

Application of Motivational Interviewing Techniques in Child Welfare Practice

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Summary

This page provides an introduction to Motivational Interviewing (MI) and its applications in child welfare. Appended are links to a training PowerPoint that can be used to train caseworkers in reflective listening, one of the foundation MI techniques, as well as a document with links to other resources for child welfare caseworkers interested in learning or practicing MI with clients.

Background

Involvement with the child welfare system necessitates opening up intimate details of one's life to strangers, with inhibiting emotions such as fear and shame informing each interaction, along with other isolating factors such as domestic abuse, substance abuse, and poverty. Public child welfare workers also face significant job stress and high burnout rates, even when compared with private child welfare workers (Kim, 2011). At the same time, caseworker engagement can be a critical factor for positive case outcomes (e.g., Lee & Ayon, 2004; Gockel, Russell, & Harris, 2008). MI, a counseling approach built on engaging ambivalent clients and motivating them to change, therefore offers promise as a technique for child welfare caseworkers in their interactions with families.

Motivational Interviewing

Developed as an approach for the treatment of those with substance use disorders, MI found application with other types of involuntary or otherwise reluctant clients (e.g., Naar-King & Suarez, 2013; Rollnick, Miller, & Butler, 2007). The spirit of MI is found in four interrelated concepts: partnership with the client, acceptance of the client, compassion for the client (through care for his welfare), and evocation of the client's commitment to apply his strengths and change, all of which must be expressed and not merely felt by the therapist (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Motivational Interviewing is especially adept at handling ambivalent clients, who might have a great desire to change but are also "immobilized" by other factors (Miller & Rollnick, 2009). MI helps the client to resolve this ambivalence not by tricking them into changing but instead by "selectively eliciting and reinforcing the client's own arguments and motivations for change" so that the client convinces himself of the need for change and his ability to accomplish it (Miller & Rollnick, 2009).

These values are achieved through methods that focus on building motivation and consolidating commitment, through phases of engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning for change, using techniques such as reflective listening (highlighted in the application section below), affirmations, and eliciting change talk (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Though these techniques were designed for a counseling relationship that would be several weeks in duration, they have also been used successfully as a brief intervention for substance abuse, smoking, and peer violence (Berman et al., 2010; Audrain-McGovern et al., 2011; Cunningham et al., 2012).

Application to Child Welfare and Related Scenarios

The importance of the worker-parent relationship and MI's efficacy in boosting engagement as a brief intervention support its use in child welfare. To date, it has been taught in workshop settings and conferences for child welfare caseworkers (e.g., Northern California Training Academy, n.d.; Dvoracek, 2007). Evaluations support its use in child welfare-specific contexts, including comprehensive family assessments (Snyder et al., 2012), juvenile corrections (Doran, Hohman, & Koutsenok, 2013), and child protection work with alcohol-abusing parents (Forrester et al., 2008). The high rate of child welfare cases involving a substance-abusing caregiver also makes the intervention a good fit for the practice (Sun et al., 2002; Hohman et al., 2005), given that MI was developed as a counseling approach for substance abuse.

MI thus has several areas of potential use and benefit for child welfare caseworkers. The PowerPoint accessible via the link below and the materials contained in the resource link below will be of use to child welfare practitioners interested in learning or practicing MI techniques in order to promote client engagement and improve case outcomes.

Reflective Listening Application

The following conversation excerpts provide an example of reflective listening in a child-welfare context. The dialogue on the left demonstrates reflective listening and the dialogue on the right depicts an absence of the approach. Reflective listening is defined as “the skills of ‘active’ listening whereby the counselor seeks to understand the client’s subjective experience, offering reflections as guesses about the person’s meaning” (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 412). It is useful even in brief interventions for establishing rapport and increasing engagement.

The following exchange takes place during a fictional consultation between a woman who has a child in foster care and a child welfare caseworker, during a monthly check-in. Notice how, in the scenario on the left, the worker is reflecting back what the client says explicitly, and also what the client means and implies.

With Reflective Listening	Without
<p>CL: I really tried to do everything on my case plan this month, but you have me running from one place to the other and trying to work, and most places are only open 9-5. It's too much.</p>	<p>CL: I really tried to do everything on my case plan this month, but you have me running from one place to the other and trying to work, and most places are only open 9-5. It's too much.</p>
<p>CW: You're feeling really overwhelmed with everything on your case plan, along with all the other stuff you have to do.</p>	<p>CW: Have you tried getting your hours adjusted at work so it would be easier to get to counseling without it impacting your job?</p>
<p>CL: Yeah, I'm trying to do everything right, but it feels like everything is stacked against me.</p>	<p>CL: I asked about that last week, but I don't want to tell them the reason why.</p>
<p>CW: It's important to you to get everything done so you can have your daughter back.</p>	<p>CW: Why do you think your work won't accommodate a switch without giving them the exact reason? You could just say you have an appointment.</p>
<p>CL: It is. I'm glad you can see that. I know I can find a way to make this work. Maybe I'll ask a coworker to trade shifts with me.</p>	<p>CL: I guess so.</p>
<p>CW: Trading shifts could work.</p>	<p>CW: So you'll try with your boss again and hopefully you can make it to more classes this month.</p>

In the example with reflective listening, the client feels understood by the caseworker, leading her to voice increased commitment to working on her case plan. This leads her to think up strategies for achieving change, and increases her confidence in her abilities. In the example without reflective listening, the client feels defensive rather than understood, leading to pessimism about her ability to get things done. This guarded, defensive feeling will probably carry over to future interactions with her caseworker and the resulting pessimism might also erode her ability to meet other challenges arising from her case plan. Additionally, the only solution is the one formulated by the caseworker, and the client does not seem committed to the strategy or optimistic about its potential success. Reflective listening as a foundational MI technique can therefore improve rapport between client and caseworker as well as client self-efficacy. Once the basics of reflective listening are mastered, more advanced reflections can be learned such as affirmations, summaries, double-sided reflections, and amplified reflections, as well as other MI skills such as soliciting change talk.

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