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Implementation frameworks in child, youth and family services – Results from a scoping review

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ABSTRACT

Background & objectives: Implementation frameworks are designed to articulate the actions and behaviors considered necessary for successful implementation of interventions, programs or services. Such frameworks have been increasingly used in social services for children, youth and families (which include family and parenting support, out-of-home care (foster care) placements, child protection, family violence, juvenile justice and community services). The purposes of this review were (a) to identify studies employing an implementation framework in this field; (b) map the literature to better understand these frameworks and the ways in which they are being applied; (c) to ascertain the ways in which implementation frameworks are being tested; and (d) to describe the current state of evidence surrounding their use in the field.
Method: For this scoping review, searches of the literature were conducted within PsycINFO, MEDLINE, CINAHL, ASSIA, Embase, Embase Classic, Social Work Abstracts, ERIC and Sociological Abstracts. Databases were searched for published, peer reviewed English language evaluation studies that applied - and reported on this application - implementation frameworks in the child, youth and family service sector. No limits were placed on years. Any type of study design was eligible from single case studies to randomized controlled trials.
Results: Out of a total of 8541 publications located, thirty-three met the inclusion criteria. They included eight frameworks that have been applied in the sector. Few of the identified frameworks were based on rigorous research designs. Common strategies used within the frameworks included staging implementation, key influences (e.g., competencies, organizational factors, leadership), stakeholder identification and engagement, and capacity measurement and building. Rarely were these approaches theoretically grounded or fully developed, and limited information was provided about their characteristics, development or interconnectedness. In short, research underpinning frameworks and their use has been meager, especially considering their proliferation in the field.
Conclusions: This review identifies a need to strengthen the conceptualization of core strategies that are integrated into implementation frameworks, including an articulation of their underlying logic. In the future, implementation science and practice may gain from moving away from comprehensive and complex implementation frameworks towards a more flexible, modular approach to implementation based on the application and combination of effective 'implementation core strategies'. Future research may also draw a more complete picture of the state of implementation frameworks by expanding search terms to also include other sectors and domains into systematic reviews.

1. Background

The calls for 'evidence-informed' and 'evidence-based' practice approaches have become stronger in health, social work, and education since the advent of 'evidence-based medicine' in the 1980's (Shlonsky & Gibbs, 2004), and the number of evidence-based programs available has grown substantially (Dixon & Schwarz, 2013; Kazdin,

2008; Novins, Green, Legha, & Aarons, 2013). Simultaneously, the need to understand and facilitate the transport of effective interventions into real life settings has become stronger (Proctor, Landsverk, Aarons, Chambers, & Mittman, 2008).

In the past two decades, a new field has emerged that focuses on how to create this knowledge and understanding: Implementation science (Brownson, Colditz, & Proctor, 2012; Khalil, 2016). Despite its

newness, the literature in this field has seen a vast growth of strategies, models and frameworks in recent years, all aiming to describe the complexity of implementation processes and to identify key influences that help individuals, organizations and systems to better understand and guide their implementation work (Greenhalgh, Robert, Macfarlane, Bate, & Kyriakidou, 2004; Novins et al., 2013; Powell et al., 2015; Tabak, Khoong, Chambers, & Brownson, 2012). A recent review by Tabak et al. (2012) found 61 unique dissemination and implementation models and frameworks currently in use within the broad implementation science literature, indicating considerable proliferation.

Child, youth and family services represent a sector that has shared this proliferation. This sector consists of government and provider organizations working with vulnerable populations within areas such as family and parenting support, child protection, family violence, juvenile justice and community services. Studies have consistently documented that paying attention to implementation can not only increase the quality of the implementation process itself, but also improve clinical outcomes for the children, youth and families who are the end-users of social welfare services (Campie & Sokolsky, 2016; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Lipsey, 2009; Mildon & Shlonsky, 2011; Powell, Proctor, & Glass, 2014).

It is therefore not surprising that the child and family services sector pays greater attention to questions about implementation. This is reflected in articles describing implementation frameworks (Ghate, 2015; Hanson, Self-Brown, Rostad, & Jackson, 2016; Kaye, DePanfilis, Bright, & Fisher, 2012; Pipkin, Sterrett, Antle, & Christensen, 2013); studies employing these frameworks in their implementation of specific programs or services (Barbee, Christensen, Antle, Wandersman, & Cahn, 2011; Brown et al., 2014; Glisson et al., 2010); and in major government institutions, charitable funding organizations, and professional associations listing implementation frameworks as their guides (Metz, Naoom, Halle, & Bartley, 2015; Project Permanency Innovations Initiative Evaluation Team, 2013; Supplee & Metz, 2015).

Practitioners and agencies working in child, youth and family services implement complex psychosocial interventions but evidence of significant improvements for the sector's target population – vulnerable families, whose physical or mental health may be threatened by individual, parental or family circumstances – is often inconsistent (Barlow, Simkiss, & Stewart-Brown, 2009; Danese & Tan, 2013; De Swart et al., 2012; Fraser et al., 2013; Vermeulen-Smit, Verdurmen, & Engels, 2015). While the uptake of empirically supported treatments in the sector is developing (Chambers, Wang, & Insel, 2010; Hoagwood, Burns, Kiser, Ringeisen, & Schoenwald, 2001; Novins et al., 2013), their benefit for families will likely only be fully realized when they are implemented with high quality. Obtaining this high quality can be difficult given that the sector is characterized by significant consumer complexities, bureaucratic and hierarchical structures, and a tendency towards risk-averse behavior (Camasso & Jagannathan, 2012, 2014; Gambrill & Shlonsky, 2001; Mansell, 2006; Mildon, Shlonsky, & Dickinson, 2014; Regehr, Bogo, Shlonsky, & LeBlanc, 2010).

The sector's interest in implementation therefore is highly relevant. However, in light of these different system constraints, government and provider organizations working with children, young people and families in need of support would benefit from clear guidance surrounding how to use implementation frameworks – guidance that is based on solid evidence rather than opinion. Hence, to better understand the range and use of implementation frameworks that are central to the child, youth and family services sector, a scoping review was conducted.

2. Method: a scoping review

The application of implementation frameworks in the child and family services sector is understudied, and no scoping reviews with this focus have been conducted thus far. Existing reviews either cut across all human service sectors (Tabak et al., 2012) or focus only on other sectors such as health (Moullin, 2015; Prihodova, Guerin, & Kernohan, 2015).

Scoping reviews are often used as a precursor to full systematic reviews, and rather than detailing the effectiveness of programs or services, are designed to broadly map the extant literature in a particular area (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Gough, Oliver, & Thomas, 2012). That is, scoping reviews differ from full systematic reviews in that they broadly describe what the literature contains, using narrative methods, rather than answering specific, narrowly focused questions of cause and effect.

The primary goals of the review were to:

- Identify studies employing an implementation framework in child, youth, and family services and map this literature to better understand these frameworks and the ways in which they are being applied;
- Ascertain the ways in which implementation frameworks are being tested and describe the current state of evidence surrounding their use in the field.

2.1. Search strategy

For this scoping review, the following bibliographic databases were used: PsycINFO, MEDLINE, CINAHL, ASSIA, Embase, Embase Classic, Social Work Abstracts, ERIC and Sociological Abstracts. Databases were searched for published, peer reviewed English language evaluation studies that applied - and reported on this application - implementation frameworks in the child, youth and family service sector. No limits were placed on years. The search strategy employed a wide but targeted range of terms describing 'implementation', 'framework', 'children', 'families' and 'evaluation', and these were combined and run separately in each database (i.e., search terms sometimes varied between databases).

In order to increase efficiency, the implementation and child-specific search terms were combined with search terms designed to identify 'studies'. Studies that were not describing work within the child, youth and families sector as well as opinion pieces, editorials, conference proceedings and similar publications were excluded. All study designs were included, ranging from single case studies to randomized controlled trials.

A formal search of the grey literature was not part of this review. However, subject matter experts were consulted, and reference lists of included studies were searched for other relevant articles. The search terms used in OVID PsycINFO appear in the results addendum. Search strategies used in other databases are available from the authors upon request. Searches were conducted in November 2016.

2.2. Study eligibility

Decisions to include or exclude an article were guided by our definition of an implementation framework – *a coherent set of interlinked elements or factors that - together - constitute a generic structure for describing, understanding or guiding implementation processes* – a definition, which aligns with earlier literature (Flaspohler, Anderson-Butcher, & Wandersman, Duffy, et al., 2008; Meyers, Wandersman, & Durlak, 2012). This definition separates the literature on frameworks from related studies focusing on implementation models developed specifically for a single intervention, or single or multiple, specific implementation strategies that are not integrated into packaged frameworks.

2.3. Literature screening and synthesis

The first author (BA) screened the literature with support from three research assistants. Abstract and title screening was distributed across team members and supervised by the first author. Full text screening was conducted by the first author, who also conducted the data extraction and analysis. All authors were equally involved in developing the discussion of findings.

In order to synthesize the content of implementation frameworks in a systematic manner, five key questions were developed to guide the data extraction and results reporting. Their development was informed by