

# **Reducing Youth Problems and Promoting Positive Youth Development: Choosing the best program for your community**

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*This resource is designed to guide a community in selecting a program that best meets the community's needs, considering issues of fit, feasibility, and evidence of effectiveness (CSAP, 2009). The exercise was developed to accompany the presentation "Promoting the Use of Evidence-based Prevention: Application in the Real World" presented via webinar to Pennsylvania Cooperative Extension educators in September, 2009 (Bumbarger, 2009). The presentation is available online at <https://breeze.psu.edu/p22215525>.*

There is increasing research evidence that it is possible for communities to reduce youth problems, including substance abuse, delinquency and violence and to promote positive youth development. From a growing knowledge base of the etiology of these problems (i.e. the risk and protective factors associated with, and the developmental pathways that lead to these problems) researchers have developed many preventive interventions that have been tested and found effective in well-designed evaluation studies. Subsequently, a number of government and research organizations have assembled "lists" of prevention and youth development programs that they endorse as effective.

Although the availability of such lists has been an important step in promoting an agenda of "evidence-based" prevention, a number of important challenges remain for communities trying to accomplish population-level improvement in youth outcomes. One such challenge is selecting the best program for a given community and its needs.

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While the fields of prevention science and practice have grown increasingly sophisticated and driven by research, the factors that lead communities to select a given prevention program or strategy are still very often unsystematic and arbitrary. This has important ramifications, as even the most efficacious program may be ineffective in improving youth outcomes if it does not match a community's needs or capacity to deliver the program with quality and sustain it.

Recent models for program selection decision-making have identified three important areas of consideration:

1. Program fit – Does the program specifically address the risk and protective factors, developmental stage, domains of influence, and the population targeted, as well as the culture and values of the community?
2. Program efficacy – Based on the program's record of evaluation results, how much confidence can the community have that the program will result in improved outcomes?
3. Program feasibility – Do the community, implementers, and implementing organization have the necessary capacity to deliver the program with sufficient quality, sustain it, and assess its delivery and impact?

As a tool for making program selection decisions, it may be helpful for communities to quantitatively assess each of these areas and generate a combined score which can be used to compare multiple programs. Further, the process of gathering the information necessary to review these considerations can be invaluable in making more informed program choices. The following worksheets can be used to

guide a community in considering these issues. In the process the worksheets can facilitate a comprehensive planning process that will also help the community to anticipate and plan to avoid or address common barriers to program adoption, implementation, and sustainability.

**Where does the program fall on the Matrix of Fit & Feasibility vs. Evidence?**

		Fit & Feasibility (F&F)		
		Poor -----> Good		
Evidence	Weak	Untested or Ineffective & Poor F&F	Untested or Ineffective & some challenges to F&F	Untested or Ineffective but good F&F
	<-----	Promising Effectiveness but Poor F&F	Promising Effectiveness but some challenges to F&F	Promising Effectiveness & good F&F
	Strong	Evidence-based but Poor F&F	Evidence-based but some challenges to F&F	Evidence-based & good F&F

**Considering the Program’s Evidence of Effectiveness**

1. Does the program have a well-articulated underlying theory of behavior change; are specific risk and/or protective factors and developmental/causal pathway targeted by the program?

2. Has the program been evaluated using a research design that includes the use of a control or comparison group, or another type of rigorous evaluation that can adequately attribute the evaluation's findings to the program and adequately rule out alternative possible explanations?

3. Has the program published results on a study of its effectiveness, and have results been independently review, through a peer-reviewed scientific journal process or other similar type of independent review, with regard to the appropriate methodology and statistical analyses?

4. Are the published results of the program's evaluation(s) generalizable to your community or the specific population you are targeting?

5. Have the results of the program's evaluation been replicated in more than one study, and/or by more than one researcher (or someone other than the program's developer)?

6. Are there convergent findings from other research on similar types of programs (i.e. programs with a similar logic model or theory of behavior change) that support the program's theory?

7. Are the positive findings from the program's evaluation(s) not only statistically significant but also practically significant (i.e. sufficient effect size and impact to justify the investment in the program), and have program effects been found to be sustained beyond immediate post-test?

8. Has research show any unintended negative effects of the program? (If so, the program should NOT be considered until additional research has been conducted).

***Based on your responses to the questions above, please rate the program's evidence of effectiveness on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being the worst and 10 being the best (strongest and most credible evidence of effectiveness:***

### **Considering the Program's Fit**

1. How closely does the program's theory of behavior change, targeted risk and protective factors, and target population match your community's identified needs?

2. How well do the program's theory, goals and approach fit with (support, reinforce, or conflict with) other existing programs and priorities in your community?

3. How well does the program seem to fit with the culture and beliefs or your community and target population?

4. Will the program have to be significantly adapted in order to be adequately adopted and implemented in your community?

5. How difficult will it be to recruit and retain the necessary staff with appropriate qualifications?

6. How supportive will key administrators and stakeholders be of the program?

7. Will the commitment of time and resources both for training and program delivery be acceptable?

8. How difficult will it be to sustain the program long-term?

***Based on your responses to the questions above, please rate the program's Fit on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being the worst (poor fit) and 10 being the best (excellent fit):***

### **Considering the Program's Feasibility**

1. Are training and program materials readily available and of sufficient quality?

2. Is there ongoing technical assistance available beyond initial training?

3. Is there a network of peer support among other communities who are also implementing this program?

4. What expenses and resources will be required to implement the program initially (training, curriculum, etc.)?

5. What expenses and resources will be required to continuously monitor the program's implementation quality and impact (observation or self-reports, data collection and analysis, etc.)?

6. What expenses and resources will be required to sustain the program (consumable program materials, refresher training or retraining to account for staff turnover)?

7. Does the program meet the requirements of common funding sources/initiatives?

8. Given the potential outcomes expected, is the program likely to represent a positive return on investment?

***Based on your responses to the questions above, please rate the program's Feasibility on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being the worst (not financially feasible) and 10 being the best (good feasibility):***

Total score for Evidence, Fit, and Feasibility:

A **total score from 24-30** indicates a program with good evidence of effectiveness AND good fit and feasibility. Such a program is likely to be effective and likely to be well implemented and sustained. A **total score from 20-23** indicates a program that either has limited evidence of effectiveness or may face challenges related to poor fit of feasibility. These challenges could result in problems with implementation quality, sustainability, or even initial program acceptance in the community. Programs with a **score below 20** should NOT be considered, as they are highly unlikely to result in positive youth development or other targeted behavior change.

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For more information on program selection and finding a balance between fit, feasibility, and evidence of effectiveness please see the following documents, which guided the development of this planning tool:

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP, 2009). Identifying and Selecting Evidence-based Interventions, 2009. *Revised Guidance Document for the Strategic Prevention Framework State Incentive Grant Program*. HHS Pub. No. (SMA)09-4205. Rockville, MD: Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Small, S.A., Cooney, S.M., Eastman, G., & O'Connor, C. (2007). Guidelines for Selecting an Evidence-based Program: Balancing community needs, program quality, and organizational resources. *What Works, Wisconsin Research to Practice Series*, 3. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison Extension.