



Microaggressions in the NICU

What are Microaggressions?

Microaggressions are statements, actions, or incidents of indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group. Although microaggressions may seem subtle and harmless, they can profoundly impact the emotional wellbeing and trust of families in the NICU.

By fostering a culturally-sensitive and inclusive environment that actively addresses and educates about microaggressions, providers in the NICU can help build rapport, improve communication, and enhance the overall quality of care for the diverse communities they serve.

What are Microinterventions?

Microinterventions are strategies that reduce harm and communicate support. The responsibility of reducing and addressing microaggressions should be primarily placed on those of greater privilege and power (e.g., the racial majority group, healthcare providers) and not on the marginalized group.

How Can We Use Microinterventions?



Make the invisible visible

- **Acknowledge the microaggression and name its underlying message.** This intervention shines light on acts that often go unnoticed or dismissed, making them visible to both the transgressor and observers. It also helps validate the recipient's experience and provides them with language to describe it.

Examples:

- ↳ "Hey, I wanted to check in with you. Those comments they made were prejudicial about women and were not OK."
- ↳ In response to a colleague who made a judgmental commentary about a mother-of-five who is on Medi-Cal: "That's a big assumption that she is unable to care for herself and her children."



Disarm the microaggression

- **Express disagreement, challenge the microaggression's message, or point out its harmful impact.** Disagreement can be communicated verbally or nonverbally (e.g., shaking your head). This intervention interrupts the microaggression and forces the transgressor to consider the impact and meaning of their words or actions.

Examples:

- ↳ Shake head and walk away.
- ↳ "I actually don't find that funny."
- ↳ "I understand you meant well, but your comment implies that you think someone with an accent doesn't understand English."





Educate the offender

- **Educate the transgressor by engaging them in a dialogue about the microaggression.** To open a discussion, try to appeal to their values, highlight commonalities and shared goals, and emphasize the professional and societal benefits of changing. Through dialogue, encourage them to consider the perspective of marginalized group members.

Examples:

- ↳ “I know you really care about serving all families.”
- ↳ “Comments like the one you just made undermine your intentions to be inclusive.”
- ↳ “We will be better providers if we can use this incident as an opportunity to learn together.”
- ↳ “You may not have realized it, but your comment was demeaning.”



Seek support

- **Reach out to colleagues and leaders in your workplace with whom you can safely discuss microaggressions and other discriminatory experiences.** This can foster a larger culture of care. You might use the “buddy system” by choosing a colleague or friend who you regularly check in with. When microaggressions occur, loop in leaders who are sensitive to these matters. If there is no one within your organization that you can safely confide in, identify support systems outside of your workplace.

Examples:

- ↳ “Who do I feel safe with in our unit?”
- ↳ “Who in leadership is an ally and advocate?”
- ↳ “What support systems do I have outside of work?”

When healthcare providers confront and dismantle these subtle forms of bias, they build trust, foster effective communication, and promote equitable care. This results in better outcomes for NICU families and a healthier work environment for NICU staff.

