



USING MOTIVATIONAL INTERVIEWING WITH FAMILIES OF CHILDREN 0-5 YEARS OLD

This resource provides practical examples of motivational interviewing (MI) techniques specifically designed for professionals working with parents and caregivers of children ages 0-5. Drawing from evidence-based approaches outlined by Miller and Rollnick (2013), Lieberman and Van Horn (2008), and Madsen (2007), this handout demonstrates how to apply MI principles in early childhood and family settings. The document includes concrete examples of partnership statements that position parents as experts on their own children, open-ended questions that explore family experiences and motivations for change, affirmations that recognize parenting strengths during the challenging early years, both simple and complex reflections, and summaries that validate parent experiences while uncovering deeper emotions and motivations. Each example is tailored to the unique developmental stage of children 0-5 and the specific challenges parents face during this critical period, including sleep difficulties, feeding concerns, behavioral guidance, and attachment building. By utilizing these MI techniques, practitioners can enhance engagement with families, reduce resistance to services, and support parents in developing confidence and motivation for positive change.

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Partnership Statements for working with parents of children ages 0-5.

These statements emphasize collaboration, respect client autonomy, and position the client as the expert on their own experience while the helper serves as a supportive partner in the process.

Collaborative Language

- "What would work best for you?"
- "Let's figure this out together."
- "You know yourself better than anyone else."
- "I'm wondering what your thoughts are about this."
- "Help me understand your perspective."

Sharing Decision-Making

- "What feels right to you?"
- "You're the expert on your own life."
- "What makes the most sense from your point of view?"
- "I'd like to hear your ideas about what might work."
- "You're in the driver's seat here."

Acknowledging Client Expertise

- "You've been dealing with this longer than anyone."
- "You know what you've tried before and what's worked."
- "Your experience with this is really valuable."
- "You understand your situation better than I do."
- "You're the one who has to live with any changes we discuss."

Inviting Collaboration

- "What would be most helpful for us to focus on today?"
- "How can we work together on this?"
- "What would you like to get out of our time together?"
- "I'm here to support you in whatever direction feels right."
- "Let's explore this together."

Avoiding Expert Position

- "I don't have all the answers, but together we might find some."
- "I'm curious about your thoughts rather than wanting to tell you what to do."

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- "My role is to walk alongside you, not to lead the way."
- "You're the one who will know if something feels right or not."

For Parents

- "You know your child better than anyone."
- "What have you noticed works best with [child's name]?"
- "You're the expert on your family's needs."
- "Help me understand what a typical day looks like for you and your child."
- "What feels manageable for your family right now?"

Examples of open-ended questions for working with parents of children ages 0-5.

These open-ended questions invite elaboration, show genuine interest in the parent's perspective, and help gather important information while maintaining a collaborative, non-judgmental stance.

Assessment and Understanding

Daily Life and Routines

- "What does a typical day look like for you and [child's name]?"
- "What parts of your day with [child] feel most challenging?"
- "Tell me about the moments when things feel like they're going well."
- "How has parenthood been different from what you expected?"

Child's Development and Behavior

- "What have you noticed about how [child] is developing?"
- "How does [child] typically respond when they're upset?"
- "What are some things [child] really enjoys doing?"
- "How does your child usually let you know what they need?"

Exploring Concerns and Strengths

Parenting Experiences

- "What feels most natural to you as a parent?"
- "What would you say are your strengths as a parent?"
- "What kinds of things worry you most about [child]?"
- "How do you usually handle it when [child] is having a difficult time?"
- "What do you think [child] needs most from you right now?"

Support and Resources

- "Who are the people you can count on for support?"
- "What kinds of things help you feel more confident as a parent?"
- "What resources have been most helpful to your family?"
- "How do you typically take care of yourself as a parent?"

Exploring Change and Goals

Motivation and Vision

- "What would need to change for things to feel better for your family?"

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- "What are your hopes for [child] as they grow?"
- "If things were going really well six months from now, what would that look like?"
- "What would be most helpful for us to work on together?"
- "What changes would make the biggest difference in your daily life?"

Past Successes

- "Tell me about a time when you handled a challenging situation with [child] really well."
- "What strategies have worked best for your family in the past?"
- "When do you feel most connected to [child]?"
- "What advice would you give to another parent in a similar situation?"

Specific Developmental Areas

Sleep and Routines

- "How are nights going for your family?"
- "What have you tried to help with [child's] sleep?"
- "What does bedtime typically look like at your house?"

Feeding and Eating

- "How are mealtimes going for your family?"
- "What have you noticed about [child's] eating patterns?"
- "What mealtime strategies have you found helpful?"

Social and Emotional Development

- "How does [child] typically interact with other children?"
- "What emotions does [child] express most easily?"
- "How do you help [child] when they're feeling overwhelmed?"

Attachment and Bonding

- "What are some special moments you and [child] share together?"
- "How do you and [child] usually reconnect after being apart?"
- "What activities do you and [child] both enjoy?"

Future-Focused Questions

- "What skills would you like [child] to develop in the coming months?"
- "What kind of relationship do you hope to have with [child] as they grow?"
- "What would help you feel more prepared for the next stage of [child's] development?"

Examples of Affirmations for working with parents of children ages 0-5:

These affirmations help parents recognize their existing strengths while building confidence in their parenting abilities during the crucial early childhood years.

Recognizing Parenting Strengths

Daily Care and Attention

- "You're so attentive to [child's name]'s needs."
- "I can see how much you care about your child's wellbeing."
- "You notice the little things that matter to [child]."
- "Your patience with [child] during that difficult moment was remarkable."
- "You're really tuned in to what [child] needs."

Parenting Skills and Efforts

- "You're working so hard to be the best parent you can be."
- "I admire how you handled that situation with [child]."
- "You have such a gentle way of talking to [child]."
- "Your consistency with bedtime routines is really paying off."
- "You're doing an amazing job keeping [child] safe and loved."

Acknowledging Growth and Learning

Parent Development

- "You've learned so much about what works for your family."
- "You're becoming more confident in your parenting decisions."
- "You're really figuring out what [child] responds to best."
- "Your willingness to try new approaches shows real dedication."

Resilience and Persistence

- "You don't give up, even when things get challenging."
- "You keep trying different strategies until you find what works."
- "Your persistence with [child's sleep/eating/behavior] is admirable."
- "You bounce back from difficult days with such strength."
- "You're showing incredible resilience during this tough time."

Recognizing Love and Connection

Bonding and Attachment

- "The love between you and [child] is so obvious."
- "You have such a special connection with [child]."
- "[Child] clearly feels safe and secure with you."
- "You make [child] feel so loved and valued."

Understanding Your Child

- "You really know [child] well."
- "You can read [child's] cues so well."
- "You understand what [child] is trying to tell you."
- "You're becoming an expert on your own child."
- "You pick up on [child's] needs before anyone else does."

Strength-Based Affirmations

Problem-Solving and Creativity

- "You come up with such creative solutions."
- "You're really good at thinking outside the box."
- "You found a way to make that work for your family."
- "Your problem-solving skills are impressive."
- "You adapt so well to [child's] changing needs."

Advocacy and Protection

- "You're such a strong advocate for [child]."
- "You fight for what [child] needs."
- "You're protecting [child] in all the right ways."
- "You speak up for [child] when it matters."
- "You're making sure [child] gets the best possible start."

Effort and Commitment Affirmations

Dedication Despite Challenges

- "You're managing so much, and still putting [child] first."
- "Even when you're exhausted, you show up for [child]."

- "Your commitment to [child] is unwavering."

Learning and Growth

- "You're always looking for ways to improve."
- "Your openness to feedback shows how much you care."
- "You seek out resources to help [child] thrive."
- "Your dedication to being the best parent you can be is evident."

Specific Developmental Moments

Early Years Focus

- "You're giving [child] such a strong foundation."
- "You're helping [child] feel secure in this big world."
- "Your nurturing is exactly what [child] needs right now."
- "You're building [child's] confidence every day."

Celebrating Small Wins

- "You helped [child] through that transition beautifully."
- "You made [child] feel so proud of themselves."
- "Your encouragement is helping [child] try new things."
- "You're teaching [child] that they are valued and important."

Family-Centered Affirmations

- "You're creating such a loving home for [child]."
- "Your family has its own special way of doing things, and it works."
- "You know what's best for your family."
- "You're building beautiful traditions with [child]."
- "Your family's strengths are really shining through."

Examples of Simple and Complex Reflections for working with parents of children ages 0-5:

Complex reflections help parents feel deeply understood and can reveal motivations for change that may not be immediately apparent.

Simple Reflections

Simple reflections repeat or paraphrase what the parent said without adding much interpretation.

Content Reflections

Parent: "I'm exhausted. Tommy woke up three times last night." **Simple Reflection:** "You're really tired from being up with Tommy."

Parent: "She refuses to eat anything except crackers." **Simple Reflection:** "Mealtime is a struggle with her only wanting crackers."

Parent: "I don't know what I'm doing wrong." **Simple Reflection:** "You're feeling uncertain about your parenting."

Feeling Reflections

Parent: "I just feel like I'm failing at this whole mom thing." **Simple Reflection:** "You're feeling like you're not succeeding as a mom."

Parent: "It breaks my heart when he cries and I can't figure out what's wrong." **Simple Reflection:** "It's painful when you can't soothe him."

Parent: "I'm so frustrated that nothing seems to work." **Simple Reflection:** "You're feeling really frustrated right now."

Complex Reflections

Complex reflections add meaning, emotion, or deeper understanding that goes beyond what was directly stated.

Tips for Complex Reflections with Parents 0-5

- **Listen for underlying emotions** behind parenting challenges
- **Reflect the parent's love and commitment** even when they're struggling
- **Acknowledge the difficulty** of early parenting while highlighting strengths
- **Notice ambivalence** about parenting roles and identity changes
- **Reflect hopes and dreams** parents have for their children
- **Highlight resilience** and persistence in the face of challenges

Reflecting Underlying Emotions

Parent: "I've tried everything - different bottles, different formulas, feeding positions." **Complex Reflection:** "You're working so hard to help your baby, and it sounds like you're feeling discouraged that nothing has worked yet."

Parent: "My mother-in-law keeps giving me advice about how to get the baby to sleep." **Complex Reflection:** "It sounds like you're feeling judged, like others think you should have this figured out already."

Parent: "He used to be such an easy baby, but now he's so clingy and whiny." **Complex Reflection:** "You're missing that easier time, and maybe wondering if you did something to cause this change in him."

Reflecting Values and Motivations

Parent: "I work full-time and feel guilty leaving her at daycare all day." **Complex Reflection:** "Being a good mom is really important to you, and you're torn between providing for your family and being present with your daughter."

Parent: "I don't want to be like my own mother - she was always yelling." **Complex Reflection:** "You want to break that cycle and create a different, more peaceful environment for your child."

Parent: "I read all these parenting books, but none of it seems to apply to my situation." **Complex Reflection:** "You're really trying to do everything right, but it feels like your child doesn't fit the textbook, which leaves you feeling lost."

Reflecting Strengths and Resilience

Parent: "I've been getting up every two hours for six months. I don't know how much more I can take." **Complex Reflection:** "You've been showing incredible endurance and dedication to your baby's needs, even when you're running on empty. That takes real strength."

Parent: "I tried time-out, but she just laughs and runs away." **Complex Reflection:** "You're experimenting with different approaches because you want to guide her behavior in a loving way, even when it's challenging."

Parent: "Some days I just want to hide in the bathroom and cry." **Complex Reflection:** "Parenting can feel overwhelming, and you're being honest about those really hard moments that every parent has."

Reflecting Ambivalence

Parent: "I love being home with him, but sometimes I miss my old life." **Complex Reflection:** "Part of you treasures this time with your son, and another part of you grieves the independence and identity you had before becoming a mom."

Parent: "I want her to be independent, but I also don't want her to need me less." **Complex Reflection:** "You have these competing feelings - wanting to raise a confident, capable child while also cherishing being needed by her."

Parent: "I know I should be patient, but by the end of the day I'm just done." **Complex Reflection:** "You hold yourself to high standards as a parent, and you're frustrated with yourself when your patience runs out, even though that's completely human."

Reflecting Deeper Concerns

Parent: "He doesn't talk as much as other kids his age." **Complex Reflection:** "You're noticing differences in his development, and that's bringing up some worry about whether he's on track."

Parent: "I feel like I'm always correcting her behavior." **Complex Reflection:** "You want to guide her well, but you're concerned that too much correction might affect your relationship with her."

Parent: "Everyone else seems to have this figured out." **Complex Reflection:** "You're feeling alone in your struggles, like other parents have some secret that you're missing."

Reflecting Hope and Motivation

Parent: "I just want him to be happy and feel loved." **Complex Reflection:** "At the heart of everything you do, you want your son to grow up feeling secure and cherished - that's what drives all your efforts as his mom."

Parent: "Maybe we'll try the new bedtime routine one more time." **Complex Reflection:** "Even when things feel difficult, you keep hoping and trying because your child's wellbeing matters so much to you."

Parent: "I know this phase won't last forever." **Complex Reflection:** "You're holding onto hope that things will get easier, which helps you get through these challenging days with your little one."

Examples of Summaries when working with parents of children 0-5:

Summaries help parents feel heard, organize complex information, and create momentum for positive change while reinforcing their role as the expert on their own child and family.

Collecting Summary

Used to gather and organize what the parent has shared

Example: "Let me see if I understand what you've shared with me today. You're feeling exhausted from Emma's sleep struggles - she's been waking up multiple times each night for the past month. You've tried several different approaches like changing her bedtime routine and moving her crib, but nothing seems to be working consistently. At the same time, you mentioned that you really treasure those quiet moments when you're rocking her back to sleep, even though you're tired. You also said that your partner thinks you should let her cry it out, but that doesn't feel right to you. You want to find a solution that helps everyone get better rest while still feeling like you're responding to Emma's needs. What did I miss, or what would you add to that?"

Linking Summary

Connects current conversation to previous sessions

Example: "I'm remembering that last time we talked, you were worried about Marcus's tantrums at bedtime, and you felt like nothing was working. Today you're telling me that the new routine where you give him two choices - pajamas first or teeth first - has really helped him feel more in control, and bedtime is going much smoother. It sounds like you've discovered that giving him some autonomy within structure is what works for your family. How does that feel for you as his mom?"

Transitional Summary

Moves from one topic to another

Example: "So we've talked quite a bit about the feeding challenges with Sophie - how she's very selective about textures and you're concerned about her nutrition. You've mentioned feeling judged by family members about her eating, and how hard it is when mealtimes become battles. You also shared that she does enjoy helping you prepare food and seems more willing to try things when she's involved. I'm wondering if we could shift our focus now to talk about what you'd like feeding time to look like ideally for your family?"

Bouquet Summary

Highlights strengths and positive qualities

Example: "I want to reflect back some of the strengths I've heard from you today. You're incredibly observant about Lily's needs - you've noticed that she gets overwhelmed in busy environments and you've started planning outings during quieter times. You're also so creative in how you help her cope - like the special backpack with her comfort items that goes everywhere with her. Even when you're feeling frustrated, you're patient with her big emotions and you help her name her feelings. You're also reaching out for support and resources because you want to understand her better. What I'm hearing is a mom who is deeply committed to helping her child thrive."

Planning Summary

Prepares for next steps or goals

Example: "Let's review what we've discussed about next steps. You mentioned wanting to work on helping Jake with his big emotions when he doesn't get his way. You're interested in trying some of the calming strategies we talked about - like the deep breathing with the stuffed animal and giving him words for his feelings. You also want to practice staying calm yourself when he's upset, which you recognize is challenging but important. You said you'd like to try these approaches for the next couple of weeks and see how things go. Does that sound right? What feels most manageable to start with?"

Ending Summary

Wraps up the session

Example: "As we wrap up today, I want to acknowledge how much insight you've shared about your family. You've been so thoughtful about what's working and what's challenging with Mia's behavior. You've recognized that she does better with predictable routines, and you're committed to being more consistent with boundaries while still being responsive to her needs. You're also taking care of yourself by asking for help from your sister when you need a break. It's clear how much you love Mia and want to support her development. What feels most important for you to remember from our conversation today?"

Tips for Effective Summaries with Parents:

Include:

- Both challenges and strengths
- Parent's emotions and concerns
- Specific examples they've shared
- Values and motivations expressed
- Progress or insights gained

Check for Accuracy:

- "What did I miss?"
- "Does that capture it?"
- "What would you add?"
- "Is there anything else important?"

Use Their Language:

- Reflect their words and phrases
- Honor their way of describing things
- Avoid professional jargon

End with Purpose:

- "What stands out most to you?"
- "What feels most important to focus on?"
- "Where would you like to go from here?"