

# Increasing Parents' Desire for Positive Growth and Change: Novel and Traditional Approaches to the Use of Motivational Interviewing with Child Welfare Involved Families



UNIVERSITY of  
**SOUTH FLORIDA**

College of Behavioral & Community Sciences  
Child & Family Studies

## Authors

Dr. Amy Vargo, University of South Florida, United States  
Pamela Hardy-Jones, University of South Florida, United States  
Lisa Coy, University of South Florida, United States  
Dr. Connie Walker, University of South Florida, United States

### Introduction

Child welfare systems have increasingly embraced the use of evidence-based behavioral health interventions to transition from crisis-oriented care to prevention-driven approaches for children and families. Motivational Interviewing (MI), an evidence-based counseling method, has been employed with the goal of effecting behavior change and enhancing physiological, psychological, and lifestyle outcomes. MI primarily targets ambivalence toward change while boosting motivation to change by having clients reflect on personal goals and any obstacles their current behaviors pose. Florida is currently using MI as a tool to enhance child welfare professionals' ability to engage families in treatment services – a philosophical shift that prioritizes collaboration with families. MI is viewed as a cultural or philosophical shift or mindset change. MI is rooted in responsiveness; therefore, staff develop a range of MI tools that they are ready to flexibly employ as the context demands. Also implemented in Florida's child welfare system is a more targeted MI approach that is focused on stabilizing the family unit. This is modeled after the MI approach used to treat substance abuse, which has been more commonly cited in treatment literature. Given the diversity in application, the utility of motivational interviewing in a child welfare setting is explored.

### Methods

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative interviews with child welfare and behavioral health professionals, a statewide survey, and document review of implementation workgroup meetings and training materials. This study was funded via Florida Department of Children and Families and the Administration for Children and Families.



### Findings

Participants across both novel and traditional MI approaches reported strengths and skills developed:

- ✓ They became more client-centered, developed another perspective on how to help families, advanced their understanding of the need for respecting individual autonomy, acquired a different mindset that makes connecting with individuals easier and builds client confidence.
- ✓ MI training changed the way they assess the needs of their clients, provided strategies to get more input from clients, assisted them in gathering better information regarding a case, and helped them to better gauge where the client is at in the treatment process.
- ✓ Participants reported that they had made changes in the way they speak to clients, putting more thought into what they ask, asking more open-ended questions to elucidate underlying family dynamics, and recognizing the effect their questions could have on the path of any given conversation.
- ✓ Participants shared that MI also empowers clients “by eliciting their narratives of meaning, pertinence, and capacity to change” and “capitalizing on the client's voice and choice and assisting them with their thought processes towards change.”

Challenges reported mainly came from nonclinical applications of MI, or case managers who had been asked to complete MI training and apply MI principles to all the work they do with families.

- ✓ Communication barriers to using MI that were reported include when parents didn't have adequate phone or wi-fi service, language barriers between caseworkers and clients, and stigma and/or beliefs individual case workers carried regarding either specific clients or other cultures.
- ✓ Some families are not ready for MI, lack of trust, the child's ability to engage due to the level of trauma, extremely violent children or parents, and clients not moving from the pre-contemplation stage.
- ✓ Clients who have not had the best experiences with service providers have different levels of openness to learning new parenting strategies, and clients who have special needs may also not be the easiest or best clients to use MI with.
- ✓ Respondents noted training-related issues, including a need for more training in certain geographic areas, lack of uniform techniques from training to training and across geographic areas being trained, and lack of consistency with mentors and field support staff who may have their own methods and deviate from the MI curriculum.

## Implications for Child Welfare

### Engagement and Collaboration

MI emphasizes collaboration and partnership between the counselor and the client. In the child welfare system, this approach can help build a positive relationship between social workers and families. It fosters a sense of collaboration, reducing defensiveness and resistance.

### Empowering Families

MI is rooted in the idea of empowering individuals to make positive changes in their lives. When working with families in the child welfare system, this approach can empower parents and caregivers to take an active role in decision-making and problem-solving, enhancing their sense of autonomy and control.

### Exploring Ambivalence

Families involved in the child welfare system often face complex and challenging situations. MI can help explore the ambivalence that may exist within the family regarding the need for change. By acknowledging and addressing conflicting feelings, MI helps families move towards positive decisions.

### Building Motivation for Change

MI is particularly effective in eliciting and strengthening intrinsic motivation for change. When applied to child welfare, it can help families identify and articulate their own reasons for making positive changes in their behavior, ultimately increasing the likelihood of successful outcomes.

### Respecting Autonomy

MI emphasizes respect for an individual's autonomy and choices. In the context of child welfare, this approach can be applied by respecting the family's perspective, acknowledging their strengths, and involving them in the decision-making process regarding the care and well-being of the children.

### Goal Setting and Action Planning

MI helps individuals set realistic and achievable goals. When working with families in the child welfare system, this can translate into collaboratively developing case plans that address concerns and lead to positive changes in parenting practices, family dynamics, and overall well-being.



## Conclusion

In summary, applying Motivational Interviewing principles in the child welfare system can contribute to building a collaborative and empowering environment, enhancing communication, and fostering positive changes within families. It aligns well with the strengths-based and family-centered approaches increasingly recognized in social work and child welfare practices.

## For Further Information

Web  
<http://childwelfareresearchandtrainingalliance.org>

Email  
avargo@usf.edu