

# Weaving Emotional Intelligence Into a Home Visiting Model

Beth Enson  
Jaci Imberger  
First Steps  
Taos, New Mexico

## Abstract

This article details the impact of Emotional Intelligence (EI) training on the 10-year evolution of the Taos First Steps Home Visiting program. While EI has become standard fare in corporate training and practice, it is less well known in the world of early childhood services. This article highlights interviews with key personnel, both in-house and at the state level, to chart EI's impact on the organization's developing understanding of and support for the parent-child relationship. The authors point the way toward a possible method of replicating program successes by sequentially introducing foundational disciplines during staff orientation and training.

First Steps, a home visiting program serving 135 families in Taos, New Mexico, has just marked its tenth anniversary. Eight home visitors serve a varied clientele in a poor, rural, and isolated county. The program is free, voluntary, and open to all parents and caregivers of children under 3 years old. In 2009, First Steps contracted with an internationally renowned teacher of Emotional Intelligence (EI), Amy McConnell Franklin, PhD, to provide quarterly training in this discipline to the staff. She defines EI as "the ability to effectively blend cognitive and emotional information in order to make better decisions taking into account self, others and context and the ability to create and sustain more mutually respectful relationships." (Franklin, n.d.) EI was first adopted by businesses and corporations seeking to invest in a process that would improve workplaces and increase productivity. The field of early childhood has been slower to embrace the EI model, but it serves to enhance the cohesion of groups and the capacity to discern one's own issues from those of one's clients.

Over time, Dr. Franklin's EI teaching incited an ongoing spirit of emotional connection and reflective inquiry that has allowed staff members to embrace and integrate into their practice several key training disciplines that support the model of infant mental health. These disciplines include Circle of Security Parenting (Hoffman, 2014), Trauma Stewardship/Trauma-Informed Care (Lipsky, 2007), Facilitating Attuned Interactions (FAN; Gilkerson et al., 2012), and Infant Massage. The mutually

reinforcing perspectives of these approaches have created a complex weave in which staff and client relationships are flourishing and personal and professional insights are plentiful. Supportive relationships between staff members, skilled reflective supervision incorporating the FAN model, generous professional development opportunities, an extensive shared vocabulary, as well as staff meeting time dedicated to discussion and reflection, allow the program to translate the content of its foundational trainings into continually deepening practice.

## First Steps' Early Years

At least one home visiting program in Silver City, New Mexico, has served families for more than 20 years. It was originally funded by the New Mexico Department of Health Maternal and Child Division. In the mid-2000s, the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD), supported by Governor Bill Richardson's Children's Cabinet, funded a few more pilot home visiting programs. With the success of these programs in hand, a broad task force supported by New Mexico CYFD and including personnel from private foundations; the medical, public health, and mental health communities; children's service agencies; and other government entities, secured funding for additional programs from the New Mexico State Legislature in 2008 (M. Elliston, personal communication, May 11, 2017). By 2009, 14 state-funded home visiting

programs were operating in New Mexico. Jeannie Ross, Children's Trust Fund grant coordinator, and Jaci Imberger, now program manager, joined the staff as home visitors during the program's first year, within a few months of one another. Ross remembered, "We received a copy of the curriculum and off we went." The program had an immense amount to learn, and EI proved invaluable in that process.

## Adoption of EI Model

Three First Steps home visitors, Ross, Imberger, and Katherine Chavez, attended an EI workshop led by Dr. Franklin in 2008, and returned to the office inspired. Ross recalled, "Amy cried during that first training. I was incredibly moved. I had never experienced a leader to be so vulnerable with their emotions. It was a powerful moment for me." They galvanized Kathy Namba, then director of the program, to help organize a series of EI trainings by Dr. Franklin for the Paso a Paso Network, a consortium of Taos service organizations committed to sharing resources and closing service gaps for families and young children in Taos. This series of trainings took place soon after home visitor Molly McCracken joined the First Steps staff. She remembered, "Kathy saw the value in EI and how it impacted our work."

"The biggest change I saw as a result of Amy's EI training for First Steps was within the culture of our organization," Namba recounted.

*It changed how we identified ourselves and were able to develop as a team. EI provided a common language with which to discuss our experiences as home visitors, and strategies to deal with the deeper emotional aspects of the work. We were better able to support one another, and the work became less isolating than it had been.*

Namba soon chose a new curriculum, *Partners for a Healthy Baby*, (Florida State University Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy, 2010), a research-based curriculum (as required for state funding.) *Partners* has a strong focus on reflection and self-care. It was better able to meet the needs of the Taos community, allowing parents to enter the program at any point in the child's first 3 years and providing home visitors the flexibility to flow between lessons, choosing topics of interest or relevance to each client. Exposure to the perspectives of EI sensitized First Steps staff members to the relationship-based model being promoted by Soledad Martinez, then early childhood program manager for New Mexico CYFD's Early Childhood Division, and currently director of CYFD's Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Services. Martinez was instrumental in initiating the parallel process in New Mexico, ensuring that personnel at every level of the CYFD's Home Visiting Programs had consistent, reliable reflective supervision in which the emotional aspects of the work could be addressed. Martinez is famous among New Mexico home visitors for the phrase "Where's the baby?" which places emphasis on holding space for the parent's emotional concerns so that the conversation can then proceed to the ways in which these concerns are affecting the baby. The



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entire parallel structure of the relationship-based model is constructed so that the home visitor can join the parent in the vital and often thorny process of taking the baby's perspective, at times advocating for the baby so the parent can modulate his responses to become more attuned to the child's needs. As one client of home visitor Katie Uilk phrased it, "You care for us so that we can care for the baby."

Namba contracted with Dr. Franklin to provide ongoing, quarterly training in EI for her staff after the Paso a Paso series. "We had a sense that this was something that everyone needed," related Jaci Imberger, the program's current program director, and a home visitor at the time.

EI changed the way the First Steps program engaged with families. In place of providing extensive amounts of information or external direction to clients, sometimes based on the home visitor's own triggers, home visitors started holding space for the client's emotional process. "This requires personal work that I don't separate from the work of the job," noted McCracken. EI requires its practitioners to increase their level of self-awareness. This capacity has become central to the First Steps program model, but was not originally seen as a critical home visiting skill. Ross quoted Katie Uilk as saying, "I never knew this job would have me holding the mirror so close."

The ability to scrutinize their emotional responses and self-judgments with kindness and honesty allows home visitors to place these potential obstacles to the side and focus attention on the needs and realities of the client and her relationship with her child. These same emotional reactions, if left unexamined, have the power to derail the relationship with the client. Dr. Franklin encouraged the staff to consider and discuss their emotional responses in reflective supervision and as a group as way to develop this vital skill in order to share it with clients. The capacity to think and talk about emotions at a home visit, instead of ignoring the topic, opens a doorway to conversations that can profoundly influence parenting choices.



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This process, while often therapeutic, is not therapy; First Steps home visitors are skilled at referring clients to counseling as appropriate.

Former First Steps client Margaret Garcia described the experience of EI in home visiting.

*My home visitor was able to listen to whatever I was feeling without judgment, and to understand that if I was feeling something, my toddler would be feeling it, too. She talked with me about the emotional dynamics in my family and how I could change them.*

Reflective practice is one of the New Mexico CYFD Home Visiting Standards (New Mexico CYFD, 2016). Dr. Franklin's EI training provided clarity for the program to incorporate this standard in a more meaningful way. Namba remembered,

*EI fit in with the trainings in reflective supervision that we were receiving from Children Youth and Families Department at the time. As a leader, EI gave me the language and strategies to support the home visitors better.*

Ross related,

*Amy laid that foundation. She created such a safe holding space for us to explore our emotions, with such gentle non-judgment. Though I didn't recognize it at the time, her EI training was my first actual experience of the parallel process. Beforehand, I didn't have a clear concept of the meaning of that phrase.*

As EI penetrated the program's culture, reflective supervision began to gain power and effectiveness. Staff members benefited from being held in the mind of their supervisor, who created safe space for them to examine thoughts and feelings without judgment or repercussions.

Self-reflection became central to the First Steps program. McCracken shared,

*We started asking the question "How do you practice self-reflection?" in our hiring interviews. Many people responded by asking "What's that?" But some people responded by saying, "I do that every day." It's become one of the most important questions we ask.*

Ross remembered a break-out session Dr. Franklin led at a home visiting conference in which she asked participants to identify their emotions. One participant could only identify three feelings: mad, sad, and glad. Ross reflected, "I was so grateful for the extensive work we've done to support our families emotionally."

## The EI Framework: Know Yourself, Choose Yourself, Give Yourself

Dr. Franklin was trained in the Six Seconds model of EI, and brought this model to First Steps. It is grounded in the dramatic advances in neuroscience over the past decades that have vastly increased researchers' understanding of the brain and endocrine systems and how emotion works. The Six Seconds model of EI offered concrete, teachable skills that the staff could evaluate in themselves and work to master. Staff members worked together and supported one another to understand, practice, and increase EI competencies as a group. Six Seconds promotes a triad of interrelated competencies, phrased as "Know Yourself, Choose Yourself, and Give Yourself" (Freedman, 2010). Each of these skills is grounded in brain science. Central to the discipline is the awareness that, over time, the choices people make can either enhance or undermine their emotional lives, due to the brain's capacity for neuroplasticity. The wheel of Know Yourself/Choose Yourself/Give Yourself is an ongoing process predicated on continual growth and lifelong learning in which each stage fuels the next (Freedman, 2007).

### Know Yourself

Know Yourself includes the skills of emotional literacy and recognizing one's own emotional patterns (Freedman, 2010). It enjoins the EI students to learn their own internal map: the feelings that recur in response to specific situations and can be predicted with increased awareness. Practitioners become aware of and are able to articulate the names of their physiological responses. They are mindful of the difficult memories and circumstances, including trauma history or early negative experiences with caregivers, that, when triggered, can cause a cascade of stress hormones throughout the body. They develop a nuanced vocabulary for shades of emotion and increase their comfort with acknowledging and expressing their emotions in appropriate ways. They learn to respect each emotion for the information it carries, rather than evaluating emotions as good or bad.

One EI exercise that promotes Know Yourself is the Check In (Franklin, 2009), which sharpens attunement to one's own

emotional state and that of others. A Check In asks the participant to select an item from a category, either conceptual or physical, to represent her feeling state at the moment. First Steps meetings always begin with a Check In, which can range from selecting a weather pattern or a movie title, to a colored paint chip or small toy animal from a collection, to symbolize one's feeling state. Another form of Check In alerts participants to the second foundation of EI, Choose Yourself. In this type of Check In, the person chooses two items, one to represent how she is feeling at the moment, and one to represent how she intends to feel by the end of the day.

Emotional literacy can be increased using a deck of EI Feeling Face Cards on which drawings of faces present a vast array of nuanced expressions. Working as a group, students sort the cards into the six major categories of emotion—happy, sad, angry, surprised, fearful, and disgusted—and then arrange each category from least to most intense. Emotional literacy can also be enhanced by discussing the meaning of vocabulary lists of words that describe a wide range of emotions.

The ability to recognize and express one's feelings is a critical step in navigating toward the feelings one wants to experience. The process of being emotionally held by another's attuned presence allows a person's emotions to shift and regain balance. Providing attuned presence requires building trusting relationships that can tolerate the difficult as well as the positive emotions. To do so, one must witness and respect a person's inner reality instead of interrupting with efforts to deny, reassure, or fix the other's feelings. This attuned listening forms the core of the parallel process. Being held in a non-judgmental and non-coercive way on an ongoing basis provides home visitors with the capacity to hold that same space for their clients, through a learning process that is experiential, physical, and emotional, rather than didactic. In turn, parents gain the capacity over time to provide the same quality of connection to their children.

### Choose Yourself

Choose Yourself includes the competencies of navigating emotions, using consequential thinking and intrinsic motivation, and harnessing optimism (Freedman 2010). Choose Yourself is distilled in the famous quote, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom" (Covey, 2008, p. vii). Choose Yourself involves responding to triggers mindfully rather than reacting unthinkingly and often harmfully out of pattern or habit.

Choose Yourself introduces the concept of choice into emotional life, in contrast to the way in which most people experience emotion passively as a wave that overwhelms intention (Freedman, 2010). Choose Yourself encourages the practitioner to use her knowledge of her own triggers to

navigate emotions thoughtfully. If one senses and successfully diverts a negative trigger before 6 seconds have passed, it is possible to avoid the resulting cascade of stress neurochemicals in the body. Over time, the neural pathways that form a luge for stress are weakened and more positive pathways of mindfulness and self-kindness are strengthened through use-dependent neurodevelopment, as outlined by Dr. Bruce Perry (2014) and other neuroscientists.

This 6-second time limit for mindful direction of emotion gives its name to the exercise the Six Second Pause, which counsels the practitioner to stand back from an emotional trigger for 6 seconds and purposefully use the neocortex to think of items in a category, for example, flavors of ice cream or titles of favorite novels. This strategy resembles counting to 10 when

angered, but engages the frontal lobes in a more challenging and diverting way. The Six Second Pause is an exercise often offered to First Steps clients trying to defuse their anger reactions and choose a different response.

The exercise called The Ripple Effect (Franklin, 2009) allows the practitioner to enhance his consequential thinking. Starting with a problem, visualized as a stone thrown into a pond, the practitioner identifies several possible responses to the

problem, and the resulting ripples caused by these responses. As enough ripples are followed to their conclusions, the correct response to a problem becomes self-evident. This exercise sharpens one's awareness of the many unintended effects of letting emotions rule one's actions, and allows home visitors to guide a parent to come to her own conclusions rather than telling her the response she should choose. The exercise Six Ways to Peel a Banana requires the student to generate six alternatives to solving a problem, no matter how silly or impractical they might appear. It offers opportunities to open one's thinking to new ways of approaching challenges, loosening rigid, habitual thinking and engendering optimism.

Another Choose Yourself exercise that nurtures optimism is titled The Messy Room. It offers a picture of a mother sitting on a sofa drinking a soda and talking on the phone while one child plays and the other cries in a playpen. The viewer's first reaction is to point out the parent's deficits as displayed in the drawing: the mother is being lazy, not comforting her child, or not cleaning her house. The Messy Room exercise challenges the viewer to point out instead the positive aspects of the picture, for example, the fact that the mother has eaten pizza for lunch to keep up her blood sugar, that the children are safe, that she is connecting with a friend or family member for self-care, or that she is taking a break from ironing the clothes. The exercise provides an opportunity to reflect on one's triggers toward judgment and fixing in order to choose a more positive and empathic response. As a strength-based program, First Steps spends a great deal of time and energy nurturing this capacity in its home visitors and making space for reflection when judgment arises.

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First Steps staff members see their work in the context of a statewide and worldwide movement to address the needs of families, so that the next generation will have a greater capacity for connection, self-realization, and joy.

### Give Yourself

The third foundation of EI, Give Yourself, includes the competencies Increase Empathy and Pursue Noble Goals (Freedman, 2010). Give Yourself makes use of the research-based insight that happiness results not from gratification but from gratitude. EI defines this capacity as dedication to a purpose greater than oneself. Cultivating one's life purpose helps to maintain long-term focus despite daily distractions or challenges, offers inspiration and meaning to oneself and others, and provides a means to achieve one's full potential.

The work of home visiting itself forms a shared Noble Goal among First Steps staff members, who see their work in the context of a statewide and worldwide movement to address the needs of families, so that the next generation will have a greater capacity for connection, self-realization, and joy. Expressions of gratitude form the closing for each First Steps meeting, and staff members frequently express gratitude for the opportunity to do the work of home visiting and to belong to a team with such strong shared values and vision. Many staff members also have an active personal gratitude practice outside of the workplace.

### Integration of Other Disciplines Into the EI Framework

The Six Seconds model of EI—its orientation toward self-awareness, its practice of navigating emotions, and its support for identifying one's Noble Goal—has deeply shaped First Steps

program implementation. Other cornerstones of program design, including Trauma Stewardship, Circle of Security, and FAN, were mapped onto these foundational EI skills and interwoven to generate an organizational culture of deep connection and reflective inquiry.

### Trauma Stewardship

During its formative years, the First Steps staff attended a Trauma Stewardship workshop led by Laura Lipsky that deeply influenced program design as it evolved. The staff read and discussed Lipsky's book, *Trauma Stewardship* (2007), as part of their ongoing book club. Lipsky's work focuses on the critical need for self-care and self-awareness by people providing services to victims of trauma in order to avoid burnout and secondary traumatic stress (2007). It is important to remember that trauma can include not only a personal history of abuse or neglect, but also historical, generational, and secondary trauma; as well as what the creators of the Circle of Security term "microtrauma" (Hoffman, 2014). *Microtrauma* refers to an accumulation of the infant's perceptions of the parent's nanosecond-length facial expressions of disconnection, grief, or rage, to which they undergo an emotional, physiologic response even though no overt trauma is evident.

Lipsky wrote about the necessity of taking inventory of one's own trauma history and becoming alert to the triggers that are omnipresent in providing care (2007). Self-care in the face of one's trauma experiences has become a touchstone of the First Steps program and remains central to orientation and training as well as ongoing practice. Self-care is a frequent topic of discussion at First Steps staff meetings, and staff members are quick to compliment one another on their self-care strategies. EI's emphasis on self-reflection helped develop the Trauma Stewardship skill of awareness of one's own trauma history and triggers. Its mandate to Choose Oneself and navigate one's emotions prepared First Steps staff to listen carefully to Lipsky's advice on discharging the accumulated stresses of secondary trauma via physical exercise, emotional connection and expression, and mindfulness practices (2007).

First Steps home visitor Julia Bergkamp described a positive outcome with a young family struggling with basic needs in which her training in both EI and Trauma Stewardship played an important role.

*I spent a long time building trust and rapport with the family in order for them to be able to Be With the child and meet her emotional needs. The dad, an undocumented immigrant, had some undiagnosed PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] and trauma issues. I consider behavioral health a basic need. The parents' relationship was so strained that they were close to divorce. I kept patiently offering behavioral health resources and engaged in problem-solving his issues with access to services. My strategies included always showing up and holding non-judgmental space to talk about all aspects of their lives and their parenting experiences.*

She used EI to be aware of how the family's intense needs affected her emotionally, and she used Trauma Stewardship through reflective supervision to handle the triggers and to refocus on what nourished her in the work.

*I never left that home feeling depleted, because my cup was always filled by the impact I was making for the family. Recently I told them, "Let me show you where you were a few months ago, and let's review where you are now." Now that he's receiving counseling he is really able to be there for his family. He's got a lot of reflective capacity. His PTSD diagnosis helped him understand that there was a reason for his behavior. He has tools now, and is very conscious of not wanting to hand on his patterns. He wants to break the cycle.*

## Circle of Security

New Mexico CYFD has chosen Circle of Security as a shared program model for all of its early childhood systems, including its 31 Home Visiting Programs statewide. Programs are free to choose their own research-based curricula, but are encouraged and funded to send home visitors to become Circle of Security Parenting trainers so that programs share a wraparound frame of reference used by all providers. In Taos, the organizational members of the Paso a Paso Network of early childhood providers have also committed to embracing the Circle of Security approach by training as many of their staff members as possible. Paso a Paso encourages its members to use "Circle Speak" in working with each other and with clients so that this shared vocabulary can enrich and clarify provision of services. All First Steps home visitors are trained as Circle of Security Parenting trainers. First Steps offers seasonal classes in Circle of Security to the wider Taos community through its Children's Trust Fund grant. Home visitors also provide the class one-on-one to clients who are unable to attend the group classes.

A key concept in the Circle approach is called Being With: the capacity of a parent to provide warm, loving support to a child in whatever feeling they are experiencing (Hoffman, 2014). This capacity presents challenges to any parent who did not have one or more of his own feelings acknowledged or accepted by caregivers in early childhood. Witnessing these same feelings in one's children then triggers that stressful unmet need, which is phrased as Shark Music in Circle parlance (Hoffman, 2014). Much of the work of attuned parenting consists in choosing to provide a loving presence which can contain the child's emotional process even when one's Shark Music is playing, rather than reverting to the anger, judgment, coercion, minimizing, denial, or withdrawal with which those same feelings were met in one's own childhood (Hoffman, 2014). EI provides a strong foundation in the capacity to Be With feelings that home

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visitors model for their clients through the parallel process. The EI mandate to be aware of one's feelings, and the perspective that emotions are neither good nor bad, but carry vital information, paved the way for home visitors to pursue the capacity to Be With their clients' feelings. This capacity is also contained in the FAN core process of Empathic Inquiry (Gilkerson et al., 2012).

Katie Uilk, who has been a home visitor with First Steps for almost 5 years, attested to the value of EI in helping her use the Circle with high-needs families.

*I was sitting with a mom doing the first chapter of Circle of Security. She was holding the baby, who started fussing. I encouraged her to comfort the baby, and she offered her the breast, but the baby was not hungry. The mother returned her attention to our discussion about the Circle. I was trying to describe the needs on the bottom of the Circle. I asked the mother, "Where do you think the baby is on the Circle right now? Which needs is she expressing?" The mother replied, "I really don't know what you mean by 'the bottom of the Circle.'" I said, "Let's use the baby as our example. What does she need right now? Is it a Comfort Me moment? Organize my feelings? Protect me? I see that she is gazing directly up at you." The mother looked down and met her daughter's gaze for the first time during the conversation. Her face softened and she stroked her baby's face tenderly. "You're tired, aren't you?" she said to the baby. "You can go to sleep if you want." The baby closed her eyes and then opened them again, seeking to renew the mutual gaze. Then she smiled, closed her eyes, and went to sleep. The mother said, "That was the most amazing thing." I told her, "You comforted her, you protected her, and you organized her feelings." The mother told me, "Last night I was just spinning. I wanted my husband to look at me, but he just kept looking past me. I was so mad all day long, and all I needed was connection. Thank you for giving me language for what was right in front of me. I can see it now. Those are the Aha Moments that make the Circle so useful."*

Without consistent training in EI, Uilk's capacity to be empathic in the moment and to allow that emotion to inform and guide the conversation with the parent might have been lacking. Regular EI practice builds a navigable, two-way channel between emotion and thought that enriches both aspects of intelligence. Uilk's FAN certification also assisted her in sensitively responding to the client's changing frame of mind as it developed during the visit.

## The FAN

First Steps program manager Jaci Imberger first encountered the FAN at a statewide CYFD conference, where Soledad Martinez had invited FAN creator and facilitator Linda Gilkerson

to present. Imberger advocated for more than 2 years to bring Linda back to New Mexico to present the approach to her staff. "The FAN gave me something I was looking for in my practice: structure. In time I discovered it also provides a compass to guide us in meeting the families' needs and our program requirements." The FAN was adopted by First Steps in 2015. All staff members are certified in the FAN either at Level 1 or Level 2; Imberger holds the Supervisory FAN certification.

The FAN identifies five core processes, arranged in a fan-shaped graphic, that come into play during a home visit: Empathic Inquiry, when the client is feeling and expressing strong emotion; Mindful Self-Regulation, which the home visitor uses to quell the physiologic stress responses to triggers during a visit so that she can maintain emotional presence for the client; Collaborative Exploration, when a client is learning to see the baby in a larger perspective; Capacity Building, when the client is ready to try something new in her parenting; and Integration, when the client experiences an insight or is able to reflect on her parenting growth (Gilkerson et al., 2012). Just as the home visitor assesses where the parent is on the "fan" of these five processes and attunes her responses to meet the client where she is, the reflective supervisor identifies where the home visitor is on the FAN during supervision and matches her process with the correct response. Skillful and sensitive questioning by the program manager using the FAN structure during reflective supervision allows home visitors to explore their triggers in a safe setting.

"The EI competencies are a foundational part of learning Mindful Self-Regulation," observed Imberger, who provides reflective supervision for eight home visitors on a regular basis.

*EI makes it so much easier to understand Mindful Self-Regulation, which is why we introduce EI early on in the orientation process. I feel it's so important as home visitors or effective infant mental health specialists to be able to look in the mirror and check ourselves so we know how to 'Be With' our families and match them where they are. I always return to the Bruce Perry (2014) concept that change comes through repeated attuned interactions with a compassionate, regulated other.*

Some of these self-calming strategies are quite creative. One First Steps home visitor imagines a miniature cartoon character of herself who gives vent to all the feelings that must be held in reserve during a visit. More common strategies include mindful breathing, nurturing self-talk, physical and spiritual grounding, soothing imagery, and muscular relaxation. The alert and purposeful deployment of these Mindful Self-Regulation strategies in the moment is an example of Choosing Oneself and one's emotions in service to a greater goal.

The FAN holds a strong emphasis on the collaboration between the home visitor and the client (Gilkerson & Imberger, 2016). By engaging in the FAN, the home visitor learns to shift his focus from the mindset of fixing a problem, toward a mindset of asking questions that will assist the client to solve her own problem, engaging in Capacity Building together. Instead of deluging a parent with information, FAN practitioners learn to give just a drop and guide the parent in a process of reflection on the new perspective it provides, through Collaborative Exploration. FAN originator Linda Gilkerson, PhD, uses the phrase "Brave Practice" in describing the skill of "being able to stay in the hard places—not rushing to fix but holding self so [one] can focus on other, which relates to MSR [Mindful Self-Regulation] and EI as well as self-knowledge and emotional regulation" (L. Gilkerson, personal communication, May 25, 2017).

*You could apply any of any of our modalities in isolation, but each modality holds its own unique strengths and emphases. Having them all together allows us to go to a deeper place, to understand what the client needs and what they're looking for.*

explained Imberger. "EI gave us the foundational importance of knowing ourselves first before we can be of service to others. The FAN model served as our compass as we learned to weave

together these invaluable modalities." The FAN provides the structure that helps guide the First Steps home visitors' interactions with their clients, and offers the program manager the well-crafted tools to help them reflect on these interactions during reflective supervision. Imberger concluded, "I see the FAN as the culmination of our development as a program."

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## Organizational Culture

First Steps' synthesis of EI with its subsequent foundational program elements has nurtured a unique organizational culture that values self-awareness, self-care, and authentic connection. Staff members debrief together after challenging visits with families. They celebrate one another's birthdays at staff meetings, with each staff member responsible for bringing the food and decorating the desk of one other. They go to the movies or out for drinks together as a group after work and go for walks together. Home visitor Cristina Portillo observed, "On my day off, I wonder what the other home visitors are doing and talking about with each other. I look forward to coming to work and spending time with my co-workers."

"First Steps home visitors all know themselves well," noted Katherine Chavez, former First Steps home visitor and currently a training and development consultant with the University of New Mexico's Center on Development and Disability, which provides training and technical assistance to home visiting programs across the state.

*The home visitors are willing to look at themselves, which is hard to do. They have the ability to recognize emotions, the meanings emotions carry, and how they affect the people around them. The staff members take responsibility for their actions and emotions. They don't avoid or ignore; they lean right into it.*

The values of the First Steps microculture are embedded in its Communication Charter, created with the help of Dr. Franklin during the year before she moved to Asia to take on the position of Director of Mindfulness and Social Emotional Learning with United World College in Thailand. The Charter sets positive intentions and guides the interactions between staff members. In guiding the lengthy process of creating the Charter, Dr. Franklin used the emotional literacy curriculum, RULER, created by Marc A. Brackett at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (2011). The Communication Charter is one of the four foundational tools in the RULER curriculum. It elicits responses to the following questions: How do we want to feel when we are at work? How can we create these feelings? How do we want to handle conflict? How will we promote positive emotions and cooperative behavior?

The staff chose to prioritize their connections and relationships in the Charter. Close, trusting relationships among staff members allow for debriefing from a challenging home visit, help emphasize self-care and positive communication, increase staff and client retention, and improve productivity. From Trauma Stewardship they borrowed the phrases "Impeccable Selves," "Check me out!" (for those moments when one's impeccable self is nowhere in evidence), and "Getting on the train" for when one is hijacked by negative emotion or behavior such as gossip (Lipsky, 2007). They chose to end the charter with a phrase from Circle of Security, "Be good enough!" (Hoffman 2014).

The staff decided to hang copies of the charter in the bathrooms, where everyone would have frequent opportunities to read and reflect on it. The staff also reads and discusses the Charter once every quarter, raising examples of how staff members have used or not used it in recent months.

Dr. Franklin reflected,

*When a family functions well it has such a positive influence on society. That's where it all starts. First Steps recognized that in order for the parents to be able to change, the home visitors had to change. The goal was not to change the child, or change the family, but by changing themselves, to help the family transform. They go back to the self, learning to regulate their emotions as individuals and as a group. This is, I believe, why First Steps became so sustainable. The staff always goes back to that steadiness, so reliably, in a responsible way. They're not always perfect, but they always return to that perspective. (A. Franklin, personal communication, May 22, 2017)*

## Sustainability of the First Steps Model

The First Steps program experiences low staff turnover because of its emphasis on professional development and the ample opportunities for reflection and connection that characterize its organizational culture. Imberger recognized the draw of First Steps' unique mix. She credited the staff's commitment to each other, to the culture and environment they have created, and to the work they do with families, in creating a workplace that nurtures and nourishes.

Imberger perceived that professional development and frequent opportunities to learn and grow keep the work fresh and challenging. Of the 11 First Steps staff members, 7 recently received their Infant Mental Health endorsements, as part of a cohort of 18 Taos early childhood providers funded for endorsement through a Paso a Paso grant from Santa Fe's Brindle Foundation, and mentored by First Steps' Children's Trust Fund grant coordinator, Jeannie Ross. Endorsement required each staff member to complete an additional 2 hours per month of reflective supervision on top of the regular

### Learn More

Information on the Six Seconds model of Emotional Intelligence is available at: [www.6seconds.org](http://www.6seconds.org)

Readers can contact Dr. Franklin via her website: <https://www.amymcconnellfranklin.com>

The Erikson Institute's Facilitating Attuned INteractions (FANI) is outlined at their website:

<https://www.erikson.edu/news/fan-tool-developed-by-eriksons-fussy-baby-network-has-become-a-national-model>

The curriculum *Partners for a Healthy Baby Home Visiting Curriculum for Expectant and New Families*, Florida State University Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy can be purchased via the Florida State University website at: <https://cpeip.fsu.edu/PHB>

Information on Circle of Security Parenting can be found at: <https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/circle-of-security-parenting>

The Trauma Stewardship Institute is found at: <http://traumastewardship.com>

The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence's RULER curriculum can be found at: <http://ei.yale.edu/ruler>

The International Institute of Infant Massage offers in-depth instructor certification training for service providers to train parents in infant touch and massage: <http://infantmassageinstitute.com>



semi-weekly sessions. Imberger worked hard to squeeze staff hours, registration fees, and per diem expenses from the budget so that staff members could attend trainings on an ongoing basis.

Program sustainability is also supported by Katherine Chavez, who provides EI-informed training and technical assistance to the First Steps staff each quarter, including guiding their Onda process, the CYFD's Continuous Quality Improvement program. Chavez maintains a voluminous file of EI articles, books, and exercises that she uses with home visiting programs. She reported that although few programs have embraced EI per se, its perspectives are spreading statewide. "I see social emotional learning being adopted by many programs, which is similar to EI in helping parents to self-regulate and have awareness of how their emotions affect their child." Chavez was present at Dr. Franklin's very first EI training, while she was working as a kindergarten teacher at Anansi Day School in Taos.

*I remember Amy saying something that grabbed my attention: learn to be smarter with your feelings, more purposeful, intentional and aware. This opened up my world to knowing how my emotions affect the people around me and my own perceptions of others. It led me to learn about self-awareness, self-regulation and empathy. Being aware of where my triggers were really helped me support parents, not by being non-judgmental, but by withholding my judgments and seeing through the parent's lens. I had to learn how to do that for myself first before I could do my job. To this day it's what I lean on.*

## Suggestions for Replication

Just as every family is unique, so is every early childhood program. No two programs will incorporate EI in the same way, but every program has the capacity to benefit from EI. Some key activities contributing to First Steps' program development can be transferred to other programs:

- Contract with an EI trainer in your area who resonates positively with your staff to provide periodic, ongoing training and consultation; the ongoing relationship embodies and models the principles being taught
- Dedicate staff time to reflecting on and discussing the EI training, including both intellectual and emotional responses
- As a staff, choose subsequent modalities for adoption that resonate as meaningful for the group; the strands that First Steps chose are EI, reflective practice, Trauma Stewardship, Circle of Security, and the FAN
- Orient new staff by starting with EI and adding additional modalities in a dose-dependent, sequential way; the First Steps orientation process begins with an introduction to EI with Molly McCracken, followed by completing the Circle of Security with Jeannie Ross, learning reflective practice

with with Jaci Imberger, learning about trauma-informed care at staff meetings, and then completing the FAN with Imberger, recapitulating individually the sequence that the program followed in a more organic way as a whole

- Create ongoing personal or simply intellectual relationships with proponents of your program's chosen training modalities through workshops and by reading and discussing books and articles in book club format, a useful way to incorporate the concepts over time on a deeper level
- Identify ways in which EI enhances staff understanding of the new concepts.
- Ensure that the program manager has sufficient support to model all program modalities and perspectives on a consistent basis and ensure that staff members are using these concepts effectively
- Incorporate EI and other training activities into daily or weekly staff meetings, for example, Check-ins and Gratitudes at the open and close of meetings, Self-Care as a topic for discussion, or using the FAN during reflective supervision
- Create a Communication Charter articulating the program's core values and the ways the staff chooses to honor these values as a group
- Select EI and other activities to bring to clients through the parallel process, such as emotional vocabulary lists, the Ripple Effect, the Six Second Pause, mindful breathing or taking walks together, or practicing Being With the child's feelings

Dr. Franklin observed,

*Having an organization adopt EI is similar to making yogurt. You can't just throw a little starter into the milk. The milk has to be the right temperature, and you need the right culture and amount of starter. It's no coincidence that we speak of a yogurt culture. An organization needs the right proportion of people who are receptive to EI and capable of putting it into practice. Then it becomes the norm—it just seeps into the organization as a whole. When the skills are embodied by enough people, others begin to see the reason for it, and to take it on. It becomes a move toward relationship (personal communication, May 22, 2017).*

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**Beth Enson** is a home visitor with First Steps. She is a certified teacher of Circle of Security Parenting and of Infant Massage, and holds her Infant Family Specialist Endorsement (IMH-E II) as well as her FAN Level 2 Certification. More than

15 years' experience as a peer counselor assist her in her work with families.

**Jaci Imberger, RN**, is the program manager for First Steps in Taos, NM, where she leads her team in developing and using the skills of Emotional Intelligence, the FAN, and Trauma Stewardship in their home visiting practices. Ms. Imberger received her Infant Mental Health Level 2 endorsement and is a Circle of Security parenting facilitator. She brings extensive nursing experience to her role as a program manager and reflective supervisor.

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