

# Intervention Technique Taxonomy: Relational Communication Techniques

Version 1 • October 2026

## OVERVIEW

Intervention techniques are the intentional, observable, replicable actions home visitors may take when working with families to improve an outcome. For the purposes of defining and studying intervention practices, HARC distinguishes between two categories of intervention techniques. *Relational communication* intervention techniques are strategies home visitors may use to communicate and to build or maintain a relationship or working alliance with families. *Behavior-focused* intervention techniques are home visitor strategies to promote specific behaviors, such as responsive parenting, breastfeeding, or seeking postpartum care.

These techniques likely co-occur and may reinforce one another in practice. Behavior-focused techniques focus on *what* changes, while relational communication techniques focus on *how* change happens. Home visitors may use relational communication techniques to introduce or support their use of behavior-focused techniques, potentially enhancing the use and effectiveness of behavior-focused techniques.

Intervention techniques can be effectively communicated in a taxonomy. A taxonomy is a comprehensive “menu of options”, or a way to organize and classify key aspects of interventions delivered within home visiting. The Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative (HARC) previously published a taxonomy of 81 *behavior-focused* intervention techniques (available [here](#)).

Through a series of surveys, workgroup sessions, concept mapping activities, and feedback tasks with 30 home visiting researchers, model representatives, and program staff (see Exhibit), HARC developed a taxonomy of **40 relational communication techniques** with definitions. The Relational Communication Technique Taxonomy draws on evidence about strategies for communicating and building and maintaining working relationships with families in home visiting,<sup>1,2</sup> as well as an existing ontology—a structured map—of delivery styles used by practitioners in related professions.<sup>3</sup> Because these processes play an important role in family engagement, they are key to understanding variation in overall home visiting effectiveness.

While the relational communication techniques included in this taxonomy are comprehensive and research-based, their inclusion does not in itself reflect evidence of effectiveness. Home visiting models and programs may differ in their support and use of these techniques.

## Highlights

- We used a **mixed-methods** approach to develop a taxonomy of relational communication techniques applicable to the home visiting context.
- We developed the taxonomy with input from a **range of partners**, including home visiting practitioners, model representatives, and researchers.
- The taxonomy can help the field better **assess** and **understand** how home visitors communicate and build and maintain **relationships** with families.

## HOW CAN THE TECHNIQUE TAXONOMY BE USED?

One of HARC's hallmarks is precision, which means using clear and exact language to describe components of interventions delivered within home visiting to support research that seeks to determine '*what work best, for whom, in which contexts, why and how.*' [Precision research](#) can help us better align intervention components with families' strengths and needs, thus leading to stronger outcomes.

**This taxonomy aims to increase precision in defining, measuring, and strengthening communication and relationship-building with families enrolled in home visiting.** These processes may influence the delivery and effectiveness of behavior-focused techniques.

The taxonomy is primarily intended for collaborative research teams engaged in home visiting research and evaluation. These teams may comprise researchers, evaluators, home visiting program representatives, and model developers. There are many ways the taxonomy can be used by research teams. Some examples include:

- **To more precisely examine how relational processes shape families' experiences of home visiting and continued participation over time.** For example, research teams may explore whether techniques such as *providing choice*, *validating perspectives*, or *emphasizing autonomy* are associated with families' perceptions of home visiting relevance, motivation to participate in home visiting, active involvement in home visits, or longer retention in services.
- **To conduct reliable and valid measurement of home visiting practice.** For example, research teams can develop or adapt observational tools or fidelity measures that incorporate specific relational communication techniques, allowing them to systematically assess the extent to which home visitors use these techniques when communicating and engaging with families. This might include coding the use of *open-ended questions* or *interpretive reflection* during visits or tracking patterns over time.
- **To clearly and practically measure how home visitors tailor services to respond to families' needs.** For example, when programs emphasize that home visitors should "meet families where they are," the taxonomy allows research teams to assess what that looks like in practice. This might include examining whether the use of techniques like *individualize delivery* or *use client's expertise* lead to greater alignment between services delivered and families' goals and context.
- **To specify and test how relational communication techniques can be paired with specific behavioral techniques to allow for more precise intervention design and/or delivery.** For example, *goal setting* may be more effective when paired with techniques that *affirm strengths* or *explore resistance*. Similarly, *behavioral*

### Exhibit

#### Brief Overview of Methods and Contributors

**Survey:** Three home visiting researchers and model representatives completed a survey assessing the clarity and uniqueness of technique labels and definitions.

**Workgroup Sessions:** A workgroup of five home visiting providers met over four sessions to advise on the clarity and uniqueness of technique labels and definitions and to ensure wording reflects home visiting practice.

**Concept Mapping:** 28 home visiting researchers, model representatives, and program staff sorted techniques into conceptually distinct categories.

**Feedback Tasks:** 13 individuals who completed the concept mapping activity attended a group interpretation meeting to review findings and provide feedback on technique groupings and labels.

*demonstration* might be strengthened when accompanied by *confirming understanding* or *encouraging questions*. Research teams can test these pairings in a structured way.

- **To work together to use a shared language to strengthen communication, collaboration, and relationship-building to support consistent measurement, training, and supervision.** For example, if a research team wants to better support home visitors in navigating challenges or tensions with families, they might operationalize specific techniques such as *acknowledge strong emotions*, *double-sided reflection*, or *reconcile differences*. They can then systematically measure how often and how effectively these strategies are used and examine how they relate to outcomes such as families' progress toward goals and their satisfaction with home visiting services.

## GENERATING EVIDENCE TO ADVANCE THE TAXONOMY

Using the taxonomy in collaborative research promotes consistency across studies by establishing a shared language for describing relational communication techniques. This common framework enables research teams to more precisely define, measure, and compare specific techniques and combinations of techniques across different contexts.

With this alignment, teams can more rigorously test which approaches are most effective, while also refining how techniques are defined and applied in real-world settings to ensure they are practical and relevant for families with different strengths, needs, and backgrounds.

Over time, this systematic, shared approach can strengthen both the evidence base and its application—improving training, supervision, and implementation, and ultimately supporting more effective home visiting practice and better outcomes for families.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Burrell, L., Fauth, R., Spinosa, C., & West, A. (2026). *Intervention technique taxonomy: Relational communication techniques*. Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative. *Home visitor responsive partnership toolkit: Techniques for strengthening relationships with families*. <https://hvharc.org/toolkits/responsive-partnership-toolkit/>

<sup>2</sup> Sturmfels, N., Fauth, R. C., Kane, M. C., & Taylor, M. (2021). *MIECHV Developing Strategies to Facilitate Cross-Model Collaboration and Data Sharing (MODS): Workplan Report*. Health Resources and Services Administration, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>3</sup> Wright A. J., Zhang L., Howes E., Veall, C., Corker, E., Johnston, M., Hastings, J., West, R., & Michie, S. (2023). *Specifying how intervention content is communicated: Development of a Style of Delivery Ontology*. Wellcome Open Research, 8, 456. <https://doi.org/10.12688/wellcomeopenres.19899.1>

## RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUE TAXONOMY

We use the term 'client' in the technique definitions, recognizing that services may be provided to multiple individuals or a family, depending on the program.

### 1. Establish & Maintain Rapport

|     | Technique Label                   | Definition                                                                                                                                                            |
|-----|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.1 | Conversational warm-up            | Use light, informal conversation to create a comfortable atmosphere before engaging in program-related activities or discussion.                                      |
| 1.2 | Convey warmth and positive regard | Use vocal tone and facial expression to signal approachability, care, and relational ease.                                                                            |
| 1.3 | Demonstrate interest              | Use statements or brief acknowledgments that signal attention to, or curiosity about, the client's experiences.                                                       |
| 1.4 | Allow uninterrupted speech        | Let the client complete their thoughts without interjecting, correcting, or redirecting.                                                                              |
| 1.5 | Engage responsively               | Respond to the client's cues and concerns in the moment.                                                                                                              |
| 1.6 | Unconditional support             | Express positive support even when progress is slow, setbacks occur, or outcomes are uncertain.                                                                       |
| 1.7 | Use neutral language              | Communicate information, guidance, or opinions in a manner that avoids pressure, blame or guilt.                                                                      |
| 1.8 | Establish boundaries              | Clearly and consistently communicate the home visitor's role, limits, and expectations for the work together, including what the home visitor can and cannot provide. |

### 2. Honor Family Customs & Context

|     | Technique Label                          | Definition                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2.1 | Individualize delivery                   | Adapt the timing, pacing, emphasis, or sequencing of intervention content based on community, circumstances, priorities, readiness, or progress.                              |
| 2.2 | Provide accessible materials             | Use materials that are accessible to the client (e.g., in client's preferred language; to accommodate different literacy levels; to accommodate visual or other impairments). |
| 2.3 | Acknowledge family values and traditions | Notice, name, and show openness to family values and traditions.                                                                                                              |
| 2.4 | Respond to family values and traditions  | Use sources, messages, and strategies that align with the family's values and traditions.                                                                                     |

| 3. Center Family Voice & Choice |                               |                                                                                                                               |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                 | Technique Label               | Definition                                                                                                                    |
| 3.1                             | Encourage questions           | Invite the client to ask questions.                                                                                           |
| 3.2                             | Explore client's perspectives | Ask questions to learn the client's perspectives, feelings, and choices.                                                      |
| 3.3                             | Ask opinions                  | Ask the client their thoughts or feelings about the content presented.                                                        |
| 3.4                             | Ask permission                | Ask the client for permission to provide information or guidance.                                                             |
| 3.5                             | Provide choice                | Provide opportunities for the client to make decisions and determine the timing and intensity of activities or interventions. |
| 3.6                             | Collaborate                   | Partner with the client in setting priorities, making decisions, and shaping activities.                                      |

| 4. Affirm & Validate |                             |                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                      | Technique Label             | Definition                                                                                                                                          |
| 4.1                  | Validate perspectives       | Communicate the legitimacy or value of the client's perspectives, feelings, or choices, even when they differ from recommendations or expectations. |
| 4.2                  | Affirm strengths            | Acknowledge and reinforce the client's positive qualities, efforts, and capabilities.                                                               |
| 4.3                  | Use client's expertise      | Explicitly reference and draw on the client's knowledge, skills, or past experiences during discussion, planning, or decision-making.               |
| 4.4                  | Emphasize autonomy          | Affirm the client's self-determination by directly communicating respect for and confidence in the client's ability to make their own decisions.    |
| 4.5                  | Celebrate success           | Express enthusiasm when the client makes progress toward their goals or achieves meaningful accomplishments.                                        |
| 4.6                  | Acknowledge change is hard  | Explicitly validate that change often involves uncertainty or setbacks, and that these experiences are common.                                      |
| 4.7                  | Acknowledge strong emotions | Validate strong feelings and the associated distress without minimizing or dismissing concerns.                                                     |

| 5. Clarify & Confirm Understanding |                         |                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                    | Technique Label         | Definition                                                                                                                        |
| 5.1                                | Summary statements      | Restate or summarize what the client said.                                                                                        |
| 5.2                                | Confirm understanding   | Check if the client has understood what is said.                                                                                  |
| 5.3                                | Open-ended questions    | Ask questions that require more than a limited (e.g. yes/no) response.                                                            |
| 5.4                                | Closed-ended questions  | Ask questions that can only be answered with a limited (e.g., yes/no) response.                                                   |
| 5.5                                | Focused questions       | Ask questions designed to narrow the discussion, clarify meaning, or explore details or alternatives related to a specific topic. |
| 5.6                                | Leading questions       | Ask a question in a way likely to produce a specific answer.                                                                      |
| 5.7                                | Interpretive reflection | Add meaning or emphasis to what the client has said to encourage deeper understanding.                                            |

| 6. Move Toward Alignment |                          |                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                          | Technique Label          | Definition                                                                                                                       |
| 6.1                      | Double-sided reflection  | Reflect both sides of a client's uncertainty, acknowledging their reasons for and against a position or behavior.                |
| 6.2                      | Explore resistance       | Respond to reluctance or pushback by exploring the reasons for client's resistance.                                              |
| 6.3                      | Highlight contradiction  | Point out a situation in which the client's statements or actions are inconsistent with each other.                              |
| 6.4                      | Prompt reconsideration   | Reflect the client's statement in a way that gently challenges or invites them to rethink its accuracy or implications.          |
| 6.5                      | Reconcile differences    | Work through differing perspectives, priorities, or constraints with the client to reach a mutually acceptable plan or decision. |
| 6.6                      | Reframing reflection     | Reframe a negative statement by the client into a more positive statement.                                                       |
| 6.7                      | Shift focus              | Redirect the conversation or activity away from a topic that is causing discomfort or disengagement.                             |
| 6.8                      | Persuasive communication | Guide clients toward the adoption of an idea, attitude, or action by providing a clear rationale or evidence.                    |