

Implementing Systems Change

How Neuroscience Informs the Process and Lessons from the Field

There is a science to putting good ideas and new approaches into action. Research shows that there are important considerations for successfully implementing new approaches that can be sustained and demonstrate lasting benefit.¹ Sustaining system, practice and program changes that will result in improved outcomes for children, youth and their families requires a comprehensive approach and an understanding of the relationships and the whole context of the individuals; organization; and political, economic, and social environment. Experience has shown that five key elements promote ongoing quality improvement and sustainability of systems change initiatives (see figure 1).² These include a shared vision and values among partners; leaders committed to achieving results; meaningful involvement of stakeholders in planning, decision making and adaptation of practices; awareness of the environmental context; and building the capacity of staff and the organizational infrastructure. Each of these five elements were crucial for building the capacity to implement system-wide, organizational, and practice changes that lead to better child and family outcomes.



Figure 1. Key Elements for Implementing Sustainable Systems Change



Implementing systems change requires assessing the system's strengths and needs regarding each of these elements; aligning organizational culture, policies, practices, and resources across each of these elements; and acting strategically in each of these areas to affect change. No one element is more critical than the others, although each may require more or less focused attention at different points in the process as each contributes to the likelihood of successful implementation.

The Application of Neuroscience to Systems Change in Child Welfare

Recent developments in social cognitive neuroscience shine a new light on how individual responses can affect systems change, and processes within the brain that lie beneath human interactions, decisions, and behaviors.³ This bulletin describes how brain science provides a deeper understanding of how individuals are impacted throughout the implementation process.

While systems change involves collective planning and action, this process begins at the individual level. Viewing systems transformation through the lens of neuroscience provides a more sophisticated appreciation of what is needed to engage people in the innovative thinking that leads to improved performance. The brain is a critical part of the change process and neuroscience provides a better understanding of why the key elements are essential to successfully implement systems change. Effectively engaging people within and across systems to solve problems differently than in the past, requires attention to changing the ways in which we think about preventing child abuse and neglect. The implications of neuroscience are profound for leaders, managers, supervisors, and teams engaged in implementing improvements across systems, practices, and the delivery of programs to prevent child abuse and neglect and improve outcomes for children and families.

Later in this bulletin, two state CBCAP projects that have applied the five key elements required for effective implementation of new programs and system changes will be reviewed. These examples will also reflect the neuroscience of systems change.

Sharing a Vision for Change

From a neuroscience perspective, a shared vision and values are critical for creating connections between people and motivating them to move forward with a shared purpose. According to provocative discoveries in brain imaging, inside our heads we constantly “act out” and imitate whatever activity we are observing. Mirror neurons are a type of brain cell that respond equally when we perform an action and when we witness someone else perform the same action.⁴ Through mirror neurons we are able to connect with each other at the neurobiological level and these connections influence our thoughts and behaviors.⁵

Shared values inform a vision and provide direction and purpose for undergoing the effort to make the necessary changes.⁶ Establishing a shared vision and reaching agreement about values that guide the vision provides an anchor in the turbulent waters of change. A shared vision with everyone “on the same page” makes it possible to remain focused and clear about intended goals despite multiple partners, stakeholders and transition among leaders. When challenges arise, groups are able to reflect back on the agreed-upon vision and values and realign and refocus efforts to achieve the intended goals.

Leadership and Commitment with the Brain in Mind

Systems change is not easy, quick, or painless. Countless internal and external pressures can threaten to derail it. Leaders provide the face and voice of systems change efforts and maintain the sense of urgency for change in the face of these pressures. Leaders have the power to turn potential roadblocks (such as negative media attention, changing political leadership, lawsuits, etc.) into opportunities to advance and accelerate the change process. For systems change to be successful, leaders at all levels of the system must be engaged and committed to achieving intended outcomes. Change can be unsettling and people look to the leader for direction and support. Leaders



need to not only communicate the vision underlying the change, but also how values inform decisions and expectations. Their behavior can motivate people, cultivate a positive emotional tone and collaborative teamwork, and foster an environment that leads to improved thinking and practice. Throughout the systems change process leaders can foster the organizational capacity to learn, innovate, and adapt to changing priorities and new directions.

The Neuroscience of Engagement

The meaningful involvement and engagement of stakeholders, including staff, parents, and youth in the planning and decision-making process is important to build system wide support and to ensure that the systems change effort is responsive to the needs and desires of the community. Meaningful involvement of leaders, supervisors, staff, families and youth in planning, implementation, evaluation, decision making, and ongoing quality assurance ensure that people are committed to the organizational goals. Increasing engagement in a child welfare system, staff, other family-serving agencies, and families and youth fosters an emotional investment in learning new ways of thinking and desire to support the change effort.

Humans are hard-wired to socially connect, as being connected to a caregiver from birth is mandatory for survival. In contrast, the experience of feeling excluded or rejected, activates the same regions of the brain as physical suffering.⁷ Within a fraction of a second and outside of our conscious awareness, people perceived to be like us are classified as being in the “in-group.” Those not like us are considered to be the “out-group.”⁸ This in-group/out-group categorization has a profound effect on how we see and understand others. People assessed to be in the out-group produce a threat response, decreasing our capacity to empathize and increasing our tendency to be biased and mistrusting of their intentions. Creating positive rewarding experiences creates a new “in-group” that helps unite stakeholders toward common goals. Ensuring that different stakeholders, who might be considered “outsiders” are actively engaged and their contributions are valued is essential for collaborative problem solving, learning, and motivation. Engaging stakeholders motivates them to build the capacity necessary to move beyond the status quo.



The Impact of Environment on Performance

The internal organizational environment, as well as the external social, economic, political or media environment, can impact the productivity of staff and capacity to implement change. Systems change requires considering the internal and external environment and considering approaches to change within that context, rather than in spite of it. Organizational issues such as communication, problem solving, readiness for change, resources, and community relations, as well as larger social, economic, and political influences such as media attention, lawsuits, and elected politicians with competing priorities are environmental factors to consider. Where there is political will, community readiness, and organizational acceptance for the identified change, the change is more likely to move forward.⁹

The environmental conditions of the organizational culture can generate a threat and reward response. To create a learning culture, staff need to be in a reward state or positive frame of mind, and able to perceive the environment as safe and supportive of trying new behaviors and taking risks. Creating a rewarding environment activates parts of the brain that encourages creative exploration of opportunities in the face of challenges. Efforts to achieve organizational change are supported by creating environments where people feel treated fairly, are socially connected, experience a sense of autonomy in decision making, are perceived as important to others, and have enough information to feel some degree of certainty as the change process unfolds supports efforts to achieve organizational change.¹⁰





Building Capacity Requires Changing Old Habits and Beliefs

Building organizational capacity for systems change requires changing skills, competencies, and behaviors of individuals. Organizational capacity and infrastructure sustains changes in policies and practices within the system including funding, staff selection, training, coaching, supervision, and performance assessment, among other factors.

Understanding the neuroscience of human interactions, habit formation, and decision making during system reform efforts has implications for the implementation of behavior change and building the capacity of staff to implement new practices, approaches, or programs. New advances in brain science inform us why people struggle with changing habits. Novelty is energy-intensive and demands conscious attention.¹¹ On the contrary, familiar activities, which are old hard-wired habits of behavior, command much less energy and resources. After a behavior is repeated a sufficient number of times, the brain has the capacity to process new incoming information and experiences requiring more attention become easier to implement.

Two CBCAP State Examples

This bulletin describes how two very different Community Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) lead agencies in Wisconsin and the District of Columbia (DC) integrated each of the five key elements to successfully implement new approaches to prevent child abuse and neglect. While the initiatives were very different, they thoughtfully engaged in a systems change process within their organization that made it possible to achieve results. Additionally, both of these initiatives required individuals to change attitudes (about the problem and the solution), change knowledge and behaviors (skills to

implement the practice) and change relationships (interactions between consumers, stakeholders and system partners). These are desired changes that benefit from understanding the neuroscience of change.

The Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund's Project GAIN (Getting Access to Income Now) was designed as a rigorous research study to explore whether addressing economic needs of families can prevent future reports to child protective services. As part of GAIN, families reported to child protective services with unsubstantiated allegations were offered the opportunity to get access to public benefits, work with staff to improve financial decision making, and provided one-time financial assistance.

The Child and Family Services Agency in Washington, DC initiated the Parent Education and Support Project to expand the array of child abuse prevention services and capacity of community-based organizations to improve outcomes for parents of young children and older youth. Through a request for proposal process, DC awarded four grants as financial incentives to community-based organizations to implement evidence-based models for child abuse prevention for vulnerable children, youth, and their families.

In both of these child abuse prevention initiatives, people were required to engage in creative problem-solving, innovative thinking, and collaborative teamwork to implement the kind of practice, policy and programmatic changes necessary to improve outcomes for children and families.

Sharing a Vision

Establishing a common vision and values in each of these projects, required engaging *all* stakeholders across the system, including staff, volunteers, and resource families who provide direct services, and children, youth, and families who receive those services. Taking time to clarify the different perspectives, values, and expectations that are important to stakeholders creates an important foundation for mutual understanding and respect.¹² While very different in their approach, both initiatives identified that a shared vision and values among the leaders, staff and stakeholders was the single most important element for implementing the project.

Project GAIN was developed based on the Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund's Community Response Program implementation evaluation.¹³ The data showed that parenting concerns were the predominant reason for referral to Child Protective Services, however nearly 50% of the participating families identified a service goal related to income or benefits. Project GAIN sought to implement a rigorous research design based on a vision that addressing economic challenges and reducing poverty will prevent child abuse and neglect. This represented a fundamental philosophical shift of child abuse prevention from focusing on building individual parenting capacity, to focusing on strengthening the economic security of families. As Project GAIN is trying to test out the approach and maintain fidelity to an economic intervention in the randomized control group, partners were brought into the process early and a communication structure was established to maintain a clear focus on providing economic interventions with a vision for improving outcomes for these families.



The underlying values of the Parent Education and Support Project were that children and families deserve access to the most effective services in their own community. Their vision was to prevent child abuse and neglect by more effectively supporting parents and addressing the needs of children. In DC, a vision for improving community based prevention services for families made it possible to reallocate limited resources, promoted collaboration among the human service system to address service gaps, and enabled community-based organizations to implement evidence-based practices to better support families.

Leadership and Commitment

Both initiatives found leadership commitment critical to address identified challenges in their community.

The leadership at the Wisconsin Children's Trust Fund, Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, all agreed to work together to address the correlation between income and the prevention of child maltreatment. The commitment of the leaders and supervisors were essential in planning and conducting a transparent, well-advertised, and competitive Request for Proposal (RFP). Partners also understood and supported the requirement in the RFP for respondents to have professionals on staff who had experience providing economic assistance. Commitment to the approach was essential to implement economic interventions and gather data to better understand the impact on child and family outcomes.

In DC, leaders of the Child and Family Services Agency, Department of Health, and Department of Mental Health recognized the need for and promoted cross agency collaboration to better meet the

needs of families. In addition, community leaders were actively engaged in a community-wide needs assessment which identified the need to improve the array of services available to support families. Leaders across these agencies made a commitment to collaborate and support the Child and Family Service's agency Request for Proposal process for funding evidence-based, community-based child abuse prevention programs focused on the needs of young children and older youth.

These initiatives provide examples of how interactions between people, especially between a leader and staff and stakeholders, can promote interest in trying new approaches and being accountable for moving goals forward. Child welfare transformation requires the support and commitment of leaders who facilitate innovation and reinforce new attitudes, behaviors and approaches to achieving goals.

Engaging Stakeholders

Both initiatives made it possible to effectively engage stakeholders to contribute to ongoing decision-making and implementation efforts. They achieved collective action by connecting and engaging stakeholders.

In Wisconsin, Project GAIN had been in development for years and originated as a pilot in a smaller community to test the economic intervention model and answer the question "How much prevention can be attained by intervening only around economic issues?" Many lessons were learned from stakeholders engaged in the pilot that informed the implementation of processes, procedures, and communications about the project with stakeholders. While economic interventions will not be the only answer for preventing child maltreatment, learning about its role in prevention will be important to understand and have implications for future service options in Wisconsin and for the broader child welfare field. As they continue to build systems that promote safe stable nurturing families, economic support for families may be a critical component in a service delivery continuum. Data on the impact of promoting economic stability in families will be shared and will be essential to engage the broader child abuse prevention field.

In DC, community prevention providers, foster parents, birth parents involved in the child welfare system and staff provided feedback about the needs in the community. A formal needs assessment was also conducted that identified gaps in evidence-based approaches to child abuse and neglect prevention, as well as limited access to the basic necessities that support family life. The report recommended that prevention efforts must focus on expanding the accessibility of these concrete support services to families, including job training, employment, and safe affordable housing, as well as an array of prevention services, mental health services to address trauma and stability in the home environment, and community-based services and proactive outreach efforts that reach families living in isolation.¹⁴ As grantees were engaged in addressing these challenges, ongoing continuous quality improvement efforts provided feedback from stakeholders which informed changes necessary to improve implementation efforts.

Considering the Environment

Both initiatives had environmental factors that supported the systems change effort. The environmental conditions in both of these initiatives supported a universal sense that they were making a meaningful contribution that was responsive to identified needs given the current environment. In Wisconsin the economic recession was impacting many families. The timing for launching Project GAIN to build the financial capacity of families was responsive to the environmental conditions across the state and the nation. In DC, the Child and Family Services Agency had been under a consent decree for many years, and there was great political will to “seize the day” and demonstrate their capacity to be responsive and accountable to identified community needs. The environment in which both initiatives were taking place was highly supportive of risk taking needed to explore new ways of work.

Building Capacity

Both initiatives had to develop the capacity and infrastructure to support the implementation process.

Project GAIN required 80 hours of training for Financial Advocates before they met with referred families. Training included how to access benefits for families including emergency assistance, prescription drug assistance, weatherization, financial assistance (SSI, SSDI, Welfare to Work), as well information on transitional jobs, literacy programs, adult education providers, credit counseling, getting a driver’s license, child support, child care, and legal aid advocates. Data on participants is being collected regularly and informing continuous quality improvement. Engaging families was a major challenge that required new ways of working. Staff needed to follow up by proactively making phone calls, sending letters, and conducting home visits to effectively engage families in services. Finding and engaging families 60 days after their case is closed also required creative approaches to problem solving. A program manual was developed to capture the lessons learned in implementing the approach and will inform future staff who work in the program.¹⁵

In DC, each of the grantees coordinated and managed their training, coaching and development of staff with support from CFSA’s assigned grant monitor. In addition, a learning community was established among grantees to share training resources and provide information on services available in their community to meet identified needs and address service gaps. Grantees needed to build the capacity for continuous quality improvement and program evaluation to better understand the entry into systems, how program participants were utilizing services, and how to better engage and retain program participants. As grantees evolved, they found that they needed to adjust their plans to engage and support fathers,



adapt services to support pregnant and parenting youth, and be more proactive through intentional outreach to ensure families had easy access to services. A gradual increasing match requirement ensured that all grantees sought to identify additional resources to sustain the evidence-based approaches within the communities.

Conclusion

The process of implementing systems change begins with identifying the issues to be addressed and the goals and outcomes to be achieved. Assessing a system's strengths and challenges in each of the five key elements inform strategic action necessary to effect systems change. The following questions might serve as a starting point for considering readiness for implementing systems change:

- What is the problem or challenge we need to resolve?
 - What is our vision for the children and families we serve?
 - Do we have the leadership capacity to support our systems change goals?
 - What environmental factors might help or hinder our progress toward goals? How will the political environment and internal organizational culture affect our ability to achieve the change we are seeking?
- Are stakeholders informing us about the challenges our system is facing, the direction we should be headed, and whether we are achieving the outcomes we are seeking?
 - What capacity do we need to strengthen – staffing, funding, training, evaluation, or quality assurance - to achieve our goals and sustain the effort in the future?

All five key elements are essential for achieving sustainable change. Recognizing the system's strengths and needs in each of these areas helps to inform the organization in creating the capacity to implement and sustain comprehensive systems change to achieve the identified goals and outcomes.

Change is hard and implementing a new approach for conducting business or establishing a new initiative, program, or approach can be challenging. However, taking both a broad view of the system, as well as considering individual reaction to the change being implemented is important to assure successful implementation. Focusing on implementing new ways to prevent child abuse requires understanding and responding to resistance and creating positive and safe experiences throughout the implementation process so that all stakeholders feel part of the process. Together, they can contribute to breaking new ground and establish sustainable approaches to ensuring the success of children and families.



Footnotes

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