Child and Youth Well-being and the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect

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Lessons from Community Health

Four imperatives from community health successes most relevant to child abuse and neglect prevention

1. The Comprehensiveness Imperative
2. The Ecological Imperative
3. Combining Best Practices and Best Processes
4. Explicit, measurable and agreed-upon goals and objectives

1. The Comprehensiveness Imperative

- Many efficacy-tested interventions found ineffective
  - when standing alone
  - when taken to scale
- Combinations of methods more effective than individual methods
- The more components, channels, and targets, the more effective the intervention

2. The Ecological Imperative

- Effective Interventions address the problem at all levels
  - Individual
  - Organizational, institutional
  - Community
  - State
  - National
- Effective Interventions make all levels of intervention mutually supportive and complementary

3. The Imperative to Combine Best Practices and Best Processes

- Effective interventions go beyond best programs and individual best practices
- They combine these with the policies and strategies that operationalize the Comprehensiveness and Ecological Imperatives

4. Explicit, Measurable and Agreed-upon Goals and Objectives

- For the last two decades, the outcomes of anti-smoking efforts have been clear, agreed upon and measurable:
  - reduced per capita consumption
  - reduced initiation
  - increased cessation
  - reduced exposure to second-hand smoke
- Measures based on understanding that interventions need time to work

With Agreed-upon, Measurable Goals and Objectives, Anti-smoking Efforts Could Be Based on Clear Theories of Change

Agreement on outcomes makes possible clear theories of change, which in turn make possible

- Solid consensus and knowledge about many compatible ways of achieving desired outcomes
  - To improve program design
  - To set priorities
  - To strengthen policies
  - To make funders more willing to invest
- Data-based advocacy: Use of data (from many sources) …
  - To establish baselines and trend lines
  - To put the issue on the advocacy and policy agenda
  - To compare progress among interventions, over time and between jurisdictions or settings

Why Do We (in CAN prevention) Have Trouble Identifying Agreed-upon Measurable Goals and Clear Theories of Change?

- Valued outcomes are hard to measure
- Valued outcomes are hard to attribute
- Long lag-times between interventions and valued outcomes
- Outcomes the public values are different from what practitioners and researchers have learned about what matters
- Scant agreement on who is responsible for preventing child abuse and neglect

The Challenge: Agreement On Clear, Measurable Goals and Theories of Change

- Key Child Abuse Prevention Outcomes that the Public Values:
  - **No deaths or atrocities due to parental abuse or neglect,** most especially not among children known to the child welfare system
  - **Fewer children abused or neglected**
  - **Fewer children in the child welfare system**

The Public's Theory of Change

INTERVENTIONS

Effective Child Protection System assures:

- **Appropriate reporting**
- **Wise decision-making**
- **Provision or connections to effective response: high-quality services and appropriate support**

OUTCOMES
the Public Values

- **No deaths or atrocities due to parental abuse or neglect**
- **Fewer children abused or neglected**
- **Fewer children in the child welfare system**

What's Wrong With This Theory of Change?

- Outcomes too narrow
- Interventions too narrow
- Distance between interventions and outcomes too great -- even the most effective interventions aimed at social change take time to work

A Consensus Theory of Change

Informed by 25 Years of Lessons from Community Health, Prevention of CAN

The Outcomes

- **Include key Child Abuse Prevention Outcomes that the Public values, slightly modified**
  - ***Fewer*** deaths or atrocities due to parental abuse or neglect, especially among children known to the child welfare system
  - Fewer children abused or neglected
  - Fewer children in the child welfare system
- **Add Outcomes that the Public values for other reasons to broaden support**
  - More children ready for school\
  - More children succeeding at school
  - More youth making successful transition to adulthood
  - Increased rates of child, family, and community well-being
- **Add Broad Range of Interventions**
- **Include Intermediate Results**
  - More protective factors
  - Fewer risk factors

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Interventions and Outcomes

C. Intervention: Effective Child Protection System

- Appropriate reporting
- Wise decision-making
- Provision or connections to effective response: high-quality services and appropriate support

D. Intervention: Agencies, systems, organizations, institutions assuring

- Appropriate identification of families needing help
- Easy access to effective and sustained connections to help, incl.
  - Appropriate high-quality primary services
  - Appropriate high-quality specialized services
  - Appropriate supports
- Norms that support healthy environments for children

A. Outcomes that the Public values as CAN Prevention

- Fewer deaths or atrocities due to parental abuse or neglect
- Fewer children abused or neglected
- Fewer children in the child welfare system

B. Outcomes that the Public values for other reasons

- More children ready for school
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(Interventions, **Interim Results** and Outcomes)

Effective Child Protection System

- Appropriate reporting
- Wise decision-making
- Provision or connections to effective response: high-quality services, appropriate support

Range of agencies, systems, organizations, institutions assuring

- Appropriate identification of families needing help
- Easy access to effective and sustained connections to help, incl.
  - Appropriate high-quality primary services
  - Appropriate high-quality specialized services
  - Appropriate supports
- Norms that support healthy environments for children

More protective factors

- Parental resilience
- Social connections
- Knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need
- Children's social and emotional development

Fewer risk factors

- Impaired parent; impaired parent-child interaction
- Isolated, dysfunctional, highly stressed family
- Child physically or emotionally vulnerable
- Poverty, unemployment
- Chaotic, unsupportive, violent neighborhood

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Action Implications of Consensus Theory of Change

- Invest in the agencies, systems, organizations, and institutions that contribute to the valued outcomes
  - The child care/early education system, e.g. Strengthening Families, Head Start, Early Head Start
  - The health system, e.g. Healthy Steps
  - Home visiting programs, e.g. Nurse Family Partnership
  - Services and centers providing family support, e.g. Family Resource Centers
  - Community-based organizations, state and national policies assuring family economic security
  - Efforts to strengthen supportive neighbors and neighborhoods
  - Specialized services for families involved with substance abuse, domestic violence, gangs, depression, mental illness, impaired attachment
  - Media and public education campaigns

Considerations in Selecting Strategies

- Select strategies that **reflect specific opportunities and circumstances of time and place**
- **Draw on Local Wisdom:** The best mix of strategies for a state, city, county, or community-based organization will vary from time to time and from one jurisdiction or place to another
- Be explicit in identifying the **connection between the strategies you select and the outcomes you seek to achieve**

Maintaining Accountability and Quality

- Capacity to document **key interim results and long-term outcomes**
  - To make funders more willing to invest
  - To identify needs for policy changes
  - To put the issue on the advocacy and policy agenda
  - To illuminate many compatible ways of achieving desired outcomes
  - To establish baselines, trend lines, and make possible comparisons among interventions and among jurisdictions or settings
- Capacity to measure **performance**
  - To assure program quality
  - To improve program design and operations

Assuring that the Strategies You Adopt Are Effective

- Beware the constraints of choosing only from among **Proven Programs** and isolated **Best Practices**

- Attend to **the connections** among interventions

- Beware the Zone of Wishful Thinking about **How the work is done**

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Dealing with the *Villain* Problem

- Anti-smoking efforts had the perfect villain: the cigarette companies
- In CAN Prevention, the public and the media blame the wrong villain
  - The parents of abused and neglected children
  - The child welfare system and staff
- Can we deepen public understanding of the role of poverty, lack of resources, staff and training in helping agencies, and perverse funding incentives?

What Next?

- Changes that will improve outcomes are identifiable; many have been identified
- Especially in California, the stars seem to be aligned
- How do we seize on the opportunities now within our reach?