MANAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION LESSONS FROM PARENTING PROGRAM RESEARCH

Jeff Perron,
University of Ottawa, 136 Jean-Jacques Lussier, Ottawa,

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Corresponding Author:
Jeff Perron,
MBA, PhD(c)
University of Ottawa, 136 Jean-Jacques Lussier, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
jperr101@uottawa.ca

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ABSTRACT

Researchers in the social sciences have long been interested in studying the implementation of health-related programs. This implementation research informs not only the implementation of health-related programs, but is of use to managers in business settings. Of frequent interest to researchers studying implementation are parenting programs. These programs have garnered intense research attention, which has not only supported their effectiveness but has also established recommendations for their implementation in a variety of types of organizations. This review article presents findings from studies that have assessed the implementation of the Triple P Positive Parenting Program. Its findings are of relevance to administrators and managers in a wide range of discipline, particularly those seeking to effectively implement new processes, programs, or strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Four decades of research in the area of parenting programs has demonstrated that structured parenting programs based on social learning models are effective in teaching parents skills that support or enhance the social, emotional, and cognitive development of the child (Mercy & Saul 2009). Of these programs, the Triple P Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) is the most widely researched and implemented worldwide (Sanders 2012).

Evidence-based programs like Triple P have been found to produce the best results when implemented properly and delivered by practitioners with fidelity (Beidas & Kendall 2010). Schoenwald et al. (2008) for example found that a program for youth with behavioural problems produced better outcomes for clients when providers adhered to guidelines. Further, Hengeller (2011) found that programs that are not competently delivered can actually be harmful to clients. Many organizations and practitioners still deliver programs in an eclectic manner, mixing different programs, modalities, and interventions. Such approaches to treatment show little evidence of benefit (Weisz 2004).

Traditionally, research on Triple P has focused on the development and evaluation of the program. As researchers and practitioners have increasingly recognized the importance of properly implementing Triple P and other evidence-based programs, the research literature has followed suit (Turner & Sanders 2006, Asgary-Eden & Lee 2011). Though it is still a growing area of research, there now exist dozens of peer-reviewed publications providing insights on how best to implement Triple P. This literature identifies those publications and summarizes their findings in a clear and actionable manner.

A helpful framework for the presentation of such literature is that presented by Fixsen et al. (2005). Defining implementation as, “a specified set of activities designed to put into practice an activity or program of known dimensions (pp. 6),” Fixsen et al. (2005) identify 6 stages of effective implementation: (1) Exploration/Adoption, (2) Program Installation, (3) Initial Implementation, (4) Full Operation, (5) Innovation, and (6) Sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

In order to identify relevant scholarly works, searches of the PsycInfo database were employed. The following searches were conducted (all in English):

1. A search for the terms “Triple P” and “implement*” (that is, any word beginning with “implement”) in any field was conducted. This search yielded 56 articles. Twenty-two of these were found to be relevant to the current review based on review of abstracts.
2. A search for “Triple P” and “fidelity” yielded 8 articles. Three were found to be relevant to the current review. Of these 3 articles, 1 had been captured in the previous search.
3. A search for “Triple P” and “adher*” (that is, any word beginning with “adher”) yielded 7 results, 4 of which were found to be relevant to the current review. Of these 4 articles, 1 had been captured in previous searches.

The relevant publications were then dutifully read. Any findings and additional references deemed relevant were
extracted for inclusion in this review. These findings are organized below according to the stages of implementation identified by Fixsen et al. (2005).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Exploration/Adoption

The exploration/adoption stage entails a decision making process through which an organization considering to adopt Triple P evaluates the merits of the program, their reasons for adopting, and their ability to effectively implement. Ultimately, organizations must decide whether to proceed or not (Fixsen et al. 2005). An examination of the use of evidence-based interventions in child welfare organizations found that fewer than 20% of such organizations actually use evidence-based interventions in regular practice (Chagnon et al. 2010). As such, those considering implementation of Triple P must carefully examine their history of use of such programs and assess whether they possess the will and capacity to implement the program with fidelity. Ideally, the organization is one that embraces evidence-based practices as this is predictive of success in adopting a new evidence-based program like Triple P (Fixsen et al. 2005, Aarons et al. 2009, Fixsen et al. 2009).

Program Installation

Installation entails the steps that must take place between the decision to implement Triple P up until (and including) staff training (Fixsen et al. 2005). Four key sub-sections of the program installation stage have been identified from Triple P implementation literature: communication with staff, building organizational supports, and training. During each of these sub-stages, strong organizational leadership is critical.

Communication to Staff

It is important that the organization’s leadership communicate openly and demonstrate their support for Triple P in order to increase interest and uptake among staff (Turner & Sanders 2006). Further, management should make it clear to staff that the use of Triple P is required by the organization as this will enhance adherence (Shapiro et al. 2012).

A key task in earning buy-in from front-line staff is demonstrating how and why Triple P is more effective than current practice (Persons & Silherschatz 1998, Turner & Sanders 2006, Sanders & Prinz 2008). While it is instinctual to highlight the benefits to the client, leadership should remember to highlight the benefits to the provider as well. For example, the finding that the use of evidence-based practices enhance staff retention and decrease levels of emotional exhaustion is important and should be shared alongside client outcome benefits (Aarons et al. 2009, Turner et al. 2011).

In addition to messaging from formal leadership, ‘opinion leaders’ or ‘champions’ among front-line staff should be sought out. While all staff should be made keenly aware of the benefits of Triple P, advocates such as opinion leaders can play a key role in communicating the importance of the program to their peers. By speaking about and using Triple P, informal leaders have been shown to increase the use, and support for, Triple P across the organization (Shapiro et al. 2010).

Ultimately, a top-down implementation without input from staff is to be avoided (Aarons et al. 2009, Sanders & Murphy-Brennan 2010). Throughout the stages of implementation, taking the time to communicate to staff why the organization is implementing Triple P will be useful in avoiding resistance based on misunderstanding or misinformation (Turner & Sanders 2006).

Building Organizational Supports

In introducing Triple P, the organization will be asking staff to change their practice. The capacity to offer necessary supports should be built during the installation stage, in preparation for later stages (Fixsen et al. 2005). Throughout the change, staff will need adequate support. A key support will be time and resources necessary for staff to discuss and consult on cases with which they have used Triple P (Asgary-Eden & Lee 2012, Shapiro et al. 2012). The organization should address the fact that staff may have difficulty integrating the new intervention into already busy schedules (Forehand et al. 2010, Shapiro et al. 2012). Staff should know that the organization understands the demands associated with the new implementation. Supports should not be thought of solely in terms of the intangibles of time and inter-personal consultation. Triple P is more likely to be delivered with fidelity when staff have access to quality resource materials, such as Triple P guides and publications (Hoagwood & Kolko 2009, Forehand et al. 2012). Further, in organizations where staff see clients off-site, adequate office space and administrative support should be provided (Hoagwood & Kolko 2009).

Training

Before sending staff to training, the organization should come up with a well thought out estimation of the number of staff it needs to achieve its goal in terms of extent of Triple P use. Those who are chosen to have the training should be those who are interested, as they have a higher likelihood of using the intervention in practice (Sanders 2012). It is also recommended that in order to maximize the impact of training, staff who have the greatest access to (or contact with) families be given priority as this will increase the reach of the program (Shapiro et al. 2012).

Once staff embark on training, staff and administration should keep reasonable expectations. Because Triple P emphasizes relatively brief training, staff will experience a learning curve when starting to use its interventions in the workplace. The organization must be prepared for this and be ready to support staff as they become more proficient (Sanders 2012).

INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION

Initial implementation entails the organizational changes and preparations that take place after training and as part of the first use of the new program (Fixsen et al. 2005). The organization should attempt to implement Triple P as fully as possible but must accept that during initial implementation it will experience learning that will inform changes and modifications made in later stages. Testing the supervision model that the organization chooses is an important part of the initial implementation. Triple P officially recommends taking a self-regulation
approach (Turner & Sanders 2006, Mazzucchelli & Sanders 2010, Sanders & Murphy-Brennan 2010, Sanders 2012). It is recommended that staff regulate themselves not only in the overall use of the program, but also in terms of choosing interventions for specific client problems (Sanders & Prinz 2008).

With staff self-regulating, the climate of the organization becomes all the more important. As the program is implemented, it is recommended that organizations build and maintain an organizational culture in which the use of evidence-based practices such as Triple P are valued and rewarded. Importantly, research has shown that a negative workplace atmosphere leads to lower rates of adherence (Hoagwood & Kolko 2009).

Even under a self-regulation supervision model (or perhaps because of self-regulation), role clarity issues will arise. The organization should proactively address any misconceptions around how Triple P is expected to fit into front-line staff members’ day-to-day work (Sanders 2010). Despite best efforts to avoid such confusion, the initial implementation will be the first time most staff members are implementing Triple P in a real-world context. As such, a degree of confusion is almost certain to arise.

Similarly, even after working to ensure a supportive work environment with appropriate supervision, organizations must be wary of potential barriers that may present themselves throughout implementation (Hoagwood & Kolko 2009, Asgary-Eden & Lee 2012). For example, for many reasons, staff may lose confidence in their use of interventions as time elapses after the training period. Monitoring staff members’ levels of confidence and providing adjunctive supervision or training when necessary is important (Sanders et al. 2009). Not only does this address gaps in confidence or training, it demonstrates the ever-important support the organization is willing to provide to staff as they begin to implement Triple P (Sanders 2009, Shapiro et al. 2012).

FULL OPERATION

Full operation represents the stage at which providers are receiving regular referrals in which they use Triple P, are able to use it with skill, and when organizational supports are firmly entrenched (Fixsen et al. 2005). Achieving this stage is a representation of success, as it indicates that implementation has successfully moved through the first three stages. Also encouraging are findings from Asgary-Eden and Lee, who found that organizations who have implemented Triple P reported adherence of 85.9% with over a third of the participants reporting adherence scores of 100% (Asgary-Eden & Lee 2012).

While organizations should celebrate having achieved full operation, at this stage they should also be reviewing earlier steps and components of implementation to ensure ongoing stability. The organization must ensure that staff remain motivated to use Triple P. Among the predictors for continued use of Triple P by practitioners was the perception that Triple P is helping families change (Asgary-Eden & Lee 2012). This suggests that as organizations move into the ‘full operation’ stage, they should be monitoring changes in clients in order to demonstrate to staff that the intervention is working. Further, the collection of outcome and implementation data will prepare the organization as it plans for changes in the innovation stage (Mazzucchelli & Sanders 2010).

INNOVATION

The innovation stage entails making changes to improve and modify (while respecting the evidence-based nature of Triple P) the program to optimally meet the needs of clients and facilitate staff use (Fixsen et al. 2005). Instead of recommending that organizations avoid customizing Triple P, research suggests that innovations should be made to tailor the program to organizational needs (Breitkreuz et al. 2011). The added benefit of embracing flexibility is that it demonstrates to staff that the program is not rigid (Mazzucchelli & Sanders 2010). This is important as it has been found to positively impact adherence (Breitkreuz et al. 2011, Mazzucchelli & Sanders 2010).

Changes (or innovations) can be classified as low-risk (those in which advantages seem to outweigh disadvantages) and high-risk (when disadvantages seem to outweigh advantages) (Fixsen et al. 2005). Sanders presents the example of lengthening a program component to make it salient to a particular client group as an acceptable, low-risk innovation (Sanders 2010).

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is the stage at which the program is well established (this takes 2-4 years according to Fixsen et al. 2005), engrained in the organization’s culture, and does not require extensive external support to succeed (Turner & Sanders 2006).

Performance monitoring data such as outcome and fidelity metrics are important to sustainability, just as they are to innovation. In the sustainability stage, appropriate data can tell the organization how the program can be changed to remain sustainable in the face of changes in the population served, the organization’s staff, and best practice (Breitkreuz et al. 2011).

Sanders (2010) points to the importance of using the Triple P provider network as a support that can help inform changes that will allow the organization’s Triple P program remain sustainable and generally self-sufficient. They note, ultimately, that, “No parenting programs can afford to be complacent or to remain static. As new knowledge about the impact of a program emerges, new impetus and a favourable motivational context for program innovation and evolution is created (Sanders 2010 pp. 23).”

CONCLUSION

This literature review presents a fulsome overview of research findings related to the implementation of Triple P. The framework presented by Fixsen et al. (2005) is provided not only as an effective organizing framework through which to present findings, but as a relevant, step-wise approach to implementation. To date, research concerning Triple P has been focused on its development, its evaluation, and its population-level dissemination. As such, organizations have no fulsome or authoritative guide to implementation. This rather brief, but comprehensive review summarizes findings in a manner that organizations should find accessible and helpful. Looking forward, research in the field should continue to move towards the development of a detailed and definitive guide to Triple P implementation.

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