



Joining formative evaluation with translational science to assess an EBI in foster care: Examining social–emotional well-being and placement stability



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ABSTRACT

This study examined measures of placement stability and social–emotional well-being for a federally-funded demonstration project of inhome Parent Management Training–Oregon model (PMTO) for children in foster care with serious emotional disturbance (SED). Following a cultural exchange framework for translational research and a tollgate approach to evaluation, this formative study tested these measures prior to further investment in summative evaluation. The research aim was to observe whether measures of social–emotional well-being and placement stability performed as expected. Using a pretest–posttest randomized consent trial, children identified as SED within six months of entering foster care were randomly assigned to PMTO or to a services-as-usual comparison group ($N = 121$). A multi-group structural equation model was tested to observe the relationship of baseline social–emotional wellbeing and placement stability on post–test social–emotional well-being. Results showed that post–test well-being was significantly predicted by baseline well-being for both groups and, importantly, only the intervention group demonstrated significant effects of placement stability on post–test well-being. For the intervention group, as placement stability increased, post–test social skills significantly improved, demonstrating an association between well-being and placement stability that was not evident in the comparison group. Overall, wellbeing measures performed as expected and detected relationships between variables and variation as hypothesized. Additionally, placement stability may have been mediated by the PMTO intervention. In conclusion, by using a real world example of the translational research concept of cultural exchange between university-based researchers and agency-based practitioners, this study shows that formative evaluation offers an important opportunity to test ad hoc research questions inspired by the process of implementation itself.

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1. Introduction

An increasing drive for evidence-based interventions (EBIs) has resulted in heavy investments by federal, state, and local stakeholders to develop, implement, and evaluate innovations in child welfare. Too often, however, the process of implementation and evaluation encounters unanticipated set-backs and hurdles that limit the quality and quantity of information garnered from the research. Even EBIs which find strong empirical support in one setting may appear totally ineffective in another, particularly when comparing a quasi- or non-experimental study to a randomized controlled trial (RCT) (Epstein & Klerman, 2013). Moreover, the research-to-practice gap of a nearly 20-year time lag between successful clinical trials of an EBI and its widespread implementation motivates the field to take additional actions to expedite the dissemination of proven practices (Brekke, Ell, & Palinkas, 2007).

Recognizing these concerns, scholars have advanced several broad concepts related to decreasing the gaps between theory, research, and dissemination of EBIs. The current study draws upon two of these concepts: *staging evaluations* (Epstein & Klerman, 2013; Testa & Poertner, 2010) and the translational research concept of *cultural exchange* (Palinkas & Soydan, 2012). Using these two concepts, this study expanded upon a local project's formative evaluation of a demonstration of Parent Management Training–Oregon model (PMTO) for children in foster care with serious emotional disturbance (SED) (Akin et al., 2014). We examined the relationship between measures of child social–emotional well-being and placement stability. While social–emotional well-being was included as a key construct in the project's initial logic model (see Fig. 1), placement stability was not explicitly identified or measured. Prior research, however, indicated that children with behavioral health problems were at an increased likelihood to experience multiple placements. One aim of the project's intervention was to improve social–emotional well-being for children with SED and, by extension, placement stability could be impacted. Despite these earlier findings in the extant literature, however, the project did not explicitly

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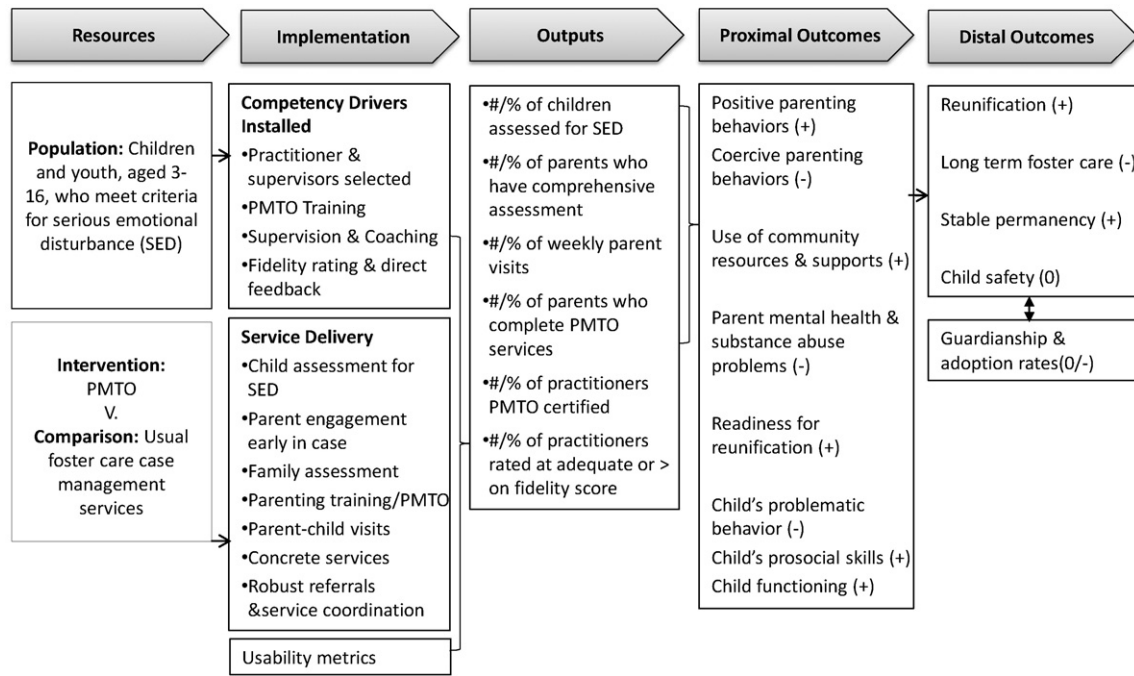


Fig. 1. Project logic model.

propose to influence placement stability. Rather, this hypothesis arose as a result of dialogue between community agency practitioners, administrators, and researchers, and provided an opportunity for some translational research strategies. The following section a) presents project background information, b) describes the two evaluation concepts, c) illustrates the application of these concepts in our EBI evaluation setting, and d) reviews the extant literature specific to the topic of investigation.

2. Background

2.1. Federal initiative and local grantee

This local implementation and evaluation was part of a five-year federally-funded demonstration project known as the Permanency Innovations Initiative (PII). In 2010, the Children's Bureau began PII through cooperative agreements with six grantees, aiming to improve permanency outcomes by targeting specific groups of children in foster care that experience the highest risk for long stays. PII's main goals were to: a) build the implementation and evaluation capacity of public child welfare systems, and b) strengthen the child welfare evidence for reducing long-term foster care. Each of the six grantees worked with technical assistance providers in the areas of implementation science and evaluation to select, implement, and test a unique service strategy for improving child and family outcomes (PII-TTAP & PII-ET, 2013). PII's systematic approach to implementation and evaluation also involved proceeding through evaluation in deliberate and thoughtful stages. Building on a results-oriented accountability framework (Testa & Poertner, 2010), grantees moved through progressive stages of explorative research (Akin, Bryson, McDonald, & Walker, 2012; Bryson, Akin, Blase, McDonald, & Walker, 2014), usability testing (Akin et al., 2013), formative evaluation (Akin et al., 2014), and summative evaluation. Each stage of the evaluation was conceptualized as a tollgate; that is, grantees were required to satisfy designated criteria before passing the tollgate and proceeding to the next stage of evaluation (PII-TAP & PII-ET, 2013). This article describes one of the PII grantee's experiences with the formative evaluation process.

2.2. Tollgate approach to formative evaluation

As introduced above, a results-oriented accountability framework (Testa & Poertner, 2010) promotes formative and summative evaluations as important but distinct steps in the execution of evaluation research. In this context, formative evaluation is concerned with developing stable interventions based on direct practice, data analysis, and theory, which show promise in improving outcomes (Testa et al., 2014, p. 336). Summative evaluation follows formative and focuses on making a summary or global judgment of the intervention's merit and worth (Testa et al., 2014). This notion of multiple evaluation stages is akin to the National Institute of Health's approach to translational research, which promotes a systematic and multi-staged process of "turning observations in the laboratory, clinic and community into interventions that improve the health of individuals and the public..." (NIH, 2015). In the present study, formative evaluation served as a "tollgate" prior to engaging in extensive summative evaluation. Engaging in this type of evaluation allows for testing of assumptions and theories related to program design (Epstein & Klerman, 2013), measuring the validity of selected instruments, and evaluating preliminary intervention effectiveness trends, among other things. The primary benefit of formative evaluation is that consideration of findings can lead to needed adjustments and provision of technical assistance to ensure sound design and rigorous implementation prior to exhausting evaluation resources, thus increasing the likelihood of a successful evaluation outcome (Epstein & Klerman, 2013). Designing an effective formative evaluation plan presents its own challenges, however, because, like summative evaluation, researchers must choose from multiple options, each with its own advantages and disadvantages.

The formative evaluation strategy selected for this analysis includes the use of a falsifiable logic model ("FLM") (Epstein & Klerman, 2013). Simply put, FLM is a detailed logic model that enumerates well-defined and measurable components which serve as hypotheses that can be empirically tested. Proponents of this concept also use the more self-evident term "logic model approach to evaluability" (Epstein & Klerman, 2013, p. 378); that is, the ability of a program to be evaluated. A FLM "implicitly embodies a program theory, and a necessary condition for the program to be effective is that it succeeds

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