

Motivational Interviewing

A Reference Guide for Tennessee Parent Attorneys

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a client-centered, goal-oriented communication style that helps individuals explore and resolve ambivalence about change.

THE PURPOSE

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is a communication strategy for enhancing engagement, building trust, and supporting individuals in making meaningful progress toward a healthy change. Many parents in dependency and neglect cases experience fear, resistance, or ambivalence about change. MI provides a structured, non-confrontational approach that attorneys can use to improve communication and help parent-client identify their own motivations for change rather than feeling forced into compliance.

By using MI, attorneys can:

- Encourage parents to take an active role in their case plans.
- Reduce defensiveness and resistance to services.
- Help parents articulate their goals for reunification in their own words.
- Strengthen parents' confidence in their ability to meet case plan requirements.
- Foster a collaborative attorney-client relationship, improving communication and case outcomes.

Ultimately, MI helps shift the conversation from compliance-driven mandates to a strengths-based, client-centered approach, increasing the likelihood of successful reunification and long-term family stability.

MI EVIDENCE AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Developed by William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick, MI has been extensively studied in various fields, including child welfare. Research demonstrates that MI can improve client engagement, enhance compliance, and lead to better outcomes for families in child welfare.

- Shah, A., Jeffries, S., Cheatham, L. P., et al. (2019). Partnering with parents: Reviewing the evidence for motivational interviewing in child welfare. *Families in Society*.
- McCambridge, J., Waissbein, C., Emlyn-Jones, R., & Rollnick, S. (2008). Child risk and parental resistance: Can motivational interviewing improve the practice of child and family social workers in working with parental alcohol misuse? *British Journal of Social Work*, 38(7), 1302-1319. *Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 100(1).
- Carroll, K. M., Libby, B., Sheehan, J., & Hyland, N. (2001). Motivational interviewing to enhance treatment initiation in substance abusers: An effectiveness study. *The American Journal on Addictions*, 10(4), 335-339.
- Forrester, D., Westlake, D., Killian, M., et al. (2018). A randomized controlled trial of training in motivational interviewing for child protection. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 88, 180-190.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING

Engaging: Building a collaborative and respectful relationship with the client.

Focusing: Identifying key issues and goals relevant to the client's case.

Evoking: Drawing out the client's own motivations for change. **Planning:** Developing concrete steps toward achieving goals.

KEY MI STRATEGIES

Open-Ended Questions: Encourage clients to share more of their thoughts instead of requesting yes/no answers. Open-ended questions promote discussion and uncover motivations.

Example: "What are some things you feel are going well right now? What are some things you wish were different?"

Affirmations: Recognize and validate a client's strengths and efforts, which helps build confidence and rapport.

Example: "I can see that you're really committed to making progress for your child."

Reflections: Repeating or rephrasing what a client says to show understanding and encourage deeper thinking. This can also help clarify thoughts and feelings.

Example: "It sounds like you really want to do what's best for your child, but you're feeling overwhelmed by the case plan."

Summaries: Pulling together key points from a conversation to reinforce understanding and progress. This helps clients see the bigger picture and solidify their motivation for change.

Example: "So far, you've shared that you love your child, want to reunify, and feel that transportation is your biggest challenge. Let's talk about some possible solutions."

WHAT MI IS:

- ✓ A way to build trust and encourage parents to engage with their case plan.
- ✓ A method for helping parents recognize and voice their own reasons for change.
- ✓ A respectful, non-confrontational approach that avoids judgment.
- ✓ A strategy to guide conversations about challenges and solutions in a supportive manner.
- ✓ A means of reinforcing self-efficacy and promoting small, achievable steps toward compliance.

WHAT MI IS NOT:

- ✗ An interrogation or persuasion tactic.
- ✗ A method of forcing compliance with court-ordered services.
- ✗ A one-size-fits-all solution—MI adapts to individual clients' readiness for change.
- ✗ A directive approach where the attorney provides all the answers.

CLIENT CONVERSATION STARTERS:

Using MI techniques, attorneys can build rapport, explore barriers, and support parents in developing their own solutions. Here are some MI-inspired conversation starters:

Engagement & Relationship-Building:

- "I know this process can be overwhelming. What's been on your mind about your case?"
- "Tell me a little about what brought you here today."
- "I want to understand your experience. What's it been like for you so far?"

Exploring Ambivalence & Readiness for Change:

- "What are some things you feel are going well right now? What are some things you wish were different?"
- "On a scale from 1 to 10, how ready do you feel to make progress on your case plan? What makes you say that number?"
- "What are some things that might make it easier for you to move forward?"

Eliciting Motivation for Change:

- "What are some reasons you want to work toward reunification?"
- "If things were to improve, what would that look like for you?"
- "What strengths do you have that will help you take the next step?"

Developing a Plan & Next Steps:

- "What's one small step you feel ready to take this week?"
- "How can I support you in making progress on your case plan?"
- "What would make it easier for you to follow through on your next court requirement?"

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- Chapin Hall, & Public Consulting Group. (2022). Motivational interviewing: A guide to Family First implementation. https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Motivational-Interviewing-Guide_ChapinHall-and-PCG.pdf
The Children's Bureau (2017) supports MI as a best practice approach for working with families involved in child protective services.
- Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2023). Motivational interviewing: A primer for child welfare professionals. U.S. DHHS, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau
- American Bar Association (2017). Motivational interviewing: Counseling clients in challenging contexts.
https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/child_law/resources/child_law_practiceonline/child_law_practice/vol-36/may-june-2017/motivational-interviewing--counseling-clients-in-challenging-con/?login