

Evidence-based interventions and practices

Evaluation resources from Wilder Research

Effective ATOD programs are often referred to as ‘evidence-based’ interventions and practices. There are a lot of different terms used to describe evidence-based programs. For the purposes of this article, we’ll focus on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s (SAMHSA) Strategic Planning Framework definition of evidence-based, which identifies evidence-based interventions in one or more of the following categories:

- inclusion in Federal registries of evidence-based interventions;
- published (with positive effects on the primary target outcomes) in peer-reviewed journals; or,
- documented effectiveness supported by other sources of information and the consensus judgment of informed experts.

Federal Registries

Federal registries are an available, public resource for identifying evidence-based interventions. The National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP) is a searchable database of interventions for preventing and treating mental health and substance use issues available online at: <http://www.nrepp.samhsa.gov/>. The evidence-based programs and practices featured on this site have been tested in communities, schools, social service organizations, and workplaces across the country, and have provided solid proof that they have prevented or reduced substance abuse and other high-risk related behaviors, including youth violence.

Federal registries like NREPP provide concise descriptions of interventions, information about the strength of evidence supporting the intervention, and a user-friendly, searchable format for those seeking quick information about included interventions. However, registries like NREPP include a limited number of interventions, especially those which are more easily evaluated using traditional scientific methods. Additionally, it may be difficult for those who are less research-savvy to accurately compare the strength of various evaluations and ratings of different intervention options.

Peer-reviewed journals

Another acceptable source of locating evidence-based practices and interventions may be published peer-reviewed journals. Research literature can provide detailed information about the effectiveness of an intervention or practice within a specific setting or with a specific population. If using this approach, be sure to conduct a thorough search of all relevant literature about a specific intervention, to ensure that you are capturing all of the available information about a particular program. This level of literature review is necessary to ensure that all of the outcomes reported in evaluations of a program are consistent across different times the program is implemented.

Primary research literature can be difficult to access, especially for those without easy access to University libraries. Additionally, a certain degree of technical expertise is necessary to assess the strengths and weaknesses of different evaluation approaches, including design, measurement, and presentation of findings.

Other sources documenting effectiveness

You may find that there are a limited number of appropriate interventions available in either Federal registries or peer-reviewed research literature, in which case you may choose to rely on other sources which document the effectiveness of a practice or intervention. This option allows you to use locally developed interventions that align with the unique needs of your community and target population. When selecting interventions based on other sources of supporting information, each of the following guidelines *must* be met:

- Guideline 1: The intervention is based on a theory of change that is documented in a clear logic or conceptual model;
- Guideline 2: The intervention is similar in content and structure to interventions that appear in registries and/or the peer-reviewed literature;
- Guideline 3: The intervention is supported by documentation that it has been effectively implemented in the past, and multiple times, in a manner attentive to scientific standards of evidence and with results that show a consistent pattern of credible and positive effects; and,
- Guideline 4: The intervention is reviewed and deemed appropriate by a panel of informed experts that includes: well-qualified prevention researchers who are experienced in evaluating prevention interventions similar to those under review, local prevention practitioners, and key community leaders as appropriate (e.g., officials from law enforcement and education sectors or elders within indigenous cultures).

While relying on other sources of documentation is an option when reviewing interventions, this method places a great deal of responsibility on the part of planners.

Selecting evidence-based programs and practices

Once you have identified the capacity and support within your organization and determined the needs of your target populations, it is time to identify the best intervention or practice for your organization. You will likely identify several options, through conversations with others in your field, research of online databases, and ideas from stakeholders. When selecting an intervention or practice, consider the following factors:

- The intervention or practice has been evaluated and has demonstrated effective outcomes in settings similar to yours.
- Programs have been successfully implemented with your intended target population, considering factors such as age, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, and geographic location.
- The intervention or practice aligns with identified community needs.
- There is fit with the capacity and support of your organization, including personnel, physical and financial resources.
- The intervention or practice fits with the mission of your organization.
- The practice or intervention reflects the values and practices of your community.
- The intervention or practice is different than what is currently being offered in the community.

These questions, along with other considerations, will help you and your stakeholders identify and adopt the best intervention or practice for your program. Keep stakeholders engaged throughout the selection process, as they might have different ideas about the fit of the program given the needs of your community. Stakeholder buy-in will be essential as you begin to adopt and implement any intervention or practice.

Adapting evidence-based interventions

While often designed to be implemented with fidelity, or exactly as prescribed, evidence-based interventions and practices as designed might not meet the needs of your particular target population. Adaptation is not always permitted when implementing an evidence-based intervention or practice. When permitted, adaptation of an intervention or practice is a delicate balance between preserving the integrity and core elements of a program and adapting that same intervention to be meaningful to participants.

Adapting evidence-based interventions and practices often stems from a desire to better address current risk and protective factors for your target population. Permission may be needed from model developers to adapt the program to meet the needs of culturally diverse audiences. These adaptations can result in changes to the delivery or design of materials.

When adapting an intervention or practice, look to stakeholders, especially participant stakeholders, for input on what is relevant to your target audience. For example, if your program's goal is to reduce youth alcohol use, ask youth in your community which aspects of the intervention resonate with them and which aspects fall short.

For more information:

- The Evidence-Based Best Practices pocket guide is available online at: <http://www.samhsa.gov/ebpwebguide/index.asp>
- The Identifying and Selecting Evidence-Based Interventions Revised Guidance Document for the Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant Program can be found at: <http://prevention.samhsa.gov/evidencebased/evidencebased.pdf>

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