Simple Interactions

An approach to professional development for adults who work with kids

The “how-to” manual for practitioners
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As you continue through this “how-to” guide you’ll see references to our website. Please visit simpleinteractions.org to fully explore the SI process through additional resources, facilitation materials, and information.
What is the Simple Interactions approach?

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN ADULTS AND CHILDREN/YOUTH are at the heart of every classroom, youth program, child-care center, and any other youth-serving entity. Not only can positive interactions help youth-serving organizations run smoothly, they can create lasting bonds that make a difference in the lives of young people! The goal of Simple Interactions is to help yourself and your staff become more mindful of these everyday interactions and the impact they can have on youth development.

The Simple Interactions approach provides an easy, positive way to focus on small, everyday interactions between adults and children/youth in your program, center, or classroom.

Through a simple process, SI helps you identify strengths of your staff and then amplify those strengths. In SI, your staff will create—rather than just receive—professional development opportunities. Through a series of interactive workshops, your staff will collect and discuss short video clips of themselves and their colleagues engaged in positive interactions with children and youth.

By celebrating the important work your staff members do every day, these clips become empowering conversation starters for discussing and sharing effective interaction strategies.
“In all of the things we do with kids, there’s interaction.”

– Youth program director after participating in SI
Getting Started

To conduct Simple Interactions, you’ll need the following:

- One or more coordinators/administrators to schedule, organize, and facilitate the process.

- A digital video camera. Many models exist around $100. Smart phones or tablets may also be used if they have sufficient storage space for collecting multiple clips.

- A way to review and edit clips. You can use clips as is, but sometimes you’ll want to trim clips, add subtitles, or even combine clips into a single video. Typically, this is easiest to do on a computer using free video editing software (e.g., MovieMaker, iMovie).

- A way to show clips to your staff. Depending on the size of your staff, you can do this from a desktop or laptop computer screen, or use a projector.

- A few hours to collect footage prior to each workshop.

- Time to review concepts and materials online to help you facilitate the workshops.

- Three workshops, each one lasting 60-90 minutes (meaning about 4 hours total of your staff’s time).
The Three-Part Cycle

The SI process involves three main parts, repeated in a cycle, three times:

1. **Collect Clips**
   - Capture one- to three-minute interactions between staff and children/youth on video.

2. **Select Clips**
   - Identify video clips that show positive interactions—at least one clip per staff member.

3. **Watch Clips**
   - Bring staff together to watch video clips. Discuss the features of positive interactions and how you might get them to occur more frequently.

The next few pages will describe these three parts in more detail.
1. Collect Clips

Collect short video clips of staff interacting with children and youth during their typical working hours. Directors/supervisors can film staff and/or staff can film each other. Clips should be short—one to three minutes each. Try to capture clips that showcase positive interactions.

**Tips**

- Try to capture the “triangle” of the interaction – the adult, child(ren), and the thing they’re doing.
- Try to capture the beginning, middle, and end of the interaction.
- Keep each clip to 3 minutes or less. If you’re filming a longer interaction, you can stop and start immediately recording again. Having short clips makes selecting clips easier in the next phase.
- Don’t use the zoom button. Instead, get close enough to adequately capture audio.

“Everyone gets a little bit nervous [being on camera]. After the first time they were definitely more comfortable and open to it.”
2. Select Clips

Go through the clips you’ve captured and choose ones that show each staff member working with youth. Usually, one good clip per staff member is the right amount. Clips should have good technical qualities (i.e., you can see and hear what is happening) and should showcase positive interactions as much as possible.

Tips

- Keep in mind the different goals of each workshop (see website and pages 15–19 for more details):
  - **Workshop #1**: Look for fun, cute, heartwarming clips to help staff feel comfortable watching themselves on video.
  - **Workshop #2**: Select videos that showcase positive interactions and allow for deeper analysis.
  - **Workshop #3**: Try to have a clip of each staff member working on the goal he/she set in Workshop 2.

- Make small edits to the clips as necessary. For example, shorten clips that extend beyond 3 minutes, compile related clips into one video file, or add captions if it’s hard to hear.

- Go for variety! If every clip is 1-on-1 homework help, this can limit discussion. Try to select clips of various activities and differing group sizes whenever possible.
3. Watch and Discuss Clips

Bring the staff together to watch the selected clips. After each clip, discuss the interaction. During these conversations, we suggest minimizing evaluative language such as “I like…” or “I don’t like…”. While the goal is certainly to highlight and support what is already working, sometimes compliments can tilt the workshop towards an evaluative atmosphere.

Without relying too much on compliments, conversations can still focus on the positive as much as possible. To keep the conversation collegial, productive, and encouraging, we recommend focusing on two things—**noticing** and **wondering**. We suggest using phrases like “I noticed…”, “I can see…”, “I can tell…” and “I wonder…” when discussing clips. We can **notice** positive moments, reactions, techniques, etc., and we can **wonder** how to amplify and multiply those things. We can also **wonder** about how other strategies could have had an impact on the interaction.

Video is rarely used to encourage reflections about practice, so it might feel awkward at first. Focusing on the positive can be an unusual task for many staff. The tendency is often to be critical and pick out all the things that could have been better. We encourage you to keep the conversation focused on the strengths that appear in each video—particularly for the first workshop. While each workshop is a bit different, these principles apply to all three. Later in this guide, as well as on the website, you’ll find more information about what is distinct about each workshop.
Workshop Tips

- It typically takes 10–15 minutes to watch and discuss a 1–3 minute clip. So in a 90-minute meeting you can review about 5 or 6 clips.

- Let the person on the clip speak first. You can ask the staff member what he/she remembers about this moment, what it’s like to work with the child(ren) in the video, and what he/she noticed about the interaction.

- Next, open up conversation to all staff. Encourage them to talk about what they noticed and what the clip made them think about.

- Always start with positives! Actively encourage this if necessary.

- After you’ve watched the first few videos, you’ll use the Simple Interactions Tool (on the next page) to guide deeper conversation.

- You can find specific advice about facilitating workshop conversations on pages 12–13.

Visit simpleinteractions.org to download agendas for each workshop.

“Seeing us on the film was really helpful... throughout the sessions we talked about how important that interaction is.”
The Simple Interactions Tool (SIT)

The Simple Interaction Tool was designed to be, well, really simple. It provides a way to guide conversation when watching video clips of interaction, specifically, in the areas of **connection, reciprocity, participation, and progression**. Research shows that these four elements are critical for successful youth-adult interactions. The SIT is a productive means for assessing the video clips—by identifying these four domains, staff can reflect on their strengths and on areas for improvement. Please visit our website for more information and research about these four dimensions.

1. **CONNECTION**: Interacting with mutually positive or appropriate emotions

   ![Connection Examples]

2. **RECIPROCITY**: Balancing roles of engagement during joint activity

   ![Reciprocity Examples]
3. PARTICIPATION: Inviting and involving all children, especially those who may be least likely or least able to participate due to ability, temperament, or other factors.

4. PROGRESSION: Presenting incremental challenge and matching with appropriate support.
Guiding Conversation in Workshops

Allow the staff in the video to begin the conversation so that she/he can first provide context and insight. Another recommendation is to focus on **noticing** and **wondering**. Phrases like “I noticed…”, “I can see…”, “I can tell…” and “I wonder…” help to begin discussions. We can **notice** positive moments, reactions, techniques, etc., and we can **wonder** how to amplify and multiply those things, or we can **wonder** how other strategies could have had an impact on the interaction.

Video Discussions *Before* Introducing the SIT
Show your pre-selected clips with overwhelmingly positive practice and ask staff, “**What did you notice?**” The “noticing” conversation often naturally generates words and language that you can summarize in a way that connects to the four broad domains of the SIT.

Introducing the SIT
We recommend giving the staff the “no-words version” of the SIT (found on the website) during the first two workshops. This allows you to first ask the staff to **interpret** the scale, one concept at a time, which can encourage a deeper understanding of the concepts. As you summarize and review the four domains of the SIT, it’s great to reference the responses staff provided during the opening activity and initial video discussions.
Video Discussions After Introducing the SIT

At all workshops, we recommend the following process:

1. Staff reflect on what stood out to them in the interaction, especially thinking about the 4 domains of the SIT.

2. In pairs or small groups, staff share what they noticed, veering away from a direct discussion of X, Y, and Zs.

3. Ask the whole group to do a shout-out or hand-raising to indicate X, Y, or Z, one dimension at a time. This lets the group see consensus and divergence.

4. For both consensus and divergence, ask staff to share their reasoning in selecting X, Y, or Z. In cases of diverging opinions, first ask those who selected X to share, moving towards those who selected Z, so the discussion ends on a positive note.

At workshops 2 and 3, we recommend pushing the conversation to the “wondering” process:

- I wonder if this interaction could have moved towards a Z if we …
- I wonder if this practice can grow in more places …
- I wonder why we do not have enough opportunities for …
- I wonder what we can do, individually and organizationally, to create more opportunities for…

Frame suggestions with language like, “I wonder what would happen if we...”. The uncertainty (wonder) and collectivity (we) convey respect, as opposed to language like “You should...” or “We need to...”
Putting it all together

We recommend that you complete the SI cycle at least three times; that is, hold at least three Watch-and-Discuss workshops. The goals and nature of the three workshops change as you progress.

“It helped with team building and the dynamics of our staff.”
The next few pages describe the three ‘Watch & Discuss’ workshops in more detail. Remember, you can also find a detailed agenda for each workshop at simpleinteractions.org.
Workshop 1: Getting Comfortable

Through our work with numerous youth programs, we found that the best goal for the first workshop is to encourage everyone to feel comfortable seeing himself/herself on video and learn to discuss youth work practice in this context. Try to create a comfortable environment in which staff members are able to safely discuss practices with each other. If you can achieve this goal, you have had a successful first workshop!

As you will see in the agenda (found on the website), the workshop begins with an opening activity. After that, you and your staff will watch the first clip. It’s great if you can start with clips that are funny, heartwarming, and/or interesting. Watch the clip, then have an open conversation without the SIT.
After watching and discussing a few clips, you can introduce the Simple Interactions Tool (SIT). In this first workshop, we recommend introducing only the first three items: connection, reciprocity, and participation. After exploring these items, try to apply it to each clip—for example “Was this interaction more like an X, Y, a Z, or somewhere in between?”

End with a closing activity, such as asking staff members to share something a colleague did that inspired them.
Workshop 2: Getting Specific

Now that your staff has experience watching and discussing clips, the second workshop often requires less facilitation than the first.

In Workshop 2, you will introduce the final and perhaps most challenging item of the Simple Interactions Tool: progression. As you’ll see in the agenda online, the opening activity at Workshop 2 is devoted to progression.

It’s also helpful to review the first three items: connection, reciprocity, and participation.

Whereas the goal of the first workshop is to help everyone get comfortable, the goal of Workshop 2 is to go a bit deeper. While still focusing on the positive, ask staff members to consider ways to create more ‘Z’ interactions. Conversation may naturally turn constructive, which can be productive as long as it stays positive.

“They wanted to really practice what we were talking about at the sessions.”
By Workshop 3, your staff will likely be used to the watch-and-discuss process. You can continue to use the SIT to guide conversations. Try to encourage the conversation to move toward improvement planning. For example you can ask, “I wonder what can be done—both structurally and individually—in this program to encourage positive interactions?” Ideally, you can finish Workshop 3 with some action plans.
Next Steps

The SI approach is designed to drive lasting change and long-term growth. The learning begins with the three workshops, and then it is up to you and your staff to decide what comes next. Try to identify next steps that will encourage your staff to continue to amplify and multiply their positive interactions with children and youth.

The interactions and relationships within any youth-serving setting are vitally important—you and your staff should feel proud of your commitment to prioritize them!
“I think our staff became more aware [that] the relationship has to be in place to meet other goals.”

Remember to visit our website for more resources and information!

simpleinteractions.org