



Motivational Interviewing: A Primer for Child Welfare Professionals

Motivational interviewing is a method professionals can utilize to support families who may be ambivalent or hesitant about support from the child welfare system. It was designed to help engage individuals and assist them in exploring and resolving their ambivalence about change.¹ Given that families often become involved in the child welfare system involuntarily and that engagement may be a challenge for caseworkers, motivational interviewing is a method caseworkers may want to consider in their practice (Mirick, 2013). This factsheet provides child welfare professionals with an overview of motivational interviewing, describes circumstances when it could be applied, and highlights the basics of the method. It also provides links to additional resources.

¹ Ambivalence is a common term in the motivational interviewing literature. It refers to the client's state of both wanting and not wanting to change or, in other words, having simultaneous conflicting motivations. For example, a client may see the negative consequences of her substance use (e.g., impairing her ability to parent) but at the same time continue using substances.

WHAT'S INSIDE

Overview

When to use
motivational interviewing

Basics of motivational
interviewing

Working toward change

Training

Conclusion

References

Overview

Motivational interviewing was developed by W. R. Miller and S. Rollnick. It was first introduced in the 1980s as a method to engage and support adults coping with substance use issues and has since been adapted to meet the needs of other helping fields, including child welfare, criminal justice, and health. Miller and Rollnick (2013, p. 29) define motivational interviewing as follows:

Motivational interviewing is a collaborative, goal-oriented style of communication with particular attention to the language of change. It is designed to strengthen personal motivation for and commitment to a specific goal by eliciting and exploring the person's own reasons for change within an atmosphere of acceptance and compassion.

Motivational interviewing was intended for a counseling relationship that could extend several weeks, but it has also been shown to be effective during shorter interventions for substance use, smoking cessation, and peer violence (Higgins, 2015). According to the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC), motivational interviewing can be used with caregivers of children, as well as with adolescents (CEBC, n.d.). Additionally, CEBC awarded the method its highest rating ("well-supported by research evidence"). The method has been shown to help engage clients and enhance their motivation to use and complete services—including those related to child welfare—that can support them in making positive life changes (Sterrett, Jones, Zalot, & Shook, 2010; Damashek, Doughty, Ware, & Silovsky, 2011). Using motivational interviewing also may help caseworkers assess families' readiness to change and assist families in better understanding the steps necessary for changes to occur.

Practitioners of motivational interviewing approach the method with a perspective that includes partnership with the client, acceptance of the client, compassion, and an evocation (i.e., helping bring forth what is needed for change from the client) (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). These four components are often called the "spirit" of motivational interviewing. The motivational interviewing

process includes four overlapping processes—engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning—that are discussed in greater detail in the Basics of Motivational Interviewing section.

When to Use Motivational Interviewing

The use of motivational interviewing may be most applicable when the following circumstances are present (Silovsky, Leffingwell, & Hecht, 2009):

- The client has a specific target behavior that is leading to negative outcomes.
- The client is ambivalent about change.
- Choices that could benefit the client and family are available.

Given that many parents involved with child welfare may have substance use disorders and that children with parents who use substances are more likely to be maltreated, motivational interviewing holds promise for use with child welfare clients (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). Much like clients in the substance use field, child welfare clients may be ambivalent to change, which makes them good candidates for the use of motivational interviewing. Child welfare practice also tends to embrace some of the same tenets present in motivational interviewing, such as engaging clients in decisions and focusing on their strengths. Additionally, motivational interviewing incorporates self-determination, which is one of the tenets of trauma-informed care. Research has shown that motivational interviewing is also effective when paired with other treatment strategies, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017).

Motivational interviewing may also be beneficial when supporting youth involved with child welfare who are exhibiting negative behaviors. Adolescents often feel they are being judged or told what to do by providers, which is not effective. Instead, using a nonconfrontational and nonjudgmental approach such as motivational interviewing can help them explore ways to change their behaviors (Hohman, Barnett, & Shillington, 2012).

Child welfare professionals should be aware of power differentials and families' values when using motivational interviewing. The power differential between a caseworker and parent—or youth—could create additional resistance or negative reactions from the parent (Mirick, 2013). Parents may feel forced to comply with a suggested or mandated activity due to the threat of court action (e.g., removal of the child from the home, termination of parental rights) rather than an internal motivation to change (Silovsky et al., 2009). That would run counter to the premise of motivational interviewing. Additionally, motivational interviewing should not be used to compel families to take actions that are in contrast to their values (Silovsky et al., 2009).

Basics of Motivational Interviewing

This section summarizes the basics of motivational interviewing. This information is not intended as a training for child welfare professionals about how to use motivational interviewing with a client. For more information about becoming trained in motivational interviewing, refer to the Working Toward Change section.

Rather than occurring in distinct stages, motivational interviews progress through the following four processes in varying combinations and orders depending on the flow of the discussion and client needs (Miller & Rollnick, 2013):

- **Engaging:** The provider and client develop a working relationship.
- **Focusing:** The provider and client develop and maintain a focus on the client achieving a particular change goal.
- **Evoking:** The provider helps the client to express his or her own motivation for change.
- **Planning:** The provider works with the client to cultivate the client's commitment to change and how that change will occur.

Motivational interviewing relies on four core communication skills to help guide professionals (Miller & Rollnick, 2013):

- **Asking open-ended questions:** Open-ended questions allow clients to expound upon issues and provide richer detail than would be elicited through a closed-ended question, which typically can be answered with a one-word response or little detail. Examples of open-ended questions include "What brought you to speak with me today?" or "How has this issue affected your family?"
- **Affirming:** These statements acknowledge client strengths and are encouraging. Affirmations can help in several ways, including strengthening provider-client relationships, reducing defensiveness, and facilitating change. An example of an affirming statement is "You've been working very hard to attend all the sessions of your parenting class."
- **Reflecting:** These statements help show clients that you are understanding them. They repeat or rephrase what the client has said. Reflective statements can encourage the client to further explore an issue. Motivational interviewing utilizes several types of reflections, each of which has a particular purpose in helping guide the conversation and client exploration. For example, a simple reflection provides nearly the exact meaning intended by the client and helps show the provider understands what the client has said. (Client: "It's been very difficult to meet all the court requirements." Provider: "You've had a lot of difficulty meeting the court requirements.") A complex reflection, on the other hand, is a restatement of what the client said with some additional meaning inferred by the provider. (Client: "It's been very difficult to meet all the court requirements." Provider: "The difficulty meeting the court requirements is probably pretty stressful and frustrating.")
- **Summarizing:** Summaries are essentially reflections that tie together several of the client's statements, which can provide clients with an opportunity to hear a retelling of their experiences and their thoughts about change.

Working Toward Change

Motivational interviewing is focused on helping clients consider their readiness and willingness to change to improve their lives and, particularly in child welfare, the lives of their family members. Motivational interviewing is not about persuading a client to change, though; it seeks to help the client develop his or her own motivation to change.

It is important for providers to recognize change talk that indicates a client is willing to change (e.g., “I really want to get myself together so I can get my kids back.”) and help elicit additional change talk, with an eventual goal of client commitment to change and a plan for how to achieve it. When change talk does occur, providers can help clients progress toward actual change by asking questions or making statements about the clients’ desires, abilities, reasons, and commitments related to the change. Motivational interviewing also includes a variety of techniques to help evoke change talk if the client is more focused on sustain talk (i.e., statements that support not changing). For example, a provider can ask the client how important something is for them (e.g., “On a scale from 0 to 10, how important is it for you to ensure your children are safe at home?”) and then ask a follow-up question based on the response to initiate change talk (e.g., “Why are you at a 3 and not a 0?”, “What would it take to go from a 3 to a 7?”). Another method is to ask questions regarding the extremes of their concerns, such as “What would be the best/worst outcome if you changed the way you discipline your children?”

Providers may also encounter discord, or resistance, when working with clients. Within the context of motivational interviewing, discord occurs when the client-provider relationship is not optimal (e.g., the client perceives the provider as pushing him or her toward change), which some practitioners see as a sign that the provider has veered from the fundamentals of motivational interviewing (Hall & Hohman, 2013). Signals of possible discord include defensiveness, oppositional statements, interrupting, and withdrawal (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Providers should be aware of their own contributions to resistance and respond accordingly, perhaps through reflections, an apology, or even shifting the focus.

Training

Training in motivational interviewing, as well as ongoing coaching, is essential to helping practitioners ensure they are properly utilizing its techniques and progressing toward the best possible outcomes for clients (Snyder, Lawrence, Weatherholt, & Nagy, 2012). The Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers website (<http://www.motivationalinterviewing.org/>) provides details about upcoming training as well as other educational materials.

The following resources provide additional information about motivational interviewing:

- “Motivational Interviewing Techniques in Child Welfare” [video] (Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare): <http://casw.umn.edu/portfolio-items/motivational-interviewing-module/>
- “Motivational Interviewing as a Practice Innovation in Child Welfare” [video] (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute): <https://vimeo.com/22607747>
- *Motivational Interviewing in Child Welfare Services* (Northern California Training Academy): <https://humanservices.ucdavis.edu/sites/default/files/131%20211%20MI%20video%20guide%20revised%207-29-15.pdf>
- *Encouraging Motivation to Change: Am I Doing this Right?* (Center for Evidence-Based Practice): <http://www.centerforebp.case.edu/client-files/pdf/miremindercard.pdf>

Conclusion

With the increasing focus on family engagement and client involvement in decision-making in the child welfare field, professionals may find motivational interviewing to be a welcome addition to their practice toolbox. Motivational interviewing can help providers engage both parents and youth in the change process. This can be very empowering and can enhance clients' commitment to change and complete recommended or mandated services. Child welfare workers who are interested in incorporating motivational interviewing into their casework practice should speak with their supervisors about training and coaching opportunities within their agencies or the community.

For a more detailed discussion of motivational interviewing, refer to the book *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change* (3rd edition) by W. R. Miller and S. Rollnick.

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