

REFLECTIVE CAREGIVING

What is the skill?

Reflective caregiving is the ability to consider the thoughts, feelings, intentions, wishes, and fears that may influence both the child's behavior and the caregiver's response. It involves recognizing that behavior has meaning while accepting that another person's mind can never be known with complete certainty.

Normal development

Children learn to understand their own minds through relationships with adults who treat their behavior as meaningful. A caregiver might say:

- "I wonder whether that goodbye felt harder than you expected."
- "Part of you may want help, and another part may not trust it yet."
- "You seemed angry after I helped your brother. Maybe you needed to know I was still thinking about you."

The caregiver does not claim to know exactly what the child feels.

How neglect interferes

Neglected children may have had few experiences of adults noticing or accurately interpreting their inner states. Their behavior may have been ignored, punished, or misunderstood. They may also have difficulty recognizing and describing their own thoughts and feelings. The child's reactions can evoke strong feelings in caregivers, including rejection, helplessness, anger, or urgency. Without reflection, the adult may respond to the child's behavior as though it were a personal attack rather than communication shaped by earlier relationships.

What it might look like

A caregiver may notice:

- Feeling rejected when the child refuses comfort.
- Feeling compelled to force closeness.
- Assuming the child acted with harmful intent.
- Becoming emotionally distant after repeated conflict.
- Taking compliance as proof that the child feels safe.
- Responding to the child's chronological age rather than emotional state.

Parenting implications

Before responding, pause and reflect:

- What am I feeling right now?
- What might my child be experiencing?
- What other explanations are possible?
- Am I reacting to the child's behavior or responding to the child's need?
- How can I maintain safety without losing curiosity?

Reflective caregiving does not require finding the perfect explanation. Its strength lies in remaining interested in the child's experience and willing to repair misunderstandings.

From Understanding to Attunement

Children become better able to understand themselves when caregivers repeatedly hold their thoughts and feelings in mind. Curiosity creates space for both connection and thoughtful limits.

