiosity.

(Madsen, 2007)

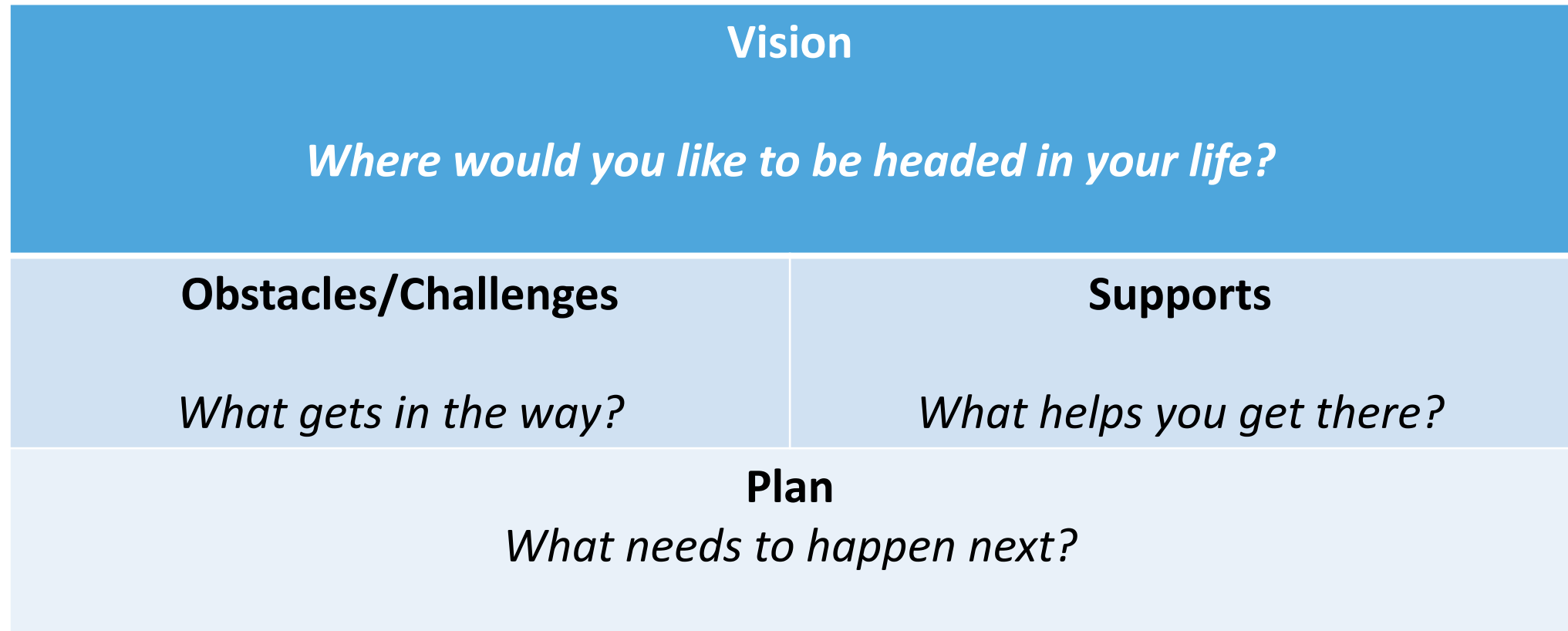


# Client as the Driver



Clients are in the driver's seat, steering their own journey towards change. As social service workers, we provide guidance from the passenger seat when needed, respecting clients' expertise in their own lives. Our role is to empower them with the necessary tools and knowledge to navigate their path effectively.

# Collaborative Helping Maps



***Questions serve as interventions, creating new experiences and opening up avenues for different possibilities.***

# Conclusion and Recommendations

- Recognize how societal and community factors affect families (e.g., Bronfenbrenner's model).
- Wear a strength-based lens to build resilience in at-risk families.
- Build collaborative, respectful relationships with families, prioritizing their perspectives.
- Partner with families to focus on their strengths and goals, aiming for positive futures.
- Deliberately practice interpersonal and relational skills. Train staff in approaches like Motivational Interviewing and Collaborative Helping to enhance outcomes.
- Invest in the social services workforce with professional development, emotional support, and resources to prevent burnout and turnover.
- Apply these principles consistently across all services for maximum impact.

# Questions, Thoughts, Comments...?



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