



# Motivational Interviewing

## Foundational Considerations

### Working Collaboratively with Parents and Caregivers



It can be daunting to start adding Motivational Interviewing (MI) to what you are already doing. At first, it may seem overwhelming to be introduced to the guiding spirit of MI, to frame the flow of the helping relationship by the four tasks, and to intentionally start using the core engaging skills outlined by OARS. But the good news is, you are likely already supporting parents and families using many of these concepts and skills. And the even better news is, MI is not a ‘one way only’ approach to guide collaborative conversations with parents about change. MI is very adaptable to the responsibilities you have and the methods you are already using. There are multiple ways to become fluent with MI and do it well.

### Resistance!



While MI does not rely on a manualized or prescribed formula, its adaptability is built on strong core principles and lessons, which include:

- ♥ The Spirit, or the Heart, of MI
  - Partnership
  - Acceptance
  - Compassion
  - Empowerment
- ♥ Flowing with the 4 Tasks
  - Engaging
  - Focusing
  - Evoking
  - Planning
- ♥ Remaining Person-Centered: the collaboration is not about a problematic parent, but about a person. The goal-oriented style of communication is neither overly directive nor is it passively following – it is guiding.

Most systems that support change have used the term ‘Resistance’ – often to describe someone that is ‘resisting all of my best efforts to make them change!’.

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*It is not immoral to try to make someone change. It is simply not possible.*

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For a long time, ‘resistance’ has been used to blame parents for not changing or engaging. Many times, though, this oppositional attitude has been the normal human reaction to confrontational approaches – perhaps well-intentioned methods intended to *convince* or ‘break-down the defenses of’ parents regarding change. MI reconceptualizes resistance as more likely due to: Sustain Talk – when the parent argues against making a change, which is a normal part of ambivalence, or Discord – when the parent is uncomfortable with the working alliance or approach. If not addressed and adapted to *by the caseworker*, both ongoing Sustain Talk and Discord predict poor outcomes.

## MI: Cultural Respect and Humility

Every helping relationship happens within the context of culture, and this is especially true in Child Welfare. We used to talk about achieving ‘cultural competence’, but competence implies ‘expertise’ and risks stereotyping or treating others with our own biases and expectations. With experience, we have learned we cannot be ‘experts’ about parents – rather, we respect that they are the experts on themselves. And MI is very well matched to this understanding.

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*Cultural Humility includes an intentional self-awareness matched with readiness to learn from others respectfully in order to honor their traditions, values and perspectives*

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MI relies strongly on empathic and active listening – which strives to understand the internal perspectives and experiences of the parent. Within this atmosphere of understanding and respect for the parent’s expertise, MI is well suited to working with culturally diverse parents and families.

There are many ways to do MI well – and when done well, MI flows like a normal conversation.

Though MI is often included as a part of therapy, its adaptability means it is a good fit in any supportive, professional relationship focused on health and change. MI has identified characteristics associated with effective therapy that typically predict better outcomes – and these core, learnable skills are likely quite useful in collaborative relationships with parents to promote increased engagement and supported change:

- Accurate empathy
- Sharing hope and positive regard
- Acceptance
- Having shared goals toward change
- Evoking the parent’s own reasons/ideas for change
- Offering information – collaboratively and with permission
- Being genuine

### Special Focus: Being Genuine

Parents are more able to explore and have hope for change when they feel safe to do so. Part of supporting this safe space includes being genuinely present during your interactions. So, being genuine – or your authentic self – is part of predicting better outcomes for parents and families. But what does this entail? In part, it means not being too wooden or impassive. While balancing empathy with objectivity is important, coming across as overly detached jeopardizes engagement and trust. Some other considerations about being genuine include:

- **Honesty:** telling the truth (filtered through the lens of compassion) and being transparent about your roles and responsibilities. This also includes honesty with yourself about any personal reactions.
- **Openness and responsivity:** this builds on not hiding behind cold objectivity and being honest by allowing your expressions (facial and vocal) to match what the parent is sharing (there is an exception here with anger – which is best met with a calm responsiveness)
- **Humility:** don’t assume that you already understand the parent, the parents’ experiences or their expectations, or that you have immediate solutions.

Source and additional information: Motivational Interviewing Fourth Edition: Helping People Change and Grow by W. Miller and S. Rollnick (2023). Guildford Press.