

WeACT Competency Descriptions and Definitions

WeACT stands for Working with Children - Assessment of Competencies Tool. It is A common competencies assessment tool tailored for non-specialists and educators delivering care to children and adolescent populations in the child protection, education and mental health and psychosocial support sectors. This document offers general descriptions of all 13 WeACT competencies.

WeACT Competency 1: Non-verbal Communication

Definition:

The act of passing on information, emotions and feelings etc. to the child without the use of words

General description:

Non-verbal communication is the signaling or messaging of feelings, emotions, and thoughts through means other than words. Non-verbal communication is an essential part of all human communication, and children are very attuned to it (even if unconsciously).

The basic helping skills and advanced helping skills items can all be categorized under the below concepts:

1. Kinesics - movement-based behavior such as facial expressions, gestures, posture, and eye contact. Kinesic behavior is categorized into emblems (gestures with conventional meaning), illustrators (gestures that accompany speech), affect displays (emotional expressions), and regulators (gestures that control interaction flow). These should all be adjusted to the age and ability of the child.
2. Paralinguistics - how words are expressed, including tone of voice, rhythm, pace, and volume. These choices in vocalic delivery often convey emotion or emphasis independently from the words themselves, which is described as the broader domain of vocalic nonverbal communication within nonverbal communication theory. It is important that these paralinguistics are matched with what is appropriate to the age and ability of the child.
3. Proxemics – use of physical space, i.e., how close or far the helper sits or stands relative to the child, room arrangement, or seating configuration.

It is important to note that these concepts are variable, and what is appropriate might be different from one context to another.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

Non-verbal communication is used proactively when the helper intentionally uses facial expressions, tone of voice, posture, and physical space to convey safety, support, and attentiveness, and making the child feel welcome. It is also reactive when the helper picks up on the child's non-verbal and verbal cues, and adjusts their non-verbal responses accordingly to show presence, empathy, and understanding.

WeACT Competency 2: Verbal Communication

Definition:

The act of passing on information, emotions, thoughts and feelings etc. by using words. Sending an intentional message to a listener.

General description:

When working with children, it is important to use language, words, and verbal expressions that are understandable to the child, presented in a way that is clear. All verbal communication should be adapted to the age and ability of the child and should be culturally appropriate.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

The helper uses verbal communication proactively to offer explanations, guide discussions, or introduce ideas and feelings that can support the child. It is used reactively in response to what the child expresses verbally and non-verbally, whether to reflect, clarify, or validate their thoughts or emotions.

WeACT Competency 3: Rapport and Relationship Building**Definition:**

The ability to connect with others in a way that creates a climate of trust and understanding.

General description:

Rapport is an essential part of a healthy relationship, it is important in showing the child the helper is an adult they can trust and like. With good rapport, a child feels the helper supports them in a way that allows them to face difficult problems.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

Rapport is built proactively by intentionally using strategies such as welcoming tone, kindness, shared language, and positive body language to put the child at ease. It is reactive when the helper responds sensitively to the child's unique emotional and relational needs during the interaction.

WeACT Competency 4: Empathy, Warmth and Genuineness**Definition:**

Empathy is demonstrating that we can see a situation from the child's perspective in terms of how they think and feel about their experience. Warmth is human interest and affection. Genuineness is realness and sincerity, the attribute of an individual's character which is honestly experienced and thoughtfully shared with others.

General description:

When working with children it is important to understand or feel what they are experiencing from their frame of reference, i.e. the ability to put oneself in the other person's shoes. It is important to show that the helper understands the child's lived experience in a warm and genuine way. It is easier to assess this competency in a one-on-one interaction, but the principles remain the same in a group setting.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

The helper demonstrates empathy and warmth generally and in response to the child's emotional cues, while being reactive by showing that they truly understand and care.

WeACT Competency 5: Supporting the Reframing of the Child's Negative Thoughts and Feelings**Definition:**

A process of reconceptualizing a negative thought or feeling shared by the child, by trying to see it from a different perspective.

General description:

We all have negative thoughts and feelings, so do have children. Children can see themselves or the things they do in an unrealistically negative light, so it is important to support a change in this perception. In times of distress or difficult situation, these may occur more frequently, and it is easy to be self-critical and focus on the negative thoughts. Sometimes children might catastrophise a situation, making it seem worse than it really is, or we might blame ourselves for things that are out of our control. Reframing is a strategy that people working with children can use, to help adjust their mindset. It often involves focusing on more positive thoughts. It is the child's own positive reframing, changing how they see a problem and refocus their thoughts and feelings in ways that can encourage change and be empowering for the child.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

Reframing is primarily reactive, it is a reaction to a child expressing distress or negative thoughts, where the helper supports the child in seeing things differently.

WeACT Competency 6: Ability to identify the child's daily life problems or needs

Definition:

Ability to explore the situation of the children, including daily life issues and child needs.

General description:

The competency addresses the helper's capacity to assess the everyday issues that might be bothering or causing problems for the child. It is important for helpers to be able to understand that things that may seem trivial to an adult can seem like big issues to a child and cause much discomfort. Therefore, it is important to see these things from the child's point of view and explore them in a child-friendly way. This competency is closely linked to WeACT Competency 7 (Problem solving) or WeACT Competency 8 (Safe Identification).

Proactive and Reactive Use:

The helper uses this competency proactively by exploring what might be bothering the child. It is also reactive, when the child voluntarily shares a concern, and the helper listens carefully and follows up to understand and support them.

WeACT Competency 7: Problem solving—applies problem solving techniques for the child's daily life problems

Definition:

Ability to understand the child's (daily life) problem(s), and applying technique to solve these problems together with the child.

General description:

Problem solving refers to the exploration of potential solutions to the problems or issues that are causing the child discomfort or stress in their everyday life. This should only be applied to problems the child has a clear ability to influence and should not be applied to potential child protection issues that would fall under WeACT Competency 8 (Safe identification), or problems that are too big to solve (e.g. like a situation of conflict in a country, a natural disaster in a community or parents' divorce). When working

with children, it is important to focus on solutions that are feasible for the child and which don't ask too much.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

Problem solving is primarily reactive as it usually follows the child's sharing of a problem. However, the helper may need to take a proactive role in exploring together with the child what options exist, what is feasible, and what could help.

WeACT Competency 8: Safe identification of child abuse, exploitation, neglect, violence, and self-harm

Definition:

Ability of recognizing in a safe way the potential signs (of risks) of harm and the ability to follow up safely and appropriately.

This competency refers to the attentiveness and ability of the helper to recognize signs of potential risk of harm to the child. These potential signs of risks of harm are a set of signals, symptoms, effects, or behaviors that a child displays and that may indicate the existence of risk to their development or safety. Warning signs can be manifested in a variety of ways and include physical and behavioral signs, as well as signs related to the social and physical environment of the child.

Safe identification means that helpers are ready and equipped to assess the level of risk in a safe way and without investigating, and safely refer children to existing specialists/ specialized services that can adequately take care of the child's situation.

This competency is not meant to replace intervention- or organisation-specific guidance or training on child protection or child safeguarding. Rather, it is meant to see whether helpers are attentive to signs of potential risk of harm and are able to manage the situation safely and appropriately.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

This is a reactive competency where, if no signs of potential risk of harm are present, the helper should not explore the matter proactively. However, If there are clear signs or disclosures of harm, even if not verbalized by the child, the helper must recognize and respond in a safe, appropriate, and non-investigative way.

WeACT Competency 9: Giving feedback to the child

Definition:

The ability to offer a helpful response to the child on their achievements, thoughts or behaviours. so that they can improve, reach their goals, and strengthen positive behavior

It is meant to be used as a basis for the child to improve in the activities, tasks, or aspects of their lives that are important to them. To be helpful and constructive, feedback needs to be nonevaluative, supportive, timely, and specific, and should never criticize the child or address issues that the child cannot control or that are not of their causing.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

The helper proactively gives specific, timely, and positive feedback during the session to encourage the child's participation, effort, or insight. It is also reactive when offered in response to a child's question, action, or achievement.

WeACT Competency 10: Acknowledges and promotes child's agency in the session

Definition:

Ability helper to create an opportunity for the child to give input on and have influence over the session they are taking part in.

Agency means the ability of individuals to influence the circumstances they live in. Here, it specifically refers to the child's ability to give input on and have influence over the session they are taking part in. Their agency in the session should be promoted by the helper. When given the opportunity to influence the activities and sessions they take part in, this can help the child feel they are important and that their opinion matters, in turn supporting their engagement and commitment to the sessions.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

Agency is proactive when the helper invites the child to share ideas, influence the session structure, or make choices. It is reactive when the child initiates input such as suggestions or questions.

WeACT Competency 11: Behaviour Management – Demonstrates Behaviour Management Skills

Definition:

Ability to guide the child's behaviour and actions towards appropriate ways of behaving.

This should be done in a positive and supportive way that encourages positive behaviours and that does not involve physical intervention, shouting, humiliating, or isolating the child. Within this, children should be given the opportunity to correct their negative behaviour, for example by stopping certain behaviour, cleaning up a mess they have made or by apologizing. Proper behaviour management is crucial in working with children in order to maintain a positive and constructive session.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

The helper uses proactive strategies to prevent misbehaviours, such as setting clear expectations, maintaining structure, and avoiding triggers. It is also a good strategy to praise children for positive and constructive behaviour within the session. Behaviour is managed reactively when the helper responds to a child's distress or disruption calmly, consistently, and supportively.

WeACT Competency 12: Organises session effectively

Definition

This competency addresses the helper's ability to provide the necessary structure and materials for a group or individual session to take place in an efficient way that addresses the session goals and themes.

Without clear structure or a clear understanding of the activities and rules, children can get confused and unruly. The helper should have a clear structure for the session, manage time effectively, and secure all necessary resources to run the session (including a safe space). The helper will ensure children know and understand the ground rules, the goals and activities, and that the planned themes and goals are addressed.

WeACT Competency 13: Ability to be inclusive

Definition:

Inclusion involves involvement and empowerment, where the inherent worth and dignity of all people are recognized. The term inclusion is used to describe the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with

diversity. The principle of inclusion is based on components of accessibility, availability, acceptability and adaptability.

Inclusivity here means the equitable opportunity for everyone to take part in a session and activities, supporting those who might otherwise be left out to take part equitably and comfortably, respecting their boundaries. Some children may be more reserved or shy and be therefore left out, while some children may be discriminated against and marginalized by their peers based on their age, gender, ethnicity, religion, background, or other factors. The participation of these children needs to be supported and any potential discrimination addressed. The helper actively takes steps to include all children and addresses any kind of marginalization.

Proactive and Reactive Use:

The helper acts proactively to ensure all children can participate, adapting the environment, materials, or structure as needed. When signs of exclusion, marginalization, or discomfort arise, the helper responds reactively to address and resolve them.

The following documents supported development of competency descriptions:

- APA: American Psychological Association. APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2022
<https://dictionary.apa.org/>
- CLARK, David A. Cognitive restructuring. *The Wiley handbook of cognitive behavioral therapy*, 2013, 1-22.
- CHILD PROTECTION WORKING GROUP, et al. Inter-Agency Guidelines for Case Management and Child Protection.
<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/document/child-protection-case-management-training-caseworkers-supervisors-and-managers/>, 2014, 24: 2020.
- CPHA, The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian action, et. Al. Child Protection in Humanitarian Action Competency Framework. <https://alliancecpa.org/en/child-protection-online-library/guidance-child-protection-humanitarian-action-competency-framework> , 2020
- EKMAN, Paul; FRIESEN, Wallace V. The repertoire of nonverbal behavior: Categories, origins, usage, and coding. *semiotica*, 1969, 1.1: 49-98.
- Hull R. The art of nonverbal communication in practice. *Hear J.* 2016;69(5);22-24.
doi:10.1097/01.HJ.0000483270.59643.cc
- INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE, et al. Caring for child survivors of sexual abuse: guidelines for health and psychosocial service providers in humanitarian settings. *New York, NY: International Rescue Committee*, 2012.
- INEE Inter-agency network for education in emergencies. Teachers in Crisis Contexts Training for Primary School Teachers <https://inee.org/resources/teachers-crisis-contexts-training-primary-school-teachers>, 2014
- KELLY, Jennifer; ZERVAS, Natalie. How to improve parent-teen communication with validation. *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*, 2016, 32.6: 1-7.
- KOHRT BA, JORDANS MJD, Rai S, Shrestha P, Luitel NP, Ramaiya M, Singla D, Patel V, Pedersen G, Schafer A. ENhancing Assessment of Common Therapeutic Factors (ENACT) competency assessment tool. WHO, Geneva, 2021.
- MYERS, Michael W.; HODGES, Sara D. Empathy: Perspective taking and prosocial behavior: Caring for others like we care for the self. 2013.

- WATTS, Sarah, et al. The WHO EQUIP foundational helping skills trainer's curriculum. *World Psychiatry*, 2021, 20.3: 449.
- World Health Organization: Early Adolescent Skills for Emotions (EASE). Helper manual Group Psychological help for young adolescents impaired by distress in communities exposed to adversity. Generic Field trial version 2, 28 January 2019. Geneva, World Health Organization, 2019.