



NC DEPARTMENT OF  
**HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES**

**Division of Social Services**

## **North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services STEP Up: Skills Training for Experienced Professionals**

### **Participant Workbook Module Six: Foundations of Effective Practice**

**June 2026**



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KNOWLEDGE®**

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## Instructions

This course was designed to guide child welfare professionals through the knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed to engage with families in need of child protection services. The workbook is structured to help you engage in the lesson through reflection and analysis throughout each module of training. Have this workbook readily available as you go through each module to create a long-lasting resource you can reference in the future.

If you are using this workbook electronically: workbook pages have text boxes for you to add notes and reflections. Due to formatting, if you are typing in these boxes, blank lines will be “pushed” forward onto the next page. To correct this, when you are done typing in the text box, you may use the delete key to remove extra lines.

## Training Overview

STEP Up: Skills Training for Experienced Professionals is designed to strengthen and refine the knowledge, skills, and behaviors of child welfare professionals through structured, practice-focused learning.

Training sessions are intentionally designed to support active engagement, reflection, and application. Each module includes a combination of lecture, guided discussion, individual practical application, and collaborative debrief. This structure allows participants to connect new learning to their existing experience and apply concepts directly to their daily practice.

Attendance and participation are essential to the learning experience. If an emergency prevents attendance, participants are responsible for notifying the trainer and their supervisor as soon as possible and developing a plan to address missed content.

### Learning Expectations

STEP Up builds on prior experience in child welfare practice. Participants are expected to:

- Engage actively in discussions and activities
- Reflect on their current practice and identify areas for growth
- Apply learning to real-world scenarios
- Collaborate with peers to strengthen practice and shared understanding

### Transfer of Learning

A core component of STEP Up is the application of learning to practice. Throughout the training, participants will engage in structured reflection and practical application activities designed to support transfer of learning.

Participants will:

- Reflect on how new concepts align with their current work
- Identify specific actions to strengthen their practice
- Apply learning between sessions, when applicable

- Engage in peer discussion and collaborative problem-solving
- Supervisors and ongoing professional supports play a critical role in reinforcing learning and supporting continued development in the workplace.

**All matters as stated above are subject to change due to unforeseen circumstances, and with approval.**

## STEP Up Module Six Learning Objectives

| <b>Module 6</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Foundations of Effective Practice</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <p>Upon completion of this course, learners will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Apply strategies to build effective, respectful relationships with children and families from different backgrounds, supporting the child's identity and continuity.</li><li>• Demonstrate the ability to conduct family-centered family and risk assessments and develop service plans and interventions that align with the values and practices of the families they serve.</li><li>• Identify and reflect on their own background and values and explain how these personal factors influence their perceptions and interactions in child welfare settings.</li></ul> |

## Module Six Agenda

### **Module Six: Foundations of Effective Practice**

**Module Timing: 180 Minutes**

Welcome

Section 1: Self Awareness and Its Impact on Practice

Section 2: Responsive Assessment and Engagement

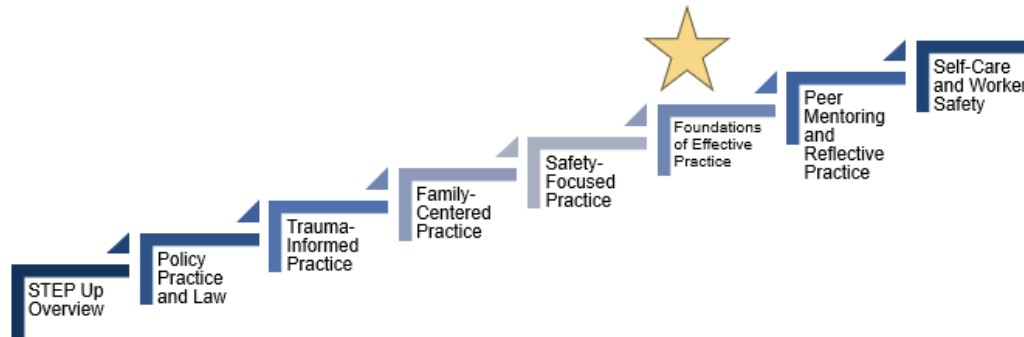
Section 3: Establishing Trust in Respectful Contexts

Section 4: Individual Practice and Application

Section 5: Debrief and Collaborative Practice

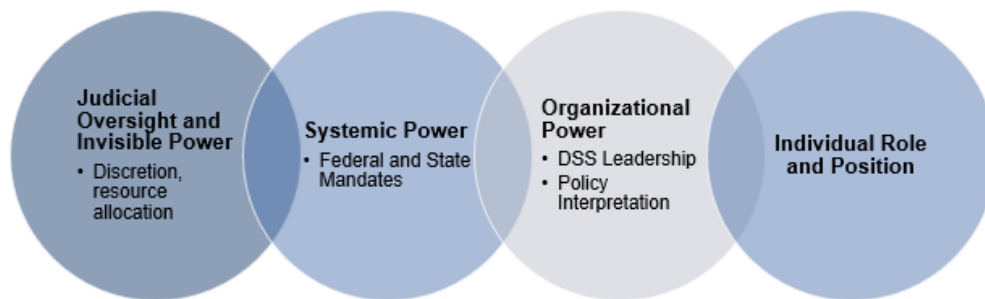
## STEP Up: Skills Training for Experienced Professionals. Module Six: Foundations of Effective Practice

### STEP Up Course Series Outline and Structure



## Section 1: Self Awareness and Its Impact on Practice

### Understanding Power Dynamics in Child Welfare



Power can be obvious or covert, formal or informal.

Power should be a tool for partnership, not control. Ethical leadership means balancing authority with collaboration through transparent communication, shared decision-making, and reflective supervision.

#### Notes

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## Strategies for Self-Reflection



### Identity Mapping

Identity mapping helps you visualize your personal and professional identities, roles, experiences, and affiliations, and consider how they influence your approach to families and decision-making.

### Positionality Statement

A positionality statement is a short reflection on where you hold influence within the system. Think about how your role amplifies or mitigates systemic power.

### Reflective Questioning

Reflective questioning surfaces hidden influences. Reflective questioning can be added to your daily practice, can be done before, during and after a visit or interaction. Reflective practice is critical to on-going growth as a child welfare caseworker.

### Critical Incident Review

Critical incident analysis uses a structured framework to reflect on challenging situations by examining what happened, individual and team responses, underlying dilemmas, and learning gained.

### Power Mapping

Power mapping helps you visualize systemic, organizational, and personal sources of influence.

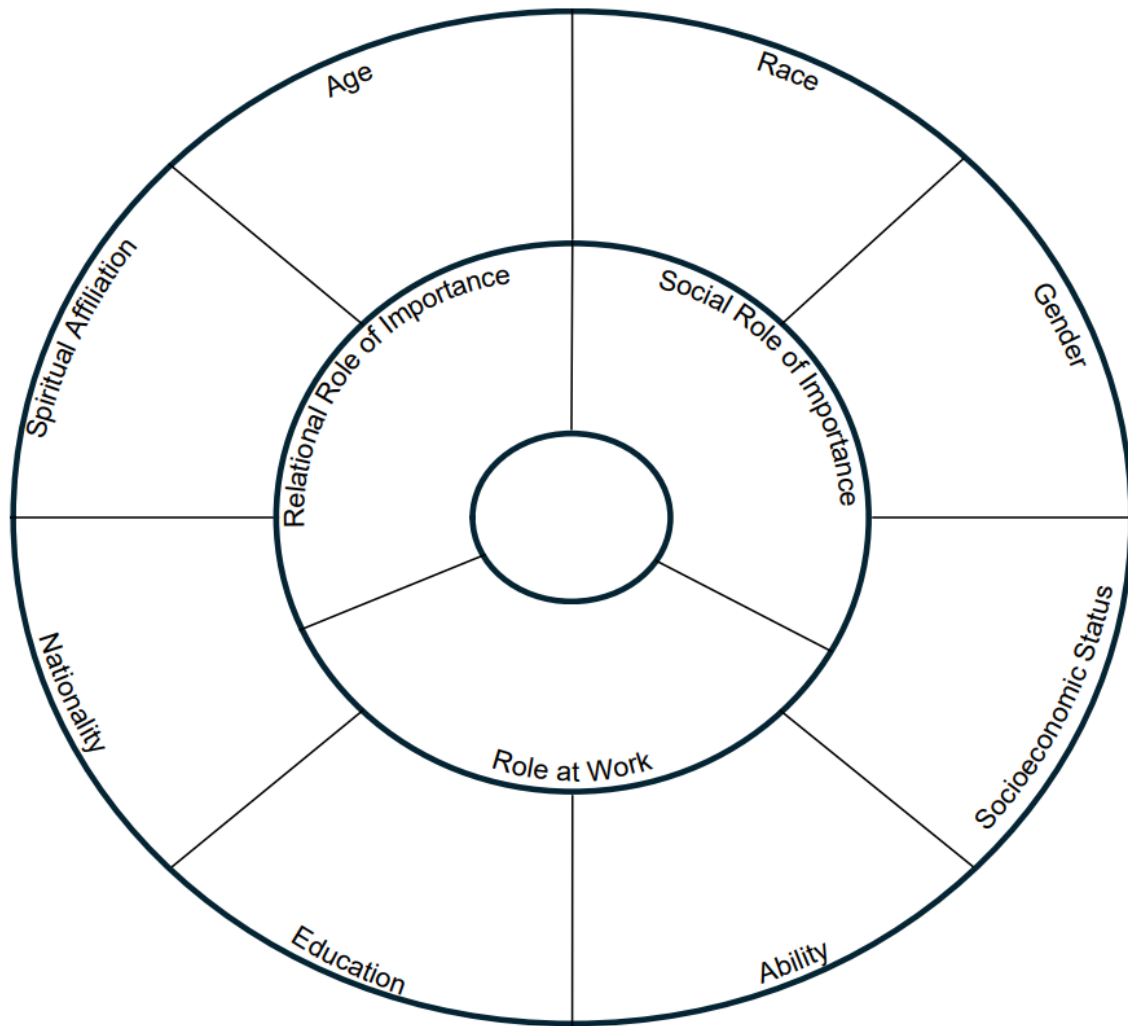
There is further guidance on these Self-Reflection Strategies in this workbook.

### Notes

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### Handout: Identity Map

An Identity Map is a visualization of personal and professional identities.



### Handout: Positionality Statement

A positionality statement is a reflection on our own positionality in regard to child welfare work. It is an explanation of our identity, privileges, and any potential biases that could influence your work.

Positionality statements help us become conscious of our own subjectivity and consider how it might shape our work within a particular context.

#### **Example Positional Statement:**

I am a 35-year-old African American male living in the United States. I was born into a family with significant social and financial status. I hold a bachelor's degree in education and a master's degree in social work. I have been married for 10 years. As a Permanency Planning Supervisor, I bring the experience of my cultural heritage and my professional development to my work. I acknowledge my privileged access to certain resources and strive to be aware of my own biases and recognize how they may shape my work with staff and families of different socioeconomic and marital statuses.

**Directions:** When you have time and are ready to process what you have learned from completing an Identity Map, develop your Positional Statement.

#### **Your Positional Statement**

### Handout: Reflective Questioning

Reflective questioning involves asking questions to examine hidden influences in practice.

Reflective questioning prompts:

- Based on my identity, what assumptions may I have brought into the interaction?
- What identities of mine were most “active” in this moment, and how did they influence my responses?
- What assumptions did I make about the family’s choices, behaviors, or priorities?
- What forms of power did I hold in this interaction?
- How might the family have experienced my power in this moment?
- In what ways did I use my authority to promote partnership? In what ways might it have limited it?
- How do my values shape my interpretation of policy?
- What alternative explanations might exist for what I observed or heard?
- What might the family say about the interaction?
- Where might I have filled in gaps with my own interpretation rather than the family’s voice?
- How might the family describe their level of choice, voice, and participation in this interaction?
- How did I check for understanding or invite the family’s perspective?
- What meaning did I add to the interaction and why?
- In what ways might system involvement itself be impacting the family’s behavior or responses?
- How might similar behaviors be interpreted differently for families with different identities?
- How did my language, tone, and pacing influence the interaction?
- Did I create space for the family to ask questions, challenge decisions, or express disagreement?
- How accurately does my documentation reflect the family’s words versus my interpretation?
- How might the family feel if they read this documentation?
- What details did I prioritize, and what might I have minimized or excluded?
- What might you do differently in the interaction or documentation next time?
- What would “doing this differently” look like in observable, behavior-specific terms in my next interaction?

Reflective questioning can be added to your daily practice, can be done before, during, and after a visit or interaction. Reflective practice is critical to ongoing growth as a child welfare caseworker

### Handout: Critical Incident Review

Critical incident analysis uses a structured framework to reflect on challenging situations by examining what happened, individual and team responses, underlying dilemmas, and learning gained.

While critical incidents are often assumed to involve danger or crisis, less serious situations can be equally significant and offer important insights for professional learning and growth. The process emphasizes understanding systemic and individual factors, encourages professional curiosity, centers the child's voice, and fosters psychological safety to support learning and improve future practice without assigning individual blame.

#### Critical Incident Review: Process Overview

- 1. Account (What happened)**
  - Describe the incident and its context
  - Clarify the purpose of the work and why the incident was significant
- 2. Response (Immediate reactions)**
  - Reflect on your emotional and professional response
  - Consider how others responded and whether reactions were expected
  - Note whether blame or explanations were sought too quickly
- 3. Dilemma (Exploration and questioning)**
  - Identify key dilemmas or tensions raised by the incident
  - Examine underlying assumptions, values, biases, and decision-making
  - Consider interprofessional implications and whether the family's voice was heard
  - Assess how risks were understood and evaluated
- 4. Learning (Reflection and insight)**
  - Identify what was learned about yourself, others, and organizational practice
  - Reflect on information sharing, professional curiosity, and attention to the child or adult's voice
  - Consider what additional support or resources could enhance learning
- 5. Outcomes (Future practice)**
  - Identify changes or improvements for future practice
  - Consider implications for individuals, teams, and the organization
  - Apply learning to strengthen systems, not assign blame
- 6. Organizational and Systems Considerations**
  - Recognize the role of organizational norms and staff anxiety in limiting learning
  - Focus on systemic factors rather than individual fault
  - Promote psychological safety to encourage open discussion and learning from errors

### Handout: Power Map

To create a Power Map, you need to analyze the following information:

Step 1: Identify the problem you are trying to fix or the decision that needs to be made.

Step 2: Identify the main stakeholders. These stakeholders generally include:

- Those responsible for creating the problem;
- Those who have the power to fix the problem but are not doing so;
- Those who are geographically relevant to the issue;
- Those who are working to fix the problem;
- Don't forget to include yourself and other child welfare staff involved.

Step 3: Plot where all the stakeholders stand:

- Draw out a version of “Power Mapping: Axes” (see the example below).
- Put each stakeholder in a circle in the correct quadrant depending on their influence and power over the problem or decision, and whether they agree or disagree in relation to you.

Step 4: Identify your problem or decision needed and add it to the power map in a circle.

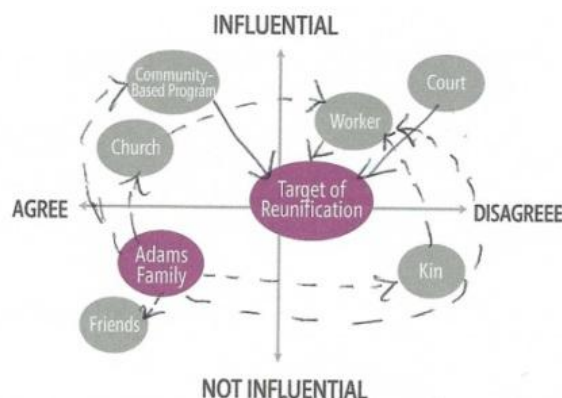
Step 5: Map the power relationships around your primary problem or decision by adding arrows (dark or dotted lines) to those who directly or indirectly influence the problem or decision (see the example below).

Step 6: Use this analysis to plan how to acknowledge the power differential and how to engage those feeling disempowered to have more voice and choice.

Step 7: Revisit and revise:

- At key junctures in the case, and as power shifts or you learn more about who holds it, revisit and revise these maps as needed.

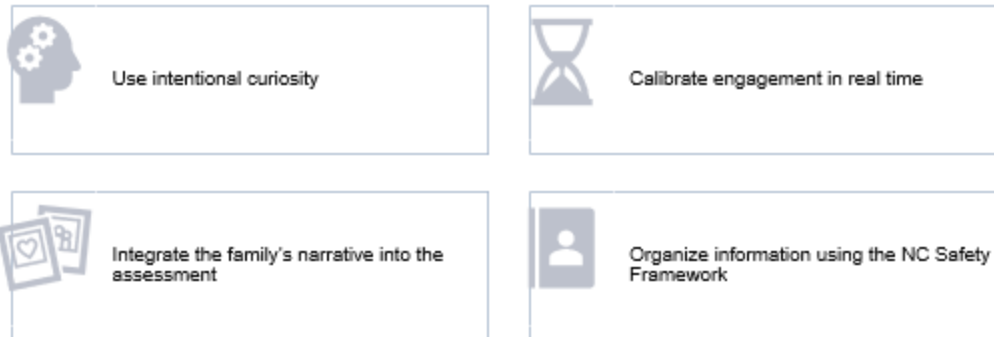
### Example Power Map:



**Note:** This power map is from the perspective of the Adams family, who feel they have no direct influence or power on how the final decision is made about reunification. They feel that the court, the worker, and the community-based program have all the influence. They also feel that the community-based program influence is the only one in agreement with them.

## Section 2: Responsive Assessment and Engagement

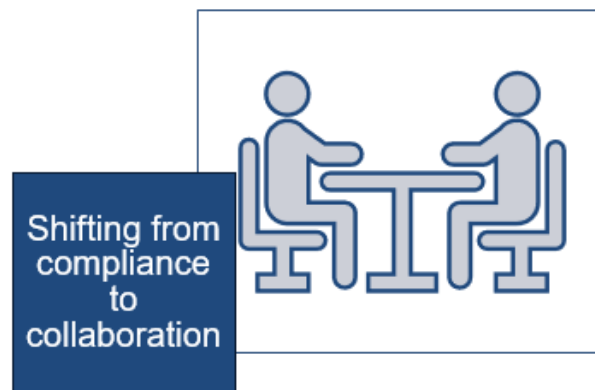
### Responsive Engagement



Responsive engagement is both relational and analytical. By combining curiosity, real-time engagement, strong documentation, and the NC safety framework, we ensure decisions are accurate, respectful, and grounded in partnership-core expectations across our system.

#### Notes

## Responsive Engagement: Conflict Approaches



### Activity: Responsive Engagement: Conflict Approaches

The purpose of this activity is to strengthen caseworkers' ability to identify and apply responsive assessment and engagement strategies in real time.

#### What to do:

- Consider the 3 scenarios provided and decide:
  - What the caseworker is doing well
  - What could be more responsive
  - What strategy should be added or adjusted

#### Scenario 1

A mother is very defensive during the assessment. The caseworker continues asking factual questions rapidly to "get through the checklist". The mother begins shutting down and giving short answers.

| Caseworker is doing well | Could be more responsive | Strategy to add or adjust |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
|                          |                          |                           |

**Scenario 2**

A father gives a detailed account of what happened but becomes frustrated when asked about past incidents. The caseworker shifts tone to something more formal and clinical.

| Caseworker is doing well | Could be more responsive | Strategy to add or adjust |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
|                          |                          |                           |

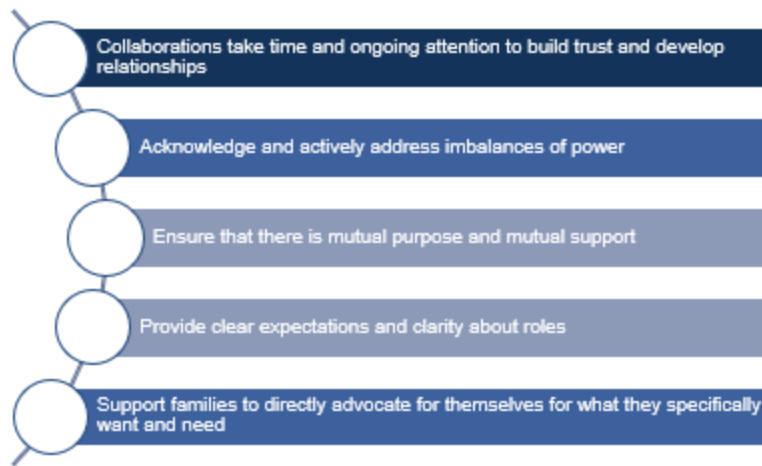
**Scenario 3**

During a home visit, the caseworkers notice environmental concerns and immediately begin documenting them on a tablet. The caregiver becomes anxious and asks, 'Are you taking my kids?'

| Caseworker is doing well | Could be more responsive | Strategy to add or adjust |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
|                          |                          |                           |

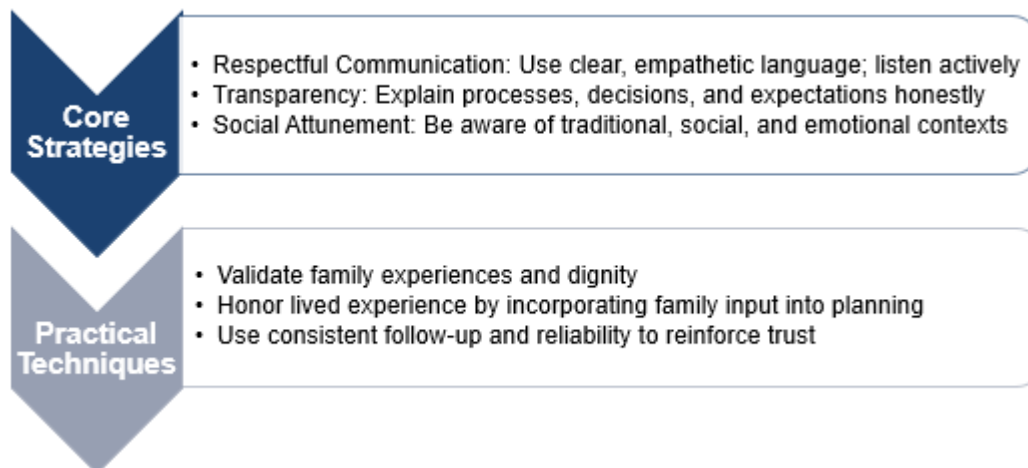
## Section 3: Establishing Trust in Respectful Contexts

### Collaborating with Community Resources



#### Notes

## Establishing Trust with Families: Practical Strategies for Meaningful Engagement



### Notes

## Section 4: Individual Practice and Application

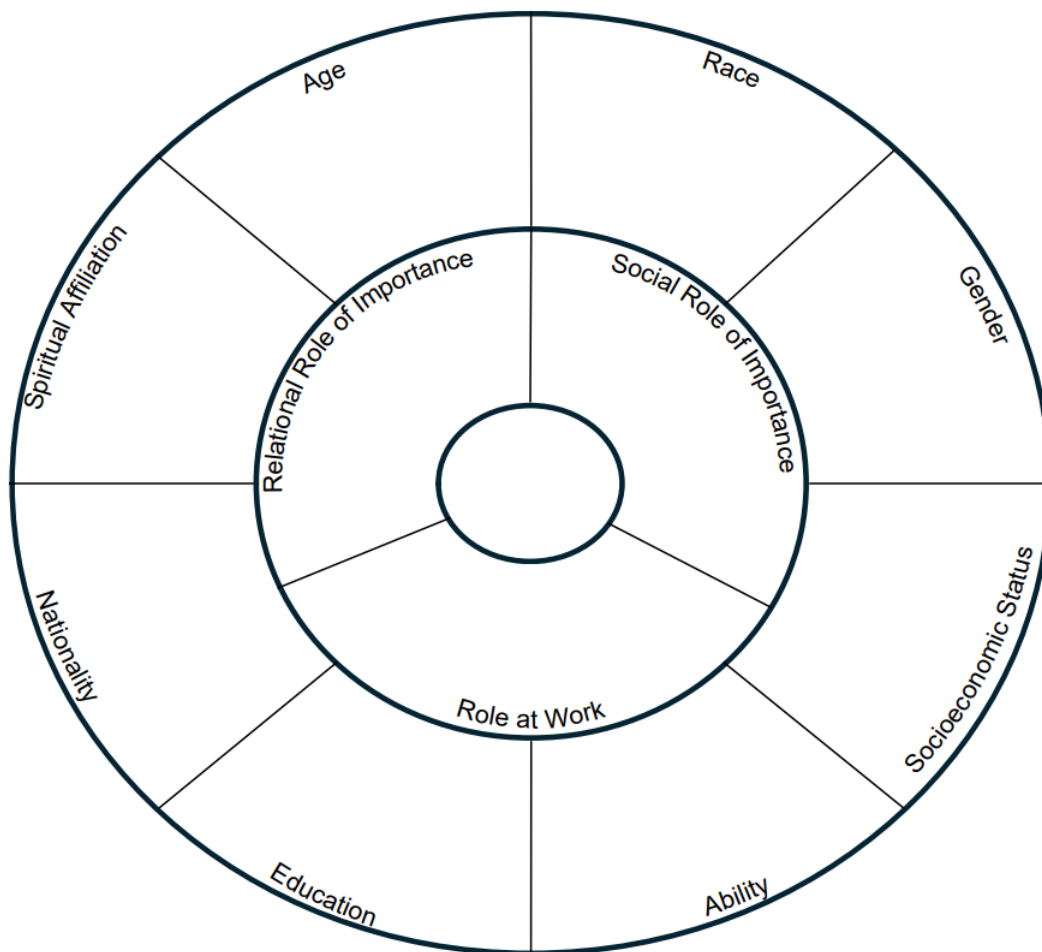
### Activity: Identity Map

**Purpose:** To dedicate time to consider your own identity and its impact on your casework.

There are no right or wrong answers. This is a self-reflective activity

#### What to Do:

- Print this page
- Complete the Identify Map below by describing yourself within each of the given categories.
- Follow the prompts below the map to further contemplate your identity.



- Draw a star beside the identities that are the most central to how you see yourself as a person
- Draw a circle beside the identities that have the most influence on how you treat others
- Draw a triangle beside the identities that are the most obvious to others
- Draw a zig-zag beside the identities that are or can be hidden

**Activity: Reflective Questions**

Review a recent case note from an interaction with a family member on one of your cases. Think back to the actual interaction with the family and reflect on the following:

**Based on my identity, what assumptions may I have brought into the interaction?**

**How might the family have felt? What might they say about the interaction?**

Considering the interaction and how it's documented, reflect on the following:

**What meaning did I add to the interaction and why?**

**How might the family feel about how it is documented?**

**What might you do differently in the interaction or documentation next time?**

**How might the family or individual respond to the changes you make in your interaction or documentation?**

### Activity: Power Map

Choose a recent case that you were responsible for, preferably one you have already used in this training.

Use the above power-mapping guidance to review your use of structured decision-making and analyze the factors that influenced your choices.

- Where did invisible power show up?
- How might you do things differently?
- How might you recognize the power differential and provide more voice and choice going forward?

### **Utilize the workbook space on the next draw a power map.**

Step 1: Identify the problem you are trying to fix or the decision that needs to be made.

Step 2: Identify the main stakeholders. These stakeholders generally include:

- Those responsible for creating the problem;
- Those who have the power to fix the problem but are not doing so;
- Those who are geographically relevant to the issue;
- Those who are working to fix the problem;
- Don't forget to include yourself and other child welfare staff involved.

Step 3: Plot where all the stakeholders stand:

- Draw out a version of "Power Mapping: Axes" (see the example below).
- Put each stakeholder in a circle in the correct quadrant depending on their influence or power over the problem or decision, and whether they agree or disagree in relation to you.

Step 4: Identify your problem or decision needed and add it to the power map in a circle.

Step 5: Map the power relationships around your primary problem or decision by adding arrows (dark or dotted lines) to those who directly or indirectly influence the problem or decision (see the example below).

Step 6: Use this analysis to plan how to acknowledge the power differential and how to engage those feeling disempowered to have more voice and choice.

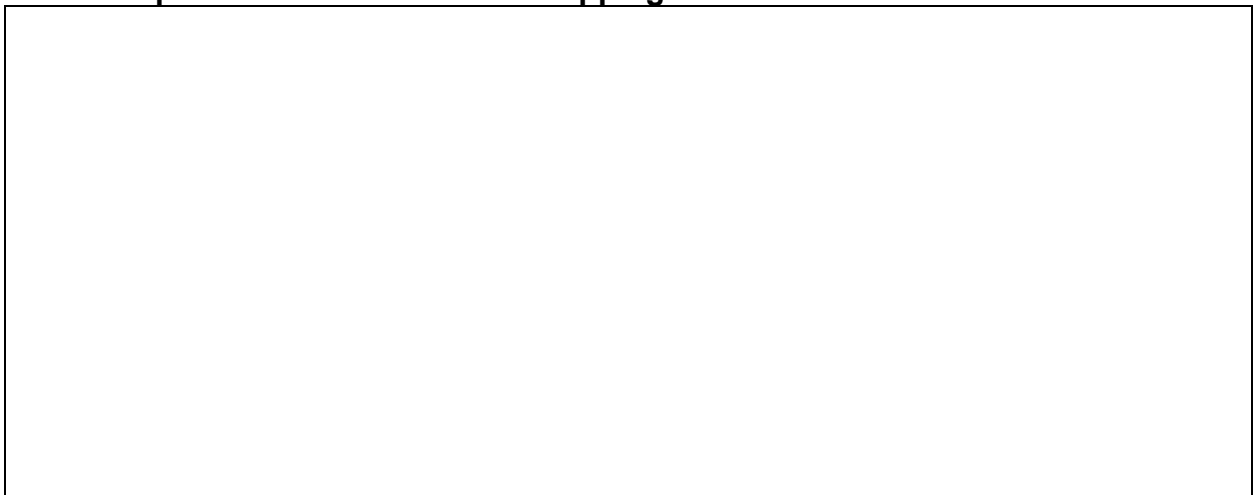
Step 7: Revisit and revise:

- At key junctures in the case, and as power shifts or you learn more about who holds it, revisit and revise these maps as needed.

**Use this space to draw the power map.**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for drawing a power map.

**Use this space to reflect on Power Mapping exercise**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for reflecting on the Power Mapping exercise.

**Activity: Engagement Skills and Conflict Styles Assessments**

- Examine your own engagement skills and conflict styles
- Considering the case you used to complete a power map, you'll have the opportunity to explore how your engagement skills and conflict styles influenced positive case outcomes

**Engaging Self-Assessment:**

- Review your responses to the Engaging section of the NC Practice Standards Worker Assessment completed during module one of STEP Up
  - If you have not yet completed the assessment, do so now beginning on page 7: <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/cw-worker-north-carolina-worker-assessment-all-practice-standards/open>.

**Write down your Engaging skills strengths.****Write down your Engaging skills opportunities for growth:**

**Conflict Styles Assessment:**

- Complete the Conflict Styles Assessment here:  
<https://facultyombuds.ncsu.edu/files/2015/11/Conflict-management-styles-quiz.pdf>

**Results of Conflict Styles Assessment**

**Use this space to record thoughts about the results of the Conflict Styles Assessment.**

**Consider the recent case you used to complete the power map, explore how your conflict styles influenced case outcomes. Note any conflict strategies you used or may use for the next interaction.**

**Conflict Strategies:**

- Use curiosity to engage by asking open, non-accusatory questions
- Slow down, clarify your role, and reduce perceived threat
- Use empathetic phrases
- Use the family's works in documentation for accuracy and trust
- Combine relational and analytical approaches (curiosity, engagement, and structured decision making)
- Reflect lived experience and align with policy
- Adapt pacing and style based on the caregiver's response
- Organizing information utilizing the NC Safety Network

Activity: Brainstorm Community Collaboration Planning Strategies and Action Planning for Yourself

**Community Collaboration Planning**

Some main components for collaborating with community resources are:

- Take time to build relationships and trust
- Acknowledge any power imbalances
- Ensure that there is mutual purpose and support
- Provide clear expectations and role clarity
- Support families advocating for their needs and wants with community partners

**Brainstorm a list of strategies that you use to collaborate with community resources. Be ready to share this in the debrief for a collective strategy bank**

**Using two open cases for which you are responsible, identify opportunities to practice planning community collaboration**

|    |
|----|
| 1. |
| 2. |

**Activity: Integration and Action Plan**

- Identify your strengths and areas for growth in your role and responsibilities in managing power dynamics, engagement, conflict, and community collaborative planning
- Based on this practice and application activity, write celebration statements for areas of strength and goals for areas of growth

**Celebration statements:****Goals for areas of growth:**

## Section 5: Debrief and Collaborative Practice

### Small Group Sharing

#### Activity: Small Group Sharing

**Purpose:** To promote sharing and connection, and to deepen learning

- Work in small groups in a breakout room to share insights from the Individual Practical Application
  - Follow the group norms established earlier in the day
  - Share openly and remain curious and non-judgmental when listening to peers' share
  - Be prepared to share one insight from each of the activities:
    - Identity map
    - Positionality statement
    - Power mapping on a recent case
    - Engagement and conflict style assessments
    - Celebrations and goals from the integration and action plan

#### Notes

## Collaborative Problem Solving

### Activity: Collaborative Problem Solving

**Purpose:** To support collaborative problem solving

You will rotate through three rooms.

- In each room, you will receive a prompt to consider
  - Reflect individually for 1–2 minutes
  - Discuss with peers for 3–4 minutes
  - After consideration, record key insights on the collaborative notetaking board

#### Room One:

|                                                                                                  |  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| Think of a time when your personal values influenced a decision. How did that shape the outcome? |  |
| Individual thoughts                                                                              |  |
| Group discussion notes                                                                           |  |

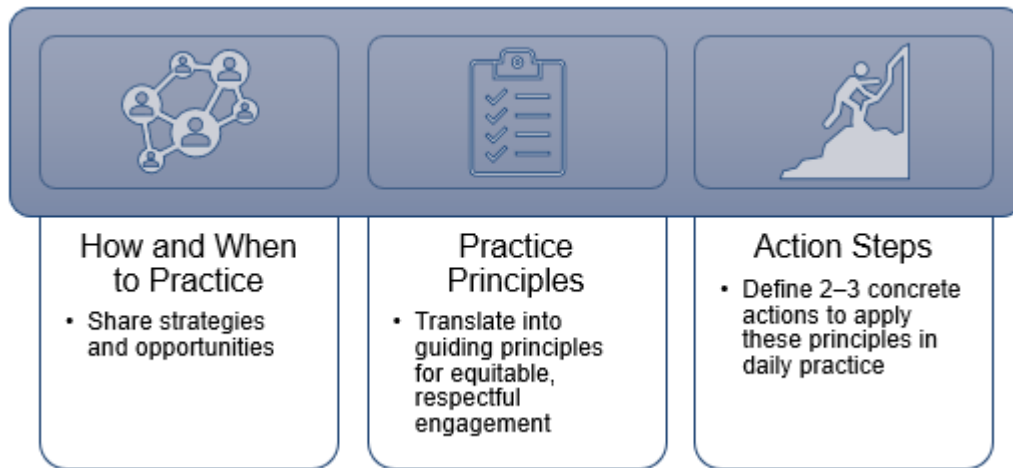
**Room Two:**

|                                                                                  |  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| What strategies help you pause and reflect before making a high-stakes decision? |  |
| Individual thoughts                                                              |  |
| Group discussion notes                                                           |  |

**Room Three:**

|                                                                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| How can openness and respect for unique family circumstances improve problem-solving? |  |
| Individual thoughts                                                                   |  |
| Group discussion notes                                                                |  |

## Practice Principles Co-Creation



### Activity: Practice Principles Co-Creation

**Purpose:** To support the operationalization of strategies and identify opportunities for principled practice

- Access the link for the collaborative note-taking tool in the chat
- Share your brainstormed strategies and identified opportunities from the practice application “Brainstorm Community Collaboration Planning Strategies and Action Planning for Yourself”
- From the shared strategies, identify 2-3 practice principles
  - Consider themes or patterns in the brainstormed strategies and identified opportunities that may represent a principle of collaborative community planning
- Identify 2-3 action steps
- Define 2-3 concrete actions to apply each of the principles

### Notes

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Group Reflection and Closing

What is your  
biggest insight  
from this  
module?



**Write your biggest insight from this module:**

## Key Takeaways



## Notes

A large empty rectangular box for taking notes.

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