

Best Practices for Balancing Program Fidelity & Adaptation

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Compiled by Brittany Rhoades Cooper

The following are recommended guidelines and questions to ask yourself in order to stay true to the fidelity of your proven-effective evidence-based program while also meeting the needs of your community. These steps were modified and adapted from the following two resources:

- Card, J. J., Solomon, J., & Cunningham (2009). How to adapt effective programs for use in new contexts. *Health Promotion Practice*, 12, 25-35.
- O'Connor, C., Small, S. A., Cooney, S. M. (April, 2007). Program fidelity and adaptation: Meeting local needs without compromising program effectiveness. *What works, Wisconsin – Research to practice series*, Issue #4.

Step 1. Select an Evidence-based Program (EBP) that Meets Your Needs

- Does the EBP target risk/protective factors and outcomes that are relevant for and acceptable to your community?
- Has the EBP shown strong evidence of having achieving these outcomes with communities similar to yours?
- Does the EBP address knowledge, values, attitudes, skills, intentions, and other determinants of behavior that are relevant for and acceptable to your community?
- Does the EBP use content and methods that are likely to be accessible and appealing to your community?
- Does the implementing agency have access to the resources needed to acquire, plan, and deliver the EBP?
- Remember it is always preferable to choose a program that won't need to be adapted, but if you do envision needing to adapt the EBP, you should choose one that has been adapted in the past and/or whose developer is willing to consult with you about the adaptation.

Step 2. Determine the Key Elements that Make the EBP Effective

- Ideally you can obtain this information from the program developer, but regardless you should take the following steps to learn more about the program's underlying theory and key elements.
- Gather program materials: Statement of the goals and objectives of the program; summary of underlying theory of change or rationale for the program; curriculum or protocol guide; teacher or facilitator manual
- Develop a program logic model: The Community Toolbox offers excellent resources for this at <http://ctb.ku.edu/en>

Step 3. Assess the Need for Adaptation

- Identify and categorize mismatches between the original program model or materials and the new context.
- Mismatches can be found in: program goals and objectives; characteristics of the priority population (e.g., age, language); characteristics of the agency implementing the program (e.g., philosophy, staff credentials and expertise, staff cultural competence); characteristics of the community (e.g., social factors – cultural norms/values, political – laws; physical/environment – transportation)
- In consultation with the developer and using the guidelines below decide whether these mismatches necessitate adaptations.

Step 4. Adapt the Program (if needed) Using Best Practices

- Ideally you will do this in consultation with program developer, but regardless there are some types of adaptations that are more acceptable and others that are more risky.
- Acceptable adaptations are those which are unlikely to diminish the program's effectiveness. They include:
 - Changing language: translating and/or modifying vocabulary
 - Replacing images to show youth and families that look like the target audience
 - Replacing cultural references
 - Modifying some aspects of activities such as physical contact
 - Adding relevant, evidence-based content to make the program more appealing to participants
- Risky or unacceptable adaptations are those which will likely diminish the program's effectiveness:
 - Reducing the number or length of sessions or how long participants are involved
 - Lowering the level of participant engagement
 - Eliminating key messages or skills learned
 - Removing topics
 - Changing the theoretical approach
 - Using staff or volunteers who are not adequately trained or qualified
 - Using fewer staff members than recommended
- Any adaptations to the program's targeted risk and protective factors or other "deep" elements of the program design should probably not be attempted unless it's done in collaboration with the program developer.

Step 5. Develop a Continuous Quality Improvement Plan

- Document and discuss progress related to fidelity, adaptations, participant engagement, and participant outcomes regularly in order to adjust as needed and assure quality implementation and positive participant outcomes.
- You can take steps to avoid program drift by monitoring program implementation via tools provided by the program developer to ensure fidelity to the key elements of the program.
- Stay up-to-date on program revisions and new materials by checking the program's website, or contacting the program developer and asking to be informed of any updates to the program or materials.

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The order in which you engage in the best practices for balancing program fidelity and adaptations might look different depending on where you are in your implementation. Use the information below as a guide for where to begin.

Which implementation stage are you in?

