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How to Choose a Social-Emotional Curriculum

The "How Do I Decide?" Series of Guidelines was developed to help you make informed decisions that will positively impact young children's challenging behavior and social-emotional development.

Today, there are many curricula that focus on young children's social emotional development. Our purpose here is not to recommend certain curricula but rather to offer guidance on how to choose the one that will best meet your needs. It is important to note, however, that CSEFEL believes that every early childhood program should have a social emotional curriculum in place in order to provide a structure and focus that will promote this fundamentally important domain of development.

Step #1: Choose a Diverse Team to Provide Input

When choosing a curriculum, a broadly representative team of administrators, direct service providers and family members should be assembled to provide input. This type of decision-making structure makes it more likely that all interested parties will be committed to the ultimate decision.

Step #2: Have the Team Consider Key Questions

Key questions for teams to consider in order to guide and inform the ultimate curriculum adoption decision are listed below. The questions are organized into two broad categories:
a. Pivotal questions which are designed to address the fundamental issue "Is this curriculum worthy of more careful review?"
b. Relationship with program characteristics/resources questions which are designed to help match potentially "acceptable" curriculum to individual program assets and needs.

Pivotal Questions:

1. *Has this curriculum been shown to produce scientifically-verifiable outcomes?*

    The team should look for multiple examples of studies published in peer-reviewed journals where children like the ones of concern were included. Teams need to make certain that the curriculum has been validated with children of similar ages, social-emotional needs, linguistic backgrounds, and culture.

2. *Has this curriculum been adopted successfully by programs like ours?*

    The team should contact similar programs to determine their level of satisfaction with the curriculum. The purpose here is not only to see if fellow providers are "satisfied" but also to inquire about results obtained, problems in implementation and initial training

on the materials, and supports needed to assist providers in accurate implementation.

3. *Does the curriculum actually impact all of the social-emotional outcomes we are concerned about?*

   Social-emotional curricula vary widely in their scope and therefore their potential impact on children's behavior. Some curricula focus primarily on friendship skills, others on emotional regulation, still others on resolving peer conflicts. Teams need to be clear about their goals for the curriculum. In some cases, teams may well decide to use all or parts of more than one curriculum to meet their needs.

Relationship with Program Characteristics/ Resources Questions

1. *What does it take to become fluent in the use of the curriculum?*

   It is vital to recognize that adopting the very best curriculum does not guarantee good results. Providers must implement the curricula as intended, to the degree it is intended to be delivered. Teams should explore what training might be available to become fluent with the curriculum and whether there are assessment tools that can be used to determine fidelity of implementation. Relatedly, teams may want to explore the degree to which the curriculum is "manualized". If a curriculum is highly prescriptive, providing guidance as to what to say and do and when to say and do, then it is more likely that a broad range of providers can be successful implementers.

2. *What are the costs—in dollars and in time to implement with fidelity?*

   Not only are there material costs but curricula differ in terms of relative durability (i.e. wear and tear) and the time and related costs to train staff and maintain fidelity of implementation. Teams need to consider the relative costs and benefits of the curriculum?

3. *How will this curriculum fit into the program's current philosophy and practices?*

   Teams need to evaluate the "goodness-of-fit" between the proposed curriculum and program philosophy. In some cases this will not be an issue, in others the issue may be overwhelming. In some cases the team may decide that the outcomes achievable with adoption are so important that it may necessitate a re-examination of their program philosophy. In any case, the bottom-line issue is increasing the likelihood of "buy-in" by program staff.

Step #3: Promote Buy-In and Implementation Fidelity

Once a curriculum has been selected, the team should take the following steps to promote buy-in and fidelity of implementation.

1. Have a formal "launch" of the curriculum in which all staff and families are informed about the decision-making process, why the particular curriculum was chosen, how providers will be trained, and what outcomes are expected.

2. Schedule training and continue training until staff can implement the curriculum with fidelity. Along the way provide acknowledgement for excellent implementation by individual staff.

3. Determine what steps supervisors will take to support fidelity of implementation. Set-up communication channels such that staff can make their support needs heard.

4. Set-up a system to evaluate child outcomes, making sure to link this assessment with other ongoing efforts.