



Skills Guide for Residential Counselors

(rev. 02/13/24)

There are many possible strategies, tactics, and skills for direct care staff to develop. Some strategies are designed to help kids develop their social and emotional skills. Some strategies are designed to counter the effects of childhood exposure to trauma. Still other strategies focus on helping kids stay emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally centered so as to prevent crises.

Regardless of the various strategies used to create a therapeutic milieu and to manage off-track behaviors, the role of direct care staff is to serve as the executive functions for some child-clients and to develop the clients' executive skills so that they become increasingly independent at regulating themselves.

That aspect of the role requires direct care staff to, themselves, demonstrate strong executive functions, to have skills at engaging with individual clients and with groups of clients, and to have skills at teamwork. This document attempts to take those skills and give behavioral examples of when those skills are being demonstrated.

It's designed for staff to self-assess and then discuss with their supervisor, as a way of monitoring their own professional development and potentially indicating when a staff person is ready for advancement.

Executive Skills:

Residential Counselors are frequently in the role of serving as the executive functions for kids who are still developing their own abilities to control their emotions, thinking, and behaviors.

This requires the skilled Residential Counselor to have highly developed executive skills of their own. Supervision is a great place to self-assess where you're at in this area of professional development and then discuss your progress.

Take a look at the following executive skills and how they manifest in a skilled Residential Counselor. The checkboxes are just some ways in which each executive skill might show up in the staff person and how the staff person might be helping the clients to develop these skills, by providing these functions.

No one is perfect at self-management and that's not a reasonable goal. The point is to have a discussion about where, and how, you might improve various skills. Frequently, that starts with increased self-awareness.

Some executive skills help you control, modulate, and regulate your feelings. These functions could be broken down into smaller skills but emotionally-focused executive skills basically fall into a couple general categories.

✦ *Reaction Inhibition:* Being able to think before you act. This includes being able to resist the urge to say or do something long enough to give yourself the time to evaluate a situation and how your behavior might impact it.

- I stay calm and project being calm when client behavior escalates.
- Even when I'm upset, I consciously control my tone of voice, body language, and facial



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expressions that I use with the clients.

- I'm aware of my own emotional reactions to the clients' behaviors.
- My reactions to verbally escalating clients tend to damp down the energy in the room.
- I'm able to de-escalate clients.
- I'm able to soothe emotionally unbalanced clients.
- I'm able to organize cognitively confused clients.
- I'm able to get clients to think before they act.
- I recognize and reinforce when clients use their own reaction inhibition.

✦ *Stress Tolerance:* Being able to thrive in stressful situations and to cope with uncertainty, change, and performance demands. This includes being able to tolerate strong feelings and varying levels of emotional distress.

- I can experience stressful interactions without it setting the tone for how I perform throughout the entire shift.
- I can confront clients in a constructive fashion that stays within, or slightly grows, their stress tolerance.
- I can confront colleagues in a constructive fashion that stays within, or slightly grows, their stress tolerance.
- I have a good awareness of my own level of stress and am proactive about managing how much it builds up.
- I'm able to help clients monitor their level of stress and provide them with guidance on how to manage that stress.
- I'm able to put my own frustrations aside and be fully present and engaged with the clients, even when I'm feeling stressed.
- I'm able to support my colleagues in managing their stress tolerance throughout the shift.

There are many executive functions that help you control, modulate, and regulate your thoughts.

✦ *Planning:* Being able to map out how to reach your goals or complete a task.

- I have a clear vision of what different aspects of the program should look like, from the appearance to bedrooms and common areas to how activities and transitions should look like.
- I take proactive steps to ensure that transitions go smoothly and that different parts of the schedule start smoothly.
- I can successfully plan on campus group activities.
- I can successfully plan off campus group activities.
- I can successfully plan individual activities.

✦ *Prioritization:* Being able to make decisions about what to focus on and what's not so important.

- I can experience stressful interactions without it setting the tone for how I perform throughout the entire shift.
- I skillfully balance when to focus on task completion versus moving on with the schedule.
- I skillfully balance paying attention to individual clients versus the group.



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- ✦ *Organization:* Being able to create and maintain systems to keep track of information or materials.
 - My paperwork is consistently done on time.
 - I keep track of all my tasks and projects.
 - Tasks that I perform are organized so that other people can cover for me as needed.

- ✦ *Sustained Attention:* Being able to maintain your attention despite distractibility, fatigue, or boredom.
 - I consistently monitor my assigned clients or assigned zone.
 - I consistently am scanning and tracking the clients and paying attention to when a teammate might require my assistance.
 - I still pay close attention to the clients even when things are relatively calm and quiet.

- ✦ *Time Management:* Being able to estimate how long various tasks will take, and how to stay within time limits and deadlines.
 - I consistently meet the individual or group schedule with transitions and activities starting on time.
 - I get my own paperwork and tasks done on time and in a time-efficient manner.
 - I manage activities with time constraints in mind so that there's minimal down time and sufficient time to complete projects.

- ✦ *Task Initiation:* Being able to begin projects without undue procrastination, in an efficient and timely fashion.
 - I consistently demonstrate appropriate initiative.
 - I consistently demonstrate appropriate autonomy and independence.
 - If something needs to be done, I take the initiative to do it, or get it started.

- ✦ *Working Memory:* Being able to hold information in memory while performing complex tasks. It includes being able to draw on past learning or experience and apply that to a current task.
 - I know, or readily look up, individual treatment strategies and tactics for each client.
 - I know, or readily look up, general treatment strategies.
 - I keep in mind important safety information, such as allergies and restrictions that might apply to any one client.

- ✦ *Flexibility:* Being able to revise plans and adapt to changed circumstances.
 - I can work successfully with any client on the unit.
 - I can work successfully in other units.
 - I can make adjustments to the schedule when they make sense.

There're also a few executive functions that control, modulate, and regulate behaviors.



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- ✦ *Goal-Directed Persistence:* Being able to stick to a goal and not give up, despite distractions, competing interests, or other challenges.
 - I stick with interventions that only work after a large number of repetitions.
 - I consciously work on my own professional development.
 - I keep trying even when I'm not getting the results I've hoped for.
 - I help clients with their goal-directed persistence.

- ✦ *Self-Awareness:* Being able to monitor yourself in real time. This skill involves having one part of your mind that is observing other parts of your mind that are generating and experiencing feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.
 - I monitor my own stress levels and take breaks and engage in other self-care as needed.
 - I consciously choose my tone of voice and body language when interacting with clients and teammates.
 - I try to communicate my intentions.

- ✦ *Meta-Cognition:* Being able to think about your own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Young children can't do this very well because their brains simply haven't grown enough to have this ability. This goes beyond monitoring or observing and includes analyzing your own feelings, thoughts, and behaviors.
 - I understand the philosophy of the program and how to create an environment and structures which promote clients reaching their treatment goals.
 - I understand how to think about specific clients and the unique challenges they face.
 - I understand what provides me with motivation and am able to maintain a positive attitude about my work.

Engagement Skills:

- ✦ *Engaging with individual clients:* Being able to hold the attention of individual clients and help them co-regulate.
 - I fully participate in activities with individual clients, in a fashion that helps them feel a sense of belonging, a sense of teamwork, and feeling cared about.
 - I have fun with individual clients.

- ✦ *Engaging with client groups:* Being able to hold the attention of a group of clients and being able to set the tone for the group.
 - I fully participate in group activities with clients, in a fashion that helps them feel involved, organized, and part of a team.
 - I can hold the attention of a group of clients and set the tone.
 - I have fun with groups of clients.

- ✦ *Engaging with other staff:* Being able to work effectively with other staff.
 - I'm emotionally supportive to my teammates.



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- I support the professional development of my teammates.
- I consistently demonstrate caring and help my teammates feel and be safe in the workplace.
- I have fun with my colleagues.

Teamwork Skills:

- ✦ *Communication:* The essential skill when a team is forming.
 - I make sure my teammates always know where I am and who, or what zone, I'm focusing on.
 - I ask for help when I need it.
 - I offer help when I think a teammate needs it.
 - I give my teammates a heads up when a client seems to be at high risk to become significantly unbalanced in the near future.

- ✦ *Feedback:* The essential skill when a team is moving past the initial forming stage and developing the norms of teamwork.
 - I share with my teammates what they do that is helpful and what is not.
 - I accept feedback from my teammates.

- ✦ *Appreciation:* The essential skill when a team is performing at a high level.
 - I share with my teammates when they make my job better or simply when I admire some skill they've demonstrated.
 - I thank my teammates when they help me.
 - I recognize my teammates efforts to be effective teammates and to help the clients.

- ✦ *Celebrating:* The essential skill when a team performs well and is achieving success.
 - I recognize when the team is successful and help the team feel good about that.

- ✦ *Ability to perform effective teamwork with non-direct care agency staff:*
 - I'm able to effectively collaborate with agency staff outside of the residential unit, such as educational staff, clinical and behavioral staff, and various specialists.

- ✦ *Ability to perform effective teamwork with non-agency persons on treatment teams:*
 - I'm able to effectively represent the agency and collaborate with parents and guardians.
 - I'm able to effectively represent the agency and collaborate with State caseworkers, advocates, and other persons who are on a client's treatment team.