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SUMMARY

A growing body of research has emerged to identify common practices that are key to effective family and youth prevention programs. These research-based principles can guide organizations in their evaluation and self-reflection and allows organizations to provide the best possible programs for their communities.

This digest summarizes the principles distilled from effective youth and family prevention programs, identifies considerations for integrating these principles into existing programs and suggests a process for engaging in evidence-informed program improvement.

Principles for Effective Family and Youth Prevention Programs

Stephen Small, *University of Wisconsin–Madison*

How can research be used to improve programs?

Researchers at the School of Human Ecology of University of Wisconsin - Madison have examined successful programs from different angles and have found common principles that seem to be key to the effectiveness of these programs. This growing body of research is an invaluable resource for organizations striving to improve youth and family programs. Learning from research on best practices guides organizations in their evaluation and self-reflection and allows organizations to provide the best possible programs for their communities. Program improvement informed by research is increasingly important as more funders expect to see evidence that programs will be successful. Integrating program principles that have shown successful results and are derived from the latest scientific knowledge can result in more effective programs and greater accountability (Small, Cooney & O'Connor, 2009).

This digest summarizes the principles distilled from effective youth and family prevention programs, identifies considerations for integrating these principles into existing programs, and suggests a process for engaging in evidence-informed program improvement. Practitioners may decide to utilize these principles to evaluate and improve their programs after gaining an understanding of the process from this digest. The *What Works, Wisconsin Program Improvement Manual* (Small, O'Connor & Cooney, 2008) is an excellent resource that provides further information and guidance. The manual lays out a process for organizations to use research in improving programs, clearly explains principles of effective youth and family prevention programs, provides a Program Assessment Tool for identifying priority areas for improvement as well as an action plan template, and suggests further resources for practitioners.

Principles of effective youth and family prevention programs

The table below provides an overview of 12 principles of effective family-based prevention programs. They are organized into four categories: Program design and content, Program relevance, Program delivery, and Program assessment and quality insurance. These categories are not mutually exclusive, but are meant to provide a framework for thinking about various aspects of a program.

Program design and content	Effective programs are driven by theory.
	Effective programs have sufficient dosage and intensity.
	Effective programs are comprehensive.
	Effective programs limit their use of fear and punishment.
	Effective programs use of active learning techniques.
Program relevance	Effective programs are developmentally appropriate.
	Effective programs reach participants when they are ready to change.
	Effective programs are socio-culturally relevant.
Program delivery	Effective programs foster good relationships.
	Effective programs are delivered by well-trained and committed staff.
Program assessment and quality assurance	Effective programs are well-documented.
	Effective programs focus on evaluation and refinement.

I. Program Design and Content

1.1 Theory Driven

Effective programs are based on empirically-supported theoretical models. They target risk and protective factors (or assets) that research shows are related to the program's targeted outcomes. In addition, an effective program's design and implementation are guided by a clear and logical program theory about how the program's activities are expected to lead to its intended goals. Ideally, there is empirical evidence that such activities are effective in bringing about the desired changes.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- What is the theory guiding the program? Does research support the theory's validity?
- Does your program target risks and assets that research has indicated to be most relevant to address?
- Can you clearly articulate the program's theory of change and created a logical model reflecting how it operates to achieve the program's intended outcomes?
- Are the program's activities well aligned with the program's goals?

1.2 Sufficient Dosage and Intensity

Participants need to be exposed to enough of a program for it to have an effect. Dosage or intensity can be measured in quantity of contact hours, duration of the total program, intensity and complexity of the program's activities, and participants' level of engagement. Generally, the more severe or entrenched the problem being addressed, the greater the dosage and intensity need to be. Many effective programs also include follow-up sessions to reinforce learning that might have faded over time.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- How does the program dosage compare to that of similar evidence-based programs?
- Are the number of program contact hours as well as the intensity and complexity of activities sufficient for the outcomes you wish to achieve?
- Do participants want to attend long enough for the desired learning and behavior changes to occur?
- Are the changes addressed by the program likely to be sustained by participants after the program is over? Is follow-up needed to sustain these changes?

I. Program Design and Content

1.3 Comprehensive

The most effective programs recognize that individuals develop within many settings such as school, family and neighborhood. Effective programs often target more than one setting, or partner with other programs that reach the same audience in different settings. Effective programs often simultaneously address more than one process related to human behavior or development. For example, a program for children with oppositional–defiant disorder might address the child’s emotional regulation, parental discipline practices and the parent–child relationship.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- Which processes in which settings does the program address?
- Which settings and processes are addressed by evidence–based programs with similar goals or audiences? What is the research basis for addressing those settings and processes?
- What additional processes, people, or settings could be targeted to strengthen the program?

1.4 Limit use of fear and punishment

Many years of research have shown that fear–based teaching methods and punishment are often ineffective. Effective programs focus on building competencies and promoting other assets that will allow participants to be successful at changing their behavior and achieving positive outcomes for themselves. Positive behavior can be encouraged by providing individuals with necessary skills, rewards and incentives, adequate role models, and positive, personally valuable experiences that enhance a sense of competence and self–efficacy.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- What role, if any, do fear and punishment play in your program?
- If there are behaviors or attitudes that your program hopes to reduce, does research suggest strategies other than fear or punishment that could be used to do so?
- What strategies could be used to promote positive behavior and develop desired competencies?

I. Program Design and Content

1.5 Use active learning techniques

People learn best when they are actively engaged and have opportunities to practice new skills. Programs that use active and varied teaching methods and keep participants interested tend to be most successful. Whether allowing parents to practice using a calm tone of voice while disciplining their children or role–playing with youth how to refuse drugs in a real–world situation, effective programs engage participants in the material and encourage them to practice and apply new behaviors, rather than just presenting information.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- Does the program require more active than passive participation?
- Are there times in the program when participants are bored or disengaged?
- If behavior change is a goal, are there opportunities for participants to practice new skills and behaviors?
- Are there opportunities for participants to reflect upon and apply knowledge and skills to their own situation?

2. Program Relevance

2.1 Developmentally appropriate

Effective programs are specifically tailored to particular ages or developmental stages rather than trying to address the widest possible group of individuals or families. They acknowledge the developmental differences that often characterize children and youth of even slightly different ages. For prevention programs, it is also important that information is delivered neither too early (for example, drug prevention curriculum in first grade) nor too late.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- Does the program target risk and assets that are relevant for the participants’ ages and developmental stages?
- Does the program use materials and activities that are interesting and engaging for the targeted age group?
- Is the age range of your audience too broad to be relevant for the participants? How can participant recruitment focus on individuals for whom the program is most appropriate?

2. Program Relevance

2.2 Reach participants when they are ready to change

Programs with the greatest impact intervene when the targeted individuals are most receptive to change. This can mean reaching out to families or individuals as they go through a transition or when a problem first becomes apparent. In addition, effective programs are careful to confirm that participants are “program ready” so that they are able to take advantage of the support that the program provides. This might mean connecting people to other resources to help them first meet more immediate needs.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- What is the most optimal time for participation in your program? At what points do EBPs with similar audiences focus on recruiting participants?
- Do some participants experience obstacles that keep them from fully benefiting from the program? Are there other services in your community that can help them deal with these issues?

2.3 Socio-cultural relevance

A family’s culture encompasses not only their racial or ethnic background, but also their socioeconomic class, religious beliefs, level of education and much more. Tailoring a program to the cultural traditions of youth and their families can improve recruitment, retention, and overall program effectiveness.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- Are there EBPs available for similar audiences? Which of their program components are designed to reflect the audience’s culture? Can you integrate some of these ideas into your own programming?
- Are program staff comfortable working with the targeted population and familiar with their culture?
- Have representatives from the targeted cultural group reviewed the program materials for their cultural appropriateness?

3. Program Delivery

3.1 Foster good relationships

Behavior change most often happens in the context of positive, supportive relationships where individuals feel safe and trust one another. Effective programs are structured to foster trusting relationships over time among participants, staff, and volunteers. Thoughtful program planning requires recognizing that trusting relationships can take time to develop. For example, activities that require participants to reveal personal information to staff or each other should be saved for later in the program when there has been time for trusting and supportive relationships to develop.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- How supportive, safe and comfortable do program participants feel while attending the program?
- How well do staff relate to one another and to program participants? Are staff respectful of participants and each other?
- Does the program allow participants to develop good relationships with each other and with staff?

3.2 Well-trained and committed staff

Programs are more likely to be effective if they have well-qualified, well-trained and committed staff who run them. Staff effectiveness is often dependent on receiving supervision, support and recognition from managers, boards, and administrators. In addition, many successful programs have a “program champion,” or someone in the sponsoring organization who is enthusiastic about the program and possesses enough organizational power to influence decisions and implement plans.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- Are staff members given adequate training?
- Do staff members regularly meet to discuss and reflect on the program?
- Do staff members receive guidance and feedback from supervisors on a regular basis?
- What could be done to increase staff members’ investment in the program and reduce turnover?

4. Program Evaluation and Quality Assurance

4.1 Thorough documentation

Documentation of what happens in a program is key to demonstrating and maintaining its effectiveness. Thorough documentation allows consistency from one session to the next, assists others to replicate the program more closely, helps staff to gain a full understanding of programs in order to implement them more successfully, and provides essential information for program evaluation.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- Do the people running the program know what it is supposed to accomplish and what each session or component involves?
- Is the program adequately documented so that others could implement or replicate it?
- Are session outlines, checklists, and other materials available to monitor how well the program is being implemented?

4.2 Commitment to evaluation and refinement

Evaluation is an important tool for learning about how well a program is doing and for developing ways to improve it. Evaluation can take many forms. It can include assessing a program's quality and impact, identifying problem areas, tracking implementation and guiding improvement. In order for a program to be considered evidence-based, it will need to undergo a rigorous impact evaluation. However, an organization may not be ready to undertake such an evaluation until it feels confident that it has a strong program.

Considerations for reflection and improvement:

- What information about the program do key stakeholders want to know?
- Do you have a system for monitoring how various parts of the program is implemented?
- What type of evaluation would be most appropriate for the program's current stage of development?
- What kinds of training and resources would you need to conduct an evaluation?
- What are some short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes you could measure in an evaluation?

The Process of Evidence Informed Program Improvement

Understanding the principles of effective programs is only the first step in evidence informed program improvement. Evidence informed program improvement is not one simple event, but rather an ongoing process of reflection, planning and action that involves different stakeholders in the organization.

Engage different stakeholders

- Engage stakeholders who are knowledgeable about and committed to the organization's mission and programs, such as program participants, board members, funders and staff, especially program staff.
- The process involves various aspects of programs and breaking it down into smaller parts can make it more manageable. Consider organizing separate meetings or dividing the group into smaller subgroups to discuss particular principles or programs areas.
- Provide each person with a copy of the Program Assessment Tool, which is available in the *What Works, Wisconsin* Program Improvement Manual. After reviewing the information individually, discuss the principles and questions as a group.
- The process can be completed without outside help, though working with an external consultant could bring objectivity, a fresh perspective and expertise to the process.

Gather information

While this digest provides general principles for effective family-based prevention programs, it is important to seek information targeted towards the specific goals of an organization or program.

- Find out what research says about which risk and protective factors to target.
- Learn as much as you can about evidence based programs that are similar to your program.
- Review principles of effective programs for your specific program type. *What Works*, *Wisconsin* Fact Sheets are a useful resource for this and are available on a number of program areas².

Planning, action and evaluation

- Identify areas where you would like to make changes to your program. Start with a small number of improvements that can realistically be achieved in a set timeframe. The Program Assessment Tool can help the group set priorities for improvement.
- Set reasonable program improvement goals. Start out with goals that are more easily attainable, less politicized and agreed upon by the group before moving onto more challenging goals.
- Create an action plan. The *What Works*, *Wisconsin* Program Improvement Manual provides a useful action planning tool.
- Regularly check back in with your action plan to be sure you are progressing as planned, and adjust as necessary.
- Repeat the process as part of your program's quality assessment cycle.
- Consider conducting a more formal program evaluation.

Conclusion

Evidence informed program improvements allow organizations to build upon the successful experience of EBPs, even when full adoption of EBPs are not the best option. The process outlined in this digest supports organizations to assess their existing programs in comparison to principles of effective programs, create plans for improvement and engage in a continuous cycle of assessment and improvement. Organizations that plan to implement evidence based program improvement are strongly encouraged to make use of the *What Works*, *Wisconsin* Program Improvement Manual which provides more in-depth guidance for the process, as well as the *What Works*, *Wisconsin* website which offers a wealth of resources and information.

Further resources and reading on evidence based program improvement

- The *What Works*, *Wisconsin* Program Improvement Manual provide useful tools that guide practitioners through the evidence based program improvement process. http://whatworks.uwex.edu/attachment/whatworks_manual.pdf
- *What Works*, *Wisconsin* Fact Sheets are brief summaries of what research tells us about effective programming, each focusing on a specific program area. <http://whatworks.uwex.edu/Pages/1factsheet.html>



Works Cited

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PROJECT TEAM

Editor

Sara G. Lam

Faculty Project Director

Brian D. Christens

Executive Director, Center for Nonprofits

Jeanan Yasiri

Information

The University of Wisconsin
Center for Nonprofits

1300 Linden Drive
Madison, WI 53706

ph: 608-262-2660

<http://centerfornonprofits.wisc.edu>