

Moving from Compliance to Behavior Change: Motivational Interviewing and the Juvenile Court

By Michael D. Clark, MSW

Juvenile courts strive to reach several service goals, yet so much of a court's focus can be compacted into two missions of critical importance. The first mission is to stabilize problem behavior and bring into control any behavior that disrupts or threatens our citizens and communities. Courts have a social mandate to bring into control that which is "out of control." The second mission is to assist positive behavior change and to provide assistance to enable youths and their families to attain optimum health. Both of these missions operate in tandem for the safety of our communities via the development and increased well-being of its citizens.

Motivational Interviewing (MI) is an approach that is gaining notice and popularity in juvenile courts as it helps courts with their mission to assist behavior change. As the name suggests, MI is a method for interviewing clients. However, many who become skilled in its use would argue that it's more than an interviewing method—it informs and influences direct practice efforts as well. MI first gained prominence in the substance abuse field in the 1980s and found favor in both health care and addiction science due to its ability to enhance client engagement and retention in treatment.

Moving beyond traditional fields of client treatment, disciplines that work with court-mandated clients are turning to MI as well. Motivational Interviewing has been embraced by both the U.S. Department of Justice and the National Institute of Corrections for its ability to lessen resistance and increase offender motivation.¹ MI gained a foothold in juvenile courts in the 1990s, and the use of this approach has been expanding ever since. The answer to why juvenile courts would turn to the strategies and skill sets of Motivational Interviewing can be found when one reviews several definitions of this approach. The formal definition of MI is listed as:

"Motivational interviewing is a person-centered, directive method of communication for enhancing intrinsic motivation to change by exploring and resolving ambivalence."²

Consider two more definitions, in simpler terms:

- It's a way of using questions and statements strategically to help people think and talk in a positive direction.
- It's an easy way of helping people find their own reasons for change.

Beyond a method for interviewing, MI offers direction to juvenile courts in order to answer a critical set of questions:

- How do people change?
- How can staff assist youths and family members to engage in important alterations in their behavior?
- How can staff lend assistance for *enduring* behavior change—the type of "self-propelled" change that continues long after the juvenile and family exit court jurisdiction?

It is in the answers to these all-important questions that the utility of an MI approach will be found. Many turn to MI because it represents

an investigation into the conditions that build cooperation and increase human motivation, and has been successful in teaching court personnel how to best assist youths and their families with positive behavior change.

Why would juvenile probation departments want to implement Motivational Interviewing?

1. Motivational Interviewing provides a structured and proven method for assisting behavior change.

Go back beyond the last two decades and you'll find that juvenile justice suffered from a lack of proven methods for reducing juvenile recidivism.³ Today, it is almost unimaginable that our field ever operated without practice methods being studied and empirically validated through rigorous science. Science-based methods for probation work were a focus of the National Institute of Corrections' "Evidence-Based Policy and Practice" Initiative,⁴ which included MI among the eight principles of effective interventions shown to reduce the risk of recidivism. Within these eight principles, the second principle of evidence-based practice cites:

"Enhance Intrinsic Motivation—Research strongly suggests that 'motivational interviewing' techniques, rather than persuasion tactics, effectively enhance motivation for initiating and maintaining behavior change." (p.1)

The NIC article lends substance to that recommendation by reviewing possible benefits offered to juvenile probation departments from the integration of motivational strategies into court services.

2. MI can help staff get "back into the game" of behavior change.

Historically, motivation has been viewed as a more-or-less fixed characteristic of clients. That is, a juvenile usually presented with a certain motivational "profile," and until he was ready to make changes there was not much you could do to influence shifts in behavior. Under this model, the probation officer becomes an enforcer of the court's orders, but not necessarily an active participant in the juvenile's behavior change. Motivational Interviewing teaches juvenile staff that motivation is not a fixed trait—something you either have or you don't. Instead, motivation is more akin to a "state" and a *state that can be influenced*.

3. MI suggests effective tools for handling resistance and can keep difficult situations from getting worse.

Since motivation has been viewed more like a fixed trait of the adolescent, it has been thought that if teens enter probation departments displaying little motivation, then the best strategy is to attempt to break through their denial, rationalization, and excuses:

- "You've got a problem."
- "You have to change."
- "You'd better change your ways, or else!"

Space prohibits a review of the many studies that have found that a confrontational counseling style limits effectiveness. One such study,⁵ however, found that a directive-confrontational counselor style produced twice the resistance, and only half as many positive client behaviors as did a supportive, client-centered approach. Problems are compounded as a confrontational style not only pushes success away, but can actually make matters worse. Although many probation staff rightly object, “We’re not counselors!—our job is to enforce the orders of the court,” this claim only serves to highlight the need for strategies to help staff get back in the game of behavior change.

4. MI keeps officers from doing all the work, and makes interactions more change-focused.

A. Interactions are more change-focused when the officer understands where change comes from.

Staff trained in Motivational Interviewing can turn away from a confrontational style or logic-based approach as they learn about the process of behavior change. Many in probation believe that what causes change are the services provided to the juvenile, whether that involves treatment, the threat of punishment, advice, education, or monitoring their activities. These conditions and services represent only part of the picture—and not necessarily the most important part. Research shows that long-term change is more likely to occur for *intrinsic* reasons.⁶ Often the things that we assume would be motivating to the juvenile simply aren’t. Thus, motivation is, in part, a process of finding out what things are valued and reinforcing to the individual youth.

When working with juveniles who see no problem with their illegal behavior, it is essential that an officer have the skills to create an “appetite” for change.

B. Change-focused interactions place the responsibility for behavior change on the juvenile.

During MI training, we use an attractive (and accurate) phrase: “When Motivational Interviewing is done correctly, it is the juvenile who voices the arguments for change.” The first step in getting the juvenile thinking and talking about change is by staff establishing an empathic and collaborative relationship, which includes watching and listening to find out what the youth values and if his or her current behavior is in conflict with these deeply held values. Motivational Interviewing calls our attention to this key idea:

It is discrepancy that underlies the perceived importance of change: no discrepancy, no motivation. The discrepancy is generally between present status and a desired goal, between what is happening and how one would want things to be (one’s goals).

It is within this discrepancy that the material will be found for amplifying the *juvenile’s own reasons for change*. When working with juveniles who see no problem with their illegal behavior, it is essential that an officer have the skills to create an “appetite” for change. Creating this appetite for change involves creating ambivalence.

5. Motivational Interviewing will change who does the talking.

Motivational Interviewing techniques focus on strategically steering a conversation in a particular direction—yet steering in itself is worthless without the ability to move the conversation forward. Consider how probation officers often work much harder than their probationers. As part of a qualitative research project, Clark⁷ videotaped actual office appointments between juveniles and their assigned probation officers. The finding was that, in office visits averaging 15 minutes in length, officers “out-talk” juveniles by a large margin. For instance, in one session, 2,768 words were spoken between officer and teen. The breakdown? The officer spoke a hefty 2,087 words out of this total while the probationer spoke only 681 words. Although listening by itself is no guarantee of behavior change, using strategies to get the juvenile talking is a prerequisite to being an effective motivational interviewer.

In interactions like this, officers are literally talking themselves out of effectiveness. The problem is not so much that the officer is doing all the talking, but rather that *the juvenile is not*. It stands to reason that the more the officer is talking, the less opportunity there is for the adolescent to talk and think about change. Compliance can occur *without* the officer listening and the juvenile feeling understood—the same cannot be said if one wants to induce behavior change.

POSTSCRIPT

Motivational Interviewing can enable court staff to help clients build commitment and reach a decision to change. Rather than remaining “stuck” in the problem, court staff using Motivational Interviewing techniques can move young people and their families toward healthier outcomes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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END NOTES

¹ National Institute of Corrections. (2003). *Implementing evidence-based practice in community corrections: The principles of effective intervention*. Washington, DC: Author.

² Miller, William R., & Rollnick, Stephen. (2002). *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing people for change*. New York: Guilford Press, p. 25.

³ Andrews, D. A., & Bonta, J. (2003). *The psychology of criminal conduct* (3rd ed.). Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing Co.

⁴ *Supra* note 1.

⁵ Miller, William R., Benefield, R. G., & Tonnigan, J. S. (1993). Enhancing motivation for change in problem drinking: A controlled comparison of two therapist styles. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 455-461.

⁶ Deci, Edward L., & Ryan, Richard M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior*. New York: Plenum.

⁷ Clark, Michael D. (2005). *Qualitative review of probation officer/offender dialogues: Transcript word counts for “talk-time” ratios*. Unpublished study. Center for Strength-Based Strategies.