

Principles for Successfully Implementing Evidence-Based Practices and Programs

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The child welfare system of care strives to make a difference in the lives of children, adolescents, and their families. Implementing evidence-based programs (those that use an intervention, program, or treatment that has been shown to be effective through scientific research according to a set of specific criteria) increases opportunities to maximize limited resources, avoids the need to reinvent the wheel, and reduces the use of interventions that have not demonstrated effectiveness, particularly important during times of economic distress, when funds are limited.

Many sources, both online and in professional journals, identify these effective interventions. However, as the article about evidence-based practice published in the Fall 2009 issue of *Juvenile and Family Justice TODAY* explained,¹ it appears that while many administrators, policy makers, and practitioners engage in evidence-based thinking, they are challenged with finding the steps to put these research-grounded programs into practice. Translating the research into real-world settings represents a new set of activities called “implementation.”

The juvenile court judge has the “positional power” to take a leadership role in increasing the development and use of evidence-based programs and practices.² With judicial leadership and support, system stakeholders and community partners must identify and execute a clear process for implementing evidence-based approaches that meet the varied needs of child welfare-involved families.

The following summary of the core components needed to successfully implement programs and practice is drawn from the work of the National Implementation Research Network, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill that focuses on taking “science” and moving it to the “service” arena.³ These stages and components are considered the critical links in the science to service chain and should provide some direction for judges and community partners.

Stages of Implementation

- Implementation of an evidence-based program is a process and may take two to four years to complete in many organizations.
- Stages of implementation are not a linear, but a recursive, process as each stage impacts the others in complex ways.
- Six functional stages have been identified from research and confirmed by participants in successful implementation practices⁴:
 1. Exploration—exploring and assessing the feasibility of programs for the best fit with the target population.
 2. Installation—securing funding, staff, and creating policies for implementation of the new program.
 3. Initial implementation—training staff and putting organizational supports in place.
 4. Full implementation—the new program is fully integrated into the agency or community.
 5. Innovation—ensuring adherence to the original program, seeking consultation with the originators to achieve excellent outcomes and maintain fidelity.⁵
 6. Sustainability—focusing on continuous training and supports for the sustainability of the program.

The implementation of evidence-based programs is challenging, even for highly effective programs that exist across various sites. Foremost to implementing evidence-based programs is understanding the core components—those features or characteristics relevant for both functional and structural elements to program effectiveness.⁶ Ensuring fidelity to the evidence-based practice is critical to success if a program or practice is to yield the same outcomes and savings as demonstrated in the research.

Core Implementation Components

1. Staff selection—includes characteristics beyond academic or experience factors, and certain practitioner characteristics necessary for the program.
2. Pre-service and in-service training—ensures practitioners have the necessary theory, skills, and values for delivering the new program and provides opportunities to practice new skills and receive feedback in a safe environment.
3. Coaching, mentoring, and supervision—instruction, observation, advice, modeling, feedback, or debriefing of practitioners specific to the innovation while on the job.
4. Staff performance assessment—evaluation of practice outcomes to help practitioners continue to improve with clients/consumers.
5. Decision support data systems—assessment of the overall performance of the organization.
6. Administrative supports—policies, procedures, climate, and culture of the organization are assessed so that practitioners have the skills and supports to perform at a high level of effectiveness with every client.
7. Systems interventions—ensures the development of partnerships within systems and among the broader systems to ensure ongoing program participation to garner support and receive feedback.

These core components are dynamic, and at any point a change in one of the elements requires adjustments in the other core components as well. Judges who are aware of the core components of implementing evidence-based practices and programs as well as the various stages of bringing “science to service” will be well-positioned to lead in the effort to bring such programs and practices into the child welfare system of care.

END NOTES

- 1 Lederman, C., Gómez-Kaifer, M., Katz, L. E., Thomlison, B., & Maze, C. L. (2009). An imperative: Evidence-based practice within the child welfare system of care. *Juvenile and Family Justice TODAY*, Fall, 22-25.
- 2 Dobbin, S. A., Gatowski, S. I., & Maxwell, D. M. (2004). Building a better collaboration: Facilitating change in the court and child welfare system. *Technical Assistance Bulletin*, 8(2). Reno, NV: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.
- 3 Fixsen, D. L., Blasé, K. A., Naoom, S. F., & Wallace, F. (2009). Core implementation components. *Research on Social Work Practice. Special issue: Implementation and Translational Research*, 19(5), 531-540.
- 4 *Id.*
- 5 More information on implementation stages is available at http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2007_10_01_RB_6SuccessDrivers.pdf
- 6 Fixsen et al., *supra* note 3.