

# Research-to-Results <sup>Brief</sup>



...information for practitioners on training staff to implement evidence-based practices.

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## TRAINING OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME STAFF

### *Part 2 in a Series on Implementing Evidence-Based Practices in Out-of-School Time Programs: The Role of Frontline Staff*

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#### BACKGROUND

A skilled and sustainable workforce is one of the most important markers of high-quality out-of-school time programs.<sup>1</sup> Given the links between skilled staff, high-quality programs, and better youth outcomes, staff training has become an essential part of program implementation.

To expand what is known about staff training, Child Trends recently conducted a literature review and collected data on this topic as part of a study on the role of frontline staff in the effective implementation of out-of-school time programs.<sup>1</sup> This brief presents findings from that study and the literature review, as well as from other research about staff training, and links these findings to effective strategies for training frontline staff. The brief also describes these strategies.

#### WHAT IS STAFF TRAINING?

Staff training in the context of out-of-school time programs is one aspect of professional development (sometimes referred to as staff development), which includes a variety of education, training, and development activities with the common goal of increasing staff knowledge and skills to improve youth outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Staff training can help practitioners learn to plan enriching activities, involve families and communities, and interact positively with child and youth participants.<sup>3</sup>

***Staff training includes activities related to providing specialized information, instruction, or skill development in an organized way to practitioners and other key staff members within the program.***

Staff training has been identified as one of six core implementation components—or *implementation drivers*—necessary for helping practitioners implement evidence-based and innovative services effectively.<sup>4,5</sup> These core components include:

- **Staff selection and recruitment**
- **Pre-service and in-service training**
- **Coaching, mentoring, and supervision**
- **Facilitative administration**
- **System-level partnerships**
- **Decision-support data systems**

This brief focuses on the second driver: *staff training*.

<sup>1</sup> For this study, Child Trends conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine program directors of evidence-based out-of-school time programs (i.e., programs that have been experimentally evaluated and demonstrated positive outcomes). Child Trends also held a Roundtable with program staff from nine additional evidence-based out-of-school time programs. The purpose of the interviews and Roundtable was to gather information to better understand how the selection, recruitment, training, and coaching of frontline staff can facilitate the successful implementation of evidence-based, promising, and innovative program models in the out-of-school time field.

## WHY IS STAFF TRAINING IMPORTANT FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS?

As out-of-school time programs move towards the implementation of evidence-based practices, more programs are offering professional development opportunities to increase their staff's ability to implement new and innovative services effectively. However, a large number of staff members who work directly with youth have not had any pre-service training and lack specific credentials or degrees related to youth development, education, or out-of-school time programming.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is vital to identify successful strategies for effectively training out-of-school time staff responsible for delivering services.<sup>ii</sup> Program directors from effective out-of-school time programs identified four ways that staff training can enhance out-of-school time programs.<sup>7</sup> Such training can:

- **Prepare newly hired staff to work with program participants.** Changing the behavior of frontline staff members is important because they are the ones who actually carry out the interventions in out-of-school time programs. Although it can be tempting to throw newly hired staff members into frontline work immediately and expect them to learn as they go, program directors agreed that investing in pre-service training (that is, training prior to working with children and youth) pays off in the end.
- **Help frontline staff members to better understand their roles.** It is important for frontline staff to connect with program participants. It is equally important, however, that staff members understand the boundaries of these relationships (for example, the difference between friendship and mentorship). Staff training can clarify staff roles as well as help staff members learn to work effectively within their roles to promote the well-being of all program participants.
- **Teach teachers how to be better youth workers.** Out-of-school time programs often rely on classroom teachers to provide frontline services. Although working with teachers has many benefits (such as, extensive content knowledge, experience working with youth in formal settings), classroom teachers may have less experience working with youth in informal settings or with young people who are disaffected from school. In these situations, staff training is key.
- **Contribute to a more positive work culture.** Program directors reported that tailoring training sessions to meet the professional needs of staff made staff members feel valued by the program and, consequently, increased their commitment to it. Additionally, one program director noted that the positive work culture that such attention to staff needs created has helped his program recruit additional staff.

## WHAT STEPS CAN PROGRAMS TAKE TO TRAIN FRONTLINE STAFF EFFECTIVELY?

Staff training, including the *content* of the training and how and when it is delivered to program staff, will vary according to program characteristics, such as a program's staffing model (for example, does the program use volunteers or paid full-time staff?), management structure, operating budget, program setting, program mission and priorities, service delivery model, and target population.

However, research has found that effective training *methods* show fewer variations. This finding indicates that there are key elements of staff training that facilitate program implementation, regardless of the specific services provided by different programs serving children and youth. Below we present five steps for effective staff training. These strategies are based on an analysis of research studies on staff training conducted in the field of human services, along with findings from Child Trends' literature review on staff training in out-of-school time programs and its exploratory study on the role of frontline staff in the implementation of effective programs. The five steps include:

- Presenting background information, theory, philosophy, and values of the new program or practice to staff;
- Introducing and demonstrating important aspects of the new practice or skills;

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<sup>ii</sup> The information provided in this brief focuses on the training of frontline staff—those staff members who work directly with children and youth and who make choices every day about the services that they deliver in their out-of-school time programs. It is important to remember, though, that staff at all levels, including supervisory and administrative staff, requires training when a new practice or program is implemented.

- Providing staff with opportunities to practice new skills and receive feedback in a safe training environment;<sup>8</sup>
- Providing staff with ongoing support and follow-up training;<sup>9</sup> and
- Allowing sufficient time for training.

Effective staff training is a back-and-forth, iterative process of defining and describing basic components of the new program or practice, teaching those components through live or video modeling, coaching staff members as they try to use the new skill and evaluate their successes and challenges, and providing ongoing support and booster training sessions. Implementing only one of these components will not result in effective training outcomes (that is, changes in staff behavior and practice).

### ***Step 1: Present Information***

Training workshops focused on imparting knowledge to staff are a key element of most staff training. These workshops present staff members with foundational information on the new program or practice. While it is common to share this type of background information with staff, programs may fall short of making this aspect of training meaningful to staff if they focus only on the “what” (i.e., description of new program or practice) and do not include the “why” (that is, underlying assumptions or theory as to why the new practice will make a positive difference with children and youth).

Research indicates that staff members are more likely to buy into a new program or practice at this stage of the training if they get a clear rationale for these changes.<sup>10</sup> For example, when training staff on basic aspects of daily programming—such as how to design and organize group activities or arrange a space to enhance positive peer interactions—it is important to share with staff why these practices are being suggested. Staff members may be accustomed to designing group activities a particular way, and if they are now told to try a new technique with program participants, they will want to understand the theory behind these suggestions. When program theory is left out of staff training, staff members report that they know more about program practices, but they do not report that they are committed to using these new practices in the field.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Step 2: Demonstrate New Practices***

Another key aspect of training involves the demonstration of important skills and abilities related to carrying out the new program or practice. Practices can be demonstrated either “live” or via video (Demonstrations of new skills are typically followed by a period in which staff can practice these skills). The content of a demonstration is a critical aspect of this part of training. Staff members need to feel that the content of what they are learning is useful and will eventually benefit children and youth participating in their programs. It is recommended that practice demonstrations represent real interactions and situations as much as possible. Toward this end, several program directors suggested involving program participants in staff training.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Step 3: Offer Opportunities for Practice and Feedback***

Evidence from the out-of-school time field suggests that the most effective training sessions contain both interactive and introspective components. This combination allows practitioners to have the opportunity to practice newly learned skills in a safe environment and to reflect on how new practices differ from their past or current way of interacting with the youth that they serve.<sup>13</sup> For example, the staff training of one effective out-of-school time program involved workshops during which staff *practiced* skills. Practice can take the form of role playing (pretending you are someone else, such as a youth participant) or behavior rehearsal (responding to a hypothetical situation or challenge that you might confront in your own position).<sup>14</sup> The staff training offered by that effective out-of-school time program also required staff members to *reflect* on their own experiences as youth and compare their experiences to their interactions with the young people that they serve. The purpose of this exercise, which took the form of keeping a journal, was to help program staff members relate to the experiences of the youth participating in their program.<sup>15</sup>

In Child Trends' recent study on program implementation, directors of successful out-of-school time programs reported that effective training sessions were highly interactive and provided opportunities for frontline staff to: 1) develop and implement activities based on the programs' curricula, and 2) engage in role-playing activities.<sup>16</sup> Practicing skills and receiving feedback were deemed important for the following reasons:

- *Practice sessions* provide staff with opportunities to learn how best to implement the program curriculum as planned and intended;
- *Constructive feedback* and guidance show staff members how to improve their practice; and
- *Opportunities for reflection* help staff members become aware of how their personal apprehensions may hinder the successful implementation of the program model and help them develop strategies for overcoming these issues.

#### ***Step 4: Provide Ongoing Support and Follow-Up Training***

***Working with staff members to process their training in a real setting allows them the opportunity to integrate new ideas and skills into their work over time, increasing the chances that these changes will be sustained. Ongoing supervisor support and coaching seem particularly critical.***

Providing ongoing training and technical assistance is invaluable to frontline program staff members as they try to incorporate newly learned skills into their everyday practice with the children and youth who they serve. Evidence supports the idea that including supervisors in training offered to frontline staff increases the likelihood that frontline staff members will incorporate new skills in their practice. Supervisors who have been exposed to the same training as their staff are better able to reinforce and support frontline staff in implementing new program practices.<sup>17</sup>

Follow-up training and technical assistance also can have a positive impact on changing staff behavior. Learning is most clearly integrated into practice when practitioners have regular opportunities to try out new skills while receiving real-time constructive feedback and tools for improving these skills.<sup>18</sup> For example, evidence from the field of education suggests that very few teachers demonstrate actual changes in classroom practice as a result of training only, but when a coaching component is added to the training, almost all newly trained teachers show measurable changes in classroom practice.<sup>19</sup> These results indicate that coaching newly trained frontline staff in the field is critical to the successful implementation of new practices and programs.

Additionally, program directors recommended tailoring ongoing staff training to meet staff needs. For example, one program using volunteer mentors hosted a series of 15-minute mini-courses throughout the year based on needs identified by staff. Another program found that frontline staff members were more likely to go to training sessions if they knew the training would be on a relevant topic<sup>iii</sup> and presented in an interesting way.<sup>20</sup>

#### ***Step 5: Allow Sufficient Time for Training***

In interviews, program directors of evidence-based out-of-school time programs underscored the importance of the length of training, emphasizing that one-day training sessions are typically insufficient and do not provide enough time to review the program thoroughly and practice newly learned skills. Although the length of training sessions varied across programs, directors of many out-of-school time programs reported that the first day of training covered foundational issues, such as the program mission, while subsequent days provided opportunities to learn and practice new skills.

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<sup>iii</sup> Program directors working with effective out-of-school time programs brought up the following topics when discussing what their ideal staff training would cover: program mission, value, and culture; curriculum content; youth development; team building; time management; crisis management; sensitivity and diversity training; data/evaluation training; boundaries with youth; pedagogy; lesson planning; "what works" for middle school students; and action research.

Evidence also indicates the importance of when and how often training is provided for the successful implementation of new programs and practices. Directors of effective out-of-school time programs reported timing the delivery of staff training in the following ways:

- Staff members receive formal, *pre-service training* before interacting with program participants.
- Staff members are offered or required to participate in *mid-year in-service training*.
- Staff members are provided with *ongoing technical assistance year-round*. Program directors agreed that all staff need ongoing training and support, but the nature of the ongoing training sessions was dependent on the specific and emergent needs of program staff.
- Staff members are given opportunities to attend training sessions that they feel will contribute to their professional development.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the need for additional research to determine the best practices for training program staff, a growing consensus is emerging about effective strategies for increasing the knowledge and skills of frontline staff needed to implement practices effectively and achieve positive outcomes. On the basis of the current evidence available, Child Trends offers the following recommendations and action steps to support the use of effective staff training strategies in the box below.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAFF TRAINING, BASED ON AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

- **Present background information, theory, philosophy, and values of the new program or practice to staff.** Make training meaningful to staff by sharing the underlying assumptions or theory about why the new practice will make a positive difference with children and youth.
- **Introduce and demonstrate important aspects of the new practice or program.** Practice demonstrations should represent real interactions and situations as much as possible.
- **Provide staff with opportunities to practice new skills and receive feedback in a safe training environment.** Ask staff members to reflect on how new practices differ from their past or current ways of interacting with the children and youth that they serve.
- **Provide staff with ongoing support and follow-up training.** Working with staff members to process their training in a real setting allows them the opportunity to integrate new ideas and skills into their work over time, increasing the chances that these changes will be sustained.
- **Allow sufficient time for training.** Training should take place over multiple days and sessions involving foundational issues and opportunities to learn and practice new skills. Pre-service training should be provided before staff interacts with program participants. Mid-year training sessions and ongoing technical assistance should also be provided to reinforce newly learned skills.

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