Evidence-Based Health Promotion Initiative: Review of Health Promotion Curricula

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Introduction

Evidence-based health promotion has become increasingly important and visible. There are numerous health promotion programs and curricula disseminated in schools and communities across the U.S., but their quality and effectiveness vary drastically. In the context of evidence-based health promotion, programs with research-based components and that have been empirically validated have the greatest potential for benefiting children and youth.

Children and youth with special health care needs (CYSHCN) have or are at increased risk for a chronic physical, developmental, behavioral, or emotional condition and who also require health and related services beyond those required by children generally. The 2009/10 National Survey of Children with Special Health Care Needs (NS-CSHCN) indicates that, compared to their peers, CYSHCN are more likely to develop secondary conditions related to poor health and are less likely to access needed healthcare services, including preventive care and health education. Given the increased risk of health problems and reduced access to healthcare among CYSHCN, it is imperative that all children and youth, including CYSHCN, have access to effective health promotion programs. The evidence-based health promotion initiative was put into place to evaluate health promotion programs and to aid individuals and agencies working with CYSHCN to make decisions regarding which health promotion curricula are equipped with the essential components for them to be effective. Two phases of the initiative have been completed: a systematic review and the development of the Health Promotion Curriculum Checklist (HPCC).

Characteristics of Effective Health Promotion Curricula

Research Evidence

The content in the curriculum needs to be research based. In other words, the curriculum needs to have been examined through carefully designed, high quality experimental studies and shown to be effective. Assessment instruments used to document the outcomes should be valid (instruments measure...
what they are intended to measure) and reliable (the same measurement process yields the same results).

**Prevention and Promotion of New Skills** Health promotion programs should proactively and positively target the function and context of behaviors rather than focusing on strategies that are reactive or punishing. Effective programs explicitly teach and expect healthy behaviors from the onset of the program and extend these behaviors into daily routines to help form healthy habits.

**Inclusion** Inclusiveness is a critical component of an effective curriculum. Health promotion programming must be universally available and accessible to all children, youth, and families, regardless of their ethnicity, family structure, income, neighborhood, education, environment, and abilities. Effective health promotion programs value cultural diversity and respect individual worth and community.

**Longevity** Healthy weight promotion is best conceptualized as a set of life-long skills that are learned early and practiced every day. Effective programs should not only teach that healthy behaviors must occur on a daily basis throughout life, but programs should also be in effect long enough to observe progress. Physical changes (e.g., weight loss, reduction in BMI, lowered blood pressure, etc.) take a significant amount of time to see improvements, and effective programs allow enough time for progress to be made.

**Collaboration** Connection to families and collaboration with other community entities must be present for health promotion programs to achieve their ultimate purpose. Effective health promotion programs can be implemented in a variety of settings, but communication among families, schools, and other community partners is essential. Health and wellness activities make up an overall healthy lifestyle. To make health behaviors routinely apart of their lives, children and youth must learn to take the skills they learn and translate them across contexts. Communication and collaboration are critical to this process.

**Training** Effective programs include a training component or professional development opportunities for individuals responsible for implementing the program. At a minimum, programs should have a manual with lesson guides. Programs are only effective if they are implemented in the manner in which they were designed. Training is necessary to ensure implementers can deliver the program properly.

**Progress Monitoring/Evaluation of Program** A mechanism to measure progress of learners is an essential component to effective health promotion curricula. Effective programs include an assessment tool to help document whether the intended outcomes of the program are achieved and whether individuals are engaging in health promotion behaviors.