



Best Practices in Professional Training and Technical Assistance

Mary Maley and John Eckenrode

Research Question

What does research evidence tell us about best practices for professional training and technical assistance for practitioners delivering evidence-based programs to youth?

Bottom Line

Research has identified best practices in the field of adult education, and key training components have been described from practice, but more rigorous empirical evaluation is needed to better characterize the components of effective training and technical assistance in this field.

Background

The ACT for Youth Center of Excellence (COE) is an intermediary charged with supporting the implementation of a statewide adolescent pregnancy prevention initiative funded by the New York State Department of Health (Powers et al., 2015). Delivery of quality youth programming depends on a well-trained, well-supported staff of front-line practitioners. In the field of teen pregnancy prevention, quality and fidelity are important components of effective implementation (Fixsen et al., 2005). Ensuring these includes developing educator competencies in both the content (adolescent reproductive health) and program delivery (facilitation skills). Training and technical assistance is necessary to support these efforts and can be provided by program developers and/or intermediary organizations to bridge the gap between evidence and practice. As part of an internal continuous quality improvement process, the COE is exploring revisions to its training and technical assistance protocols that support the professionals who deliver evidence-based programs (EBPs) to youth. A rapid review of evidence was conducted to look for best practices in the field.

Methods

An electronic database search of PsychInfo, SocIndex, and ERIC was conducted using relevant terms (e.g., training, technical assistance or professional development, and best, effective, positive, practices, components, impact, outcomes, or success). The search was limited to literature published since 2012 because the research team was aware of two recent reviews of literature: a research synthesis (Katz & Wandersman, 2016) and a 2014 comprehensive review conducted by Christopher & colleagues for ETR (Education Training Research). They were included and citations from those publications were hand searched. A total of 75

publications were identified; however, after abstraction for relevance, only 6 publications were retained.

The research synthesis (Katz & Wandersman, 2016) explored the current evidence base for outside organizations providing training and technical assistance (TA) to practitioners delivering evidence-based prevention initiatives to learners. It focused on the characterization of TA in the literature and the lack of rigorous evaluations of TA practices. No other systematic reviews, meta-analyses, or experimental studies were identified in this Systematic Translational Review (STR). The publications included in this STR addressed best practices in the field. Results consisted of one review of literature, one theoretical model, and three summary reports. This scarcity of evidence highlights the need for rigorous evaluation of training, technical assistance, and professional development for practitioners who deliver evidence-based interventions to youth.

Findings

Most published literature on best practices for professional development, training, and/or technical assistance has been conducted in the fields of medicine, dentistry, and classroom teaching. The most relevant papers to the current question were in the fields of adult education, intra-professional education, and implementation science.

Adult learning theory (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2011; Lindeman, 1926) suggests that the following are effective training methods:

- ◆ valuing participant expertise
- ◆ connecting to participants' needs
- ◆ providing time for hands-on practice of new skills
- ◆ taking a collaborative rather than authoritative approach

Adult learning, particularly in professional development settings, is most effective when the experience of the learner is integrated into the content and the process is interactive

Findings - continued

and paced according to the needs of the individual or group. This practice can be thought of as more of a dialogue than a one-way transmission of knowledge from teacher to student.

To describe the components of TA in the field of evidence-based interventions, Katz & Wandersman (2016) conducted a research synthesis of the current evidence base. The authors examined 111 empirical articles that addressed technical assistance and evaluation or outcomes, focused on dissemination and implementation projects, and were delivered by an external organization. The review identified the components of training from three perspectives:

1. Tasks (the activities of implementation as defined by the Getting to Outcomes model) (Wiseman, Chinman, Ebener, Hunter, Imm, & Wandersman 2007)
2. Relationships (the nature of the interaction between the trainer and the recipient)
3. Intervention life cycle (changing needs over the course of an intervention)

In addition, the authors highlighted the lack of evaluation and outcome evidence in TA practice, and the need for additional research in the field.

A tool kit produced by Christopher and colleagues for the nonprofit group ETR Associates in 2014 summarized best practices for the effective delivery of technical assistance,

and a Guide for Technical Assistance Providers using Getting to Outcomes (Wiseman, Chinman, Ebener, Hunter, Imm, & Wandersman 2007) in teen pregnancy programs was published by Fisher and colleagues for Healthy Teen Network in 2014. Together, recommendations from these reports align with research and professional expertise of other authors in the field (Hunzicker, 2010; Lauer, Christopher, Firpo-Triplett, & Buchting 2014; Wandersman, Chien, & Katz 2012) as illustrated in **Table 1**.

Conclusion

As the field of evidence-based practice grows in response to the increasing need for effective interventions to support the health and well-being of young people, the need for evidence to support best practices in professional training and technical assistance grows along with it. The limited empirical evidence identified by this review highlights the need for rigorous evaluation of training, technical assistance, and professional development for practitioners who deliver evidence-based interventions to youth. Katz & Wandersman (2016) call for a more systematic delivery and evaluation of TA for greater quality and accountability. Practice-based expertise can contribute significantly to those efforts.

Table 1. Best Practices in Professional Training and Technical Assistance

First Author/Year	Best Practices or Key Components
Christopher, 2014 (Report - ETR)	Effective delivery of technical assistance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ is focused on need-based topics; ◆ uses a collaborative process; ◆ is relationship-focused; ◆ uses active learning; ◆ offers different approaches at different stages; ◆ is an ongoing process with regular follow-up.
Fisher, 2014 (Report - HTN)	Trainers should have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ facilitation skills; ◆ expertise in subject area; ◆ observation skills; ◆ flexibility; ◆ interpersonal integrity; ◆ project management skills; ◆ coaching skills.

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Table 1. Best Practices in Professional Training and Technical Assistance - continued

First Author/Year	Best Practices or Key Components
Fisher, 2014 (Report - HTN) <i>continued from previous page</i>	Training and TA should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ use a variety of strategies; ◆ support learner goals; ◆ present technical or scientific information in user-friendly terms; ◆ provide a process for planning and discussion; ◆ offer ongoing support and guidance; ◆ include diverse perspectives; ◆ build relationships and trust; ◆ include regular site visits or virtual meetings; ◆ offer proactive follow-up and support over time; ◆ be well documented in assessment reports.
Hunzicker, 2010 (Report)	Effective professional development is: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ supportive; ◆ job-embedded; ◆ instructionally-focused; ◆ collaborative; ◆ ongoing.
Katz, 2016 (research synthesis)	TA is characterized by activities to address: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ tasks of implementation; ◆ relationships; ◆ intervention lifecycle.
Lauer, 2014 (review)	Successful professional development: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ aligns content with participant needs; ◆ allows sufficient time for topic complexity; ◆ delivers content based on learning objectives; ◆ includes demonstrations of desired behaviors and skills; ◆ provides opportunities for participant practice; ◆ includes group discussion; ◆ uses active learning tasks that require cognitive processing; ◆ is conducted in a participant-centered setting; ◆ provides follow-up support to promote transfer of learning.
Wandersman, 2012 (Theoretical Model)	Training and technical assistance for implementation quality should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ take an individualized approach; ◆ use hands-on learning methods; ◆ be focused on increasing capacity; ◆ be an ongoing process; ◆ be proactive as well as reactive.

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Mary Maley is an extension associate in the BCTR.

For more information email mm153@cornell.edu

John Eckenrode is an associate director of the BCTR.

For an overview of the review process, please see [Systematic Translation Review Description](#) at www.bctr.cornell.edu/?attachment_id=3965

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