Simple Interactions
An approach to professional development for adults who work with children or youth

The “how-to” manual for practitioners
Simple Interactions

Thomas Akiva
University of Pittsburgh

Junlei Li
Saint Vincent College

Megan Julian
University of Pittsburgh

Christy Galletta Horner
University of Pittsburgh

Kelly Martin
University of Pittsburgh

A collaborative effort brought to you by:

This project was made possible through generous grants from The Grable Foundation and The Heinz Endowments.
In this guidebook you’ll find...

What is the Simple Interactions Approach? ........................................ 2
Getting Started.................................................................................. 4
The Three-Part Cycle ........................................................................... 5
Simple Interaction Scale ...................................................................... 10
Putting it All Together ......................................................................... 14

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

Interactions between adults and children/youth are at the heart of every classroom, youth program, and child center. 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 the Simple Interactions process is to help 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
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 under $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 (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.

- 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**
   - Using affordable digital video cameras, capture one- to three-minute interactions between staff and children/youth.

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

3. **Watch Clips**
   - Bring all the staff together to watch clips and discuss what makes positive interactions and how to get them to occur 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.
- Keep each clip to 1-3 minutes. If you want to film more than that simply stop and start recording again. Having short clips makes selecting easier.
- 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 18-20 for more details):
  – Workshop #1: Look for fun, cute clips to use to allow staff to feel comfortable watching themselves on film.
  – 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 for a meeting to watch the selected clips. After each clip, discuss the strengths of the interaction. For each clip you can discuss: What made this a good interaction? How can we encourage more such interactions?

The key is to focus on the positive. Video is rarely used this way, so it might feel awkward at first. Focusing on the positive can be an unusual task for many staff, particularly after watching themselves on video. 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 exclusively 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 different at each 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 get through about 5 or 6 clips.

- Let the person on the clip speak first. Ask the staff member what he/she remembers about the clip and what went well in this interaction.

- Next, open up conversation to other staff. Ask about what they noticed and what their colleague did well in the clip.

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

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

- See page 14 for questions you can ask to help facilitate conversation.

Visit [simpleinteractions.org](http://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 Interaction Scale

The Simple Interaction Scale 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, progression, and participation.** Research shows that these four elements are critical for successful youth-adult interactions. The scale is a productive tool 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>X</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Image" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Image" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. PROGRESSION: Presenting incremental challenge and matching with appropriate support

4. 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
Workshop Conversation Starters

Before Introducing the SI Scale

• “What did you notice?”
• “What was good about this interaction?”

After Introducing the SI Scale

• “Did the ‘connection’ change throughout the course of the clip? Perhaps it started in ‘X’ but moved to a ‘Y’ by the end? How/why did this happen?”

• “Maybe the ‘reciprocity’ falls somewhere in between these categories?”

• “If this clip falls into the ‘X’ / ‘Y’ category for participation, could anything have bumped it up into the ‘Y’ / ‘Z’ category? Why or why not?”

• “When/where in our classrooms or program do we have opportunities for progression?”
“After we saw it on video... we recognized things like reciprocity.”
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 and grow 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 by visiting our website.
Workshop 1: Getting Comfortable

Through our work with numerous youth programs, we found that the best goal for the first workshop is to allow everyone to feel comfortable seeing themselves 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 practice with each other. If you can achieve this goal, you have had a successful first workshop!

As you will see in the agenda, 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 SI Scale. You might want to ask, “What did you notice?” or “What made this a good interaction?” Be sure to stay positive! Focus on the good in each clip and help staff do this as well.
After watching and discussing a few clips, you can introduce the Simple Interaction Scale. In this first workshop, we recommend introducing only the first two items: connection and reciprocity. After explaining and discussing each item, 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. It can be especially good to ask 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. You still might start with an opening activity (see agenda) but can quickly move into watching video clips.

In Workshop 2 you will introduce the other two items of the Simple Interaction Scale: progression and participation. It’s also helpful to review the first two items: connection and reciprocity.

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.”
Workshop 3: Planning for Improvement

By the third workshop, your staff will likely be used to the Watch-and-Discuss process. You can continue to use the Simple Interaction Scale to guide conversations (pages 12-15). Try to encourage the conversation to move toward improvement planning. For example you can ask, “What can we do—both structurally and individually—in the program to increase the number of 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 described above, 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.
“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!

www.simpleinteractions.org