



Research article

Implementation and evaluation of linked parenting models in a large urban child welfare system[☆]



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ABSTRACT

During the past decade, there have been increased efforts to implement evidence-based practices into child welfare systems to improve outcomes for children in foster care and their families. In this paper, the implementation and evaluation of a policy-driven large system-initiated reform is described. Over 250 caseworkers and supervisors were trained and supported to implement two evidence-based parent focused interventions in five private agencies serving over 2,000 children and families. At the request of child welfare system leaders, a third intervention was developed and implemented to train the social work workforce to use evidence-based principles in everyday interactions with caregivers (including foster, relative, adoptive, and biological parents). In this paper, we describe the policy context and the targeted outcomes of the reform. We discuss the theory of the interventions and the logistics of how they were linked to create consistency and synergy. Training and ongoing consultation strategies used are described as are some of the barriers and opportunities that arose during the implementation. The strategy for creating a path to sustainability is also discussed. The reform effort was evaluated using both qualitative and quantitative methods; the evaluation design, research questions and preliminary results are provided.

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Introduction

There is much to be learned about “what it takes” to scale-up evidence-based practices (EBPs) in real-world community settings. Although increasing attention has focused on factors that influence the adoption, implementation, and sustainability of EBPs in child and family service sectors, examples of large-scale efforts with independent evaluations are rare. In part, this is attributable to the complexity of monitoring and evaluating large-scale initiatives, and due to the reality that such initiatives are likely to be system or community driven, rather than research driven. Capitalizing on one such opportunity, the current paper will describe the evolution of a child welfare system (CWS) initiated large-scale implementation rollout of linked EBPs.

In this paper, the implementation of an initiative that linked evidence-based parenting interventions in a large urban foster care system is described. The interventions were part of a policy-driven system reform initiated by a public child

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welfare agency that targeted the following outcomes: (1) to decrease the rate of placement disruption (i.e., lateral moves or moves to higher levels of care); (2) to reduce the number of placement days (days children spend in foster care); and (3) to reduce the number of re-entries into foster care for families who had been reunified. Two evidence-based parenting practices (Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Supported and Trained; KEEP and Parent Management Training; PMT) and one developing practice (R³) were implemented in five private foster care agencies serving 2,000 children and families beginning in February 2012. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago was contracted to design and conduct an independent evaluation of the initiative outcomes.

This paper first will provide background on the overall initiative and intended targets. Next, a detailed description of each of the integrated interventions will be provided. Finally, the evaluation strategy conducted by Chapin Hall and the preliminary results are reported.

Background

The CWS leadership solicited the involvement of Oregon Social Learning Center (OSLC), a research center known for the development and evaluation of EBPs to address the needs of children and families involved in child public service systems, and in this case in the child welfare system. OSLC was asked to lead an initiative to conduct the implementation of evidence-based parenting interventions with a set of primary goals: to strengthen child welfare caseworkers' and supervisors' skills for working with caregivers involved in the foster care system including foster and biological/relative, and adoptive parents and to improve child and family outcomes. The initiative was designed to be integrated within the ongoing practice priorities of the CWS including: (a) reducing caseworker caseloads, (b) use of concurrent planning to achieve permanency goals for children within federal guidelines ([Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997](#)), and (c) use of Family Finding to identify more potential kinship permanency outcomes when permanency with birth parents was not an option.

The goal was to pilot the reformation efforts in 5 of the city's over 35 private agencies that are contracted to provide all case planning and case management services for families involved in the foster care system. With consultation from the Chapin Hall evaluators, the initial five "pilot" agencies were chosen to represent agencies of a variety of sizes (serving from 230 to 830 foster youth per year), past performance on the targeted outcomes, and cultural backgrounds. The goal was to identify agencies that were not the best performers, and therefore had little room for improvement, but also not the worst performers, who might be overwhelmed with a complex initiative where multiple interventions were to be implemented. The identified pilot agencies were selected to demonstrate the generalizability of the system reform interventions in order to facilitate the eventual rollout to the remaining agencies with the overarching goal of scaling up the initiative to all CWS contracted foster home agencies.

Targeted Outcomes. A 17 percent decrease was the goal for each of the targeted outcomes including placement disruptions, length of stay in foster care, and re-entries into the foster care system. The 17 percent level of reduction was selected based on a fiscal calculation. That is, reducing disruptions, and lengths of stay by 17 percent was projected to generate sufficient cost savings to the child welfare system to pay for the start-up and ongoing implementation of the interventions. A 17 percent reduction in these outcomes would not only improve the experience of foster care for participating children and families, it would demonstrate that the initiative could be cost-neutral.

Intervention Targets. Two EBPs developed at OSLC that have demonstrated effectiveness in achieving successful outcomes, similar to those desired by the urban CWS, were selected for the initiative. The Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Supported and Trained (KEEP) intervention has demonstrated success in reducing placement disruptions in a number of studies ([Chamberlain, Price, Leve, et al., 2008](#); [Price et al., 2008](#)). KEEP is a group-based intervention for foster and kinship parents focused on increasing the potential for children living in their homes to be exposed to evidence-based parenting practices shown to increase child well-being. Similarly, Parenting Through Change for Reunification (PTC-R), a group-based form of the Oregon Model of Parent Management Training (PMTO) developed for biological parents, has repeatedly demonstrated positive parenting and subsequent child outcomes for serious family problems, including decreased involvement in the child welfare system ([Forgatch, Patterson, & Gewirtz, 2013](#)). Because KEEP and PTC-R were developed from the same behavioral and social learning frameworks often utilized in interventions developed at OSLC, the integration of the two was a natural fit. The CWS leadership determined that all caseworkers and supervisors in the five pilot agencies would be trained to provide both KEEP (for foster/foster kinship parents) and PTC (for biological/adoptive parents). The reform was designed so that caseworkers would implement these two interventions as part of their usual casework routines, rather than the previous strategy of referring parents out for support and parenting services. In addition, at the request of the CWS system a casework practice model (R³; [Saldana, Chamberlain, & Weber, 2015](#)) was developed by OSLC to train supervisors and caseworkers to provide support to parents in the context of their daily interactions with one another. R³ is based on the social learning principle of reinforcement. Supervisors were trained to use reinforcement with their caseworkers in group supervision meetings and, in turn, supervisors trained the caseworkers to reinforce the effort and strengths of the parents on their caseloads (biological, foster, kin). In order to accommodate for the added time that implementing the suite of interventions required, caseloads were reduced to 12 families per caseworker and to 6 caseworkers per supervisor. Previous caseloads varied by agency from 12 to 20 cases per caseworker.

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