

Effective Technical Assistance Practices

Updated September 8, 2022

This article appears online at <https://trohanis.fpg.unc.edu/effective.asp>

Effective technical assistance (TA) is a collaborative, coordinated effort to facilitate change in systems, build capacity, improve practices, and reach agreed-upon outcomes^{1, 2}. Specifically, effective TA provides a pathway to improvement through activities and materials that promote new behaviors, practices, beliefs, and understandings of staff in the systems served³.

The Trohanis Technical Assistance Projects at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina established nine practices of effective TA to support state and local agency staff (client) who provide IDEA Part C early intervention and Part B, Section 619 early childhood special education to young children with, or at risk for disabilities, and their families. The practices are based on more than 50 years of stellar TA provision, ongoing collection and use of evaluation data, and existing literature.

The following nine key practices ensure that TA successfully supports state and local leaders to bring about the desired changes in systems and practices.

See also: [Indicators of Effective Technical Assistance Practices](#)

1. Trusting relationships

In TA, trusting relationships are those in which the client believes that the TA provider has the best of intentions for the client's system and staff. Trust is established in TA by maintaining confidentiality, demonstrating respect and honesty, and confronting issues of bias as they emerge⁴. Trusting relationships are critical to TA. They lead to information sharing that establishes context; support collaborative partnership, reciprocal respect, and co-learning; increase the likelihood that the client reaches out for future TA support; and increase the likelihood that the client will use TA-identified resources and expertise to inform decision making at the policy level^{5, 6}.

2. Effective communication

Communication is the means through which TA providers build relationships and provide effective support to clients. Effective communication helps to identify, clarify, and address barriers to a high-quality system improvement^{7, 8}. Effective communication is timely, consistent, and adaptive to different communication styles, preferred language and accessibility needs.

3. Collaborative partnering

Collaborative partnering is a process in which the TA provider partners with the client in the systems they serve to discuss desired outcomes of the TA and associated strengths, needs, or barriers to the identified issue. Together, and with stakeholders, they co-create or identify strategies to achieve the desired outcomes⁹. Some benefits of effective collaboration include shared understanding, joint problem-solving, respect for community (state context, history, culture and priorities), enhanced individual commitment and capacity, efficiency, deepened relationships, and heightened morale^{1, 7, 10, 11}.

4. Differentiated support

Effective providers adjust TA delivery according to each system's strengths, needs, resources, and desired outcomes. Also taken into account is the skill level, experience, knowledge, and desire staff in the system bring to the change effort. The level of TA ranges from brief information, support tailored to client needs, to sustained TA engagement intended to facilitate systems change^{6, 12}. Differentiation allows TA centers to align staff resources with client capacity to engage in TA activities. Differentiated support promotes equity by offering effective TA for all states based on client need and the capacity to create opportunities for participation for each client.

5. Adult learning strategies

TA providers incorporate adult learning strategies that are likely to increase individual's content knowledge^{13, 14, 15, 16}. TA includes opportunities for ongoing support to help adult learners apply new information to their individual context. Ongoing support includes strategies such as: making information relevant to the learner's language, context, incorporating prior learning and experience, peer sharing in small groups, and the use of evaluation to gauge learners' understanding that is likely to affect individual change.

6. External leadership for change

Effective TA providers play a key leadership role in guiding activities required for systems change. A trusted person from outside the system can be a catalyst for change through deep understanding and facilitation of the change process^{10, 17}.

7. Partnerships for resource integration

Effective TA means partnering with the various organizations that comprise a system, as well as those that support and govern it. The TA provider works across federal and state public agencies, with professional development organizations and TA partners, professional associations, and consumer groups. This partnership provides a unified network of resources and supports available to both the TA provider and client for the desired outcome¹⁸. These resources and supports represent a wide breadth of expertise and knowledge providing clients and TA providers with effective strategies and tools that are coordinated, comprehensive and efficient.

8. Use of implementation, improvement, and systems change frameworks

Research has expanded the understanding of factors that lead to successful implementation of new policies and practices for improved equitable systems^{19, 20}. Effective TA incorporates implementation, improvement, and systems change frameworks. Implementation science focuses on sustainability of evidence-based practices^{13, 21, 22}. Improvement science focuses on ongoing evaluation and adjustment of change efforts²³. Systems change frameworks focus on the effect of change on multiple components and levels of complex systems^{10, 11, 24, 25, 26}.

9. Ongoing evaluation

A critical component of effective TA is the ongoing collection and use of evaluation data to guide the work of the TA provider and the client. Evaluation data give the TA provider and the client regular feedback on what is and is not working and where course corrections can be made to more successfully achieve mutually agreed upon desired outcomes^{11, 24, 27, 28}. Evaluation may occur at multiple time points, be revised as needed to reflect changes in state context or client priority, and involve staff outside of the TA team.

References

1. Fixsen, D., Blase, K., Horner, R., & Sugai, G. (2009). Intensive technical assistance. Retrieved from <https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/reports-and-policy-briefs/SISEP-Brief2-Intensive-TA-02-2009.pdf>
2. Trohanis, P. L. (Ed.). (1982). Strategies for change. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, Technical Assistance Development System.
3. Beale, B., & Luster, J. N. (2009). A framework for collaborative partnership in providing intensive technical assistance. Southeast Regional Resource Center and Data Accountability Center.
4. Boone Blanchard S, Ryan Newton J, Didericksen KW, Daniels M, Glosson K. Confronting Racism and Bias Within Early Intervention: The Responsibility of Systems and Individuals to Influence Change and Advance Equity. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 41(1):6-17. doi: 10.1177/0271121421992470
5. Skelton, S. (2019) Situating my positionality as a Black woman with a dis/ability in the provision of equity-focused technical assistance: a personal reflection, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32:3, 225-242, DOI: 10.1080/09518398.2019.1576942
6. Tseng, V. (2012). The uses of research in policy and practice. *Social Policy Report*, 26(2). Retrieved from http://www.srcc.org/sites/default/files/documents/spr_262_final.pdf
7. Fixsen, D., Blase, K., Horner, R., & Sugai, G. (2009a). Readiness for change. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED507442.pdf>
8. Fullan, M. (2007). *The new meaning of educational change* (4th ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.
9. Metz, A., Louison, L., Burke, K., Albers, B., & Ward, C. (2020). Implementation support practitioner profile: Guiding principles and core competencies for implementation practice. Chapel Hill, NC: National Implementation Research Network, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Retrieved from <https://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/nirn.fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/IS%20Practice%20Profile-single%20page%20printing-v10-November%202020.pdf>
10. Hurth, J. & Goode, S. (Eds.) (2009). Thinking points: A synthesis of ideas about the change process (Topics: An occasional paper on the literature and practice of Technical Assistance). Retrieved from https://www.ectacenter.org/~pdfs/pubs/tatopics/topics_thinkingpoints.pdf
11. Metz, A., & Bartley, L. (2012). Active implementation frameworks for program success: How to use implementation science to improve outcomes for children. *Zero To Three*, March 2012, 11-18.

12. Office of Special Education Programs (2016). Results driven accountability: Differentiated monitoring and support engagement decisions - DMS Notices. Presentation. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/fund/data/report/idea/dmsrpts/index.html>
13. Fixsen, D., Naoom, S., Blase, K., Friedman, R. & Wallace, F. (2005). Implementation research: A synthesis of the literature. Retrieved from <http://nirn.fpg.unc.edu/resources/implementation-research-synthesis-literature>
14. Trivette, C. (2009). Participatory adult learning professional development strategy: Evidence and examples. Presentation made at the Ninth National Early Childhood Inclusion Institute, Chapel Hill, NC July 15, 2009. Retrieved from <https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/reports-and-policy-briefs/SISEP-Brief2-Intensive-TA-02-2009.pdf>
15. Trivette, C., Dunst, C., Hamby, D., & O'Herin, C. (2009). Characteristics and consequences of adult learning methods and strategies, Research Brief, Volume 3, Number 1. Tots n Tech Research Institute. Retrieved from <http://tnt.asu.edu>
16. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Compassion Capital Fund National Resource Center. (2010). Delivering training and technical assistance. Retrieved from https://ananlcc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2_Delivering_Training_and_Technical_Assistance.pdf
17. Kendrick, M., Jones, D., Bezanson, L., & Petty, R. (2006). Key components of systems change. Retrieved from https://www.ilru.org/sites/default/files/Systems_Change_Key_Components1.pdf
18. Gross, B., Jochim, A. & Nafziger, D. (2013). New challenges, new mindsets, new disciplines: Transforming the SEA into a modern performance organization. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED542919.pdf>
19. Woo, B., DuMont, K., Metz, A. (2019, December 10). Equity at the center of implementation. Center for the Study of Social Policy: Ideas into action. Retrieved from <https://cssp.org/2019/12/implementation-equity/>
20. Metz, A., Albers, B., Burke, K., Bartley, L., Louison, L., Ward, C. & Farley, A. (2021). Implementation practice in human service systems: Understanding the principles and competencies of professionals who support implementation. Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance. DOI: 10.1080/23303131.2021.1895401. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23303131.2021.1895401>
21. Bertram, R., Blase, K. & Fixsen, D. (2015). Improving programs and outcomes: Implementation frameworks and organizational change. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 25(4), 477-48.
22. Aarons, G., Hulbert, M. and Horwitz, S. (2011). Advancing a conceptual model for evidence practice implementation in public service sectors. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 38(1), 4-23.
23. Langley, G., Moen, R., Nolan, K., Nolan, T., Norman, C. & Provost, L. (Eds.) (2009). *The improvement guide: A practical approach to enhancing organizational performance* (2nd Ed). San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons.
24. Kahn, L., Hurth, J., Kasprzak, C., Diefendorf, M., Goode, S., & Ringwalt, S. (2009). The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center model for long-term systems change. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 29(1), 24-39, 2009. doi: 10.1177/0271121409334039
25. Kasprzak, C., Hebbeler, K., & Spiker, D., McCullough, K., Lucas, A., Walsh, S., Swett, J., Smith, B.J., Kelley, G., Whaley, K., Pletcher, L., Cate, D., Peters, M., Ayankoya, B., Bruder, M.B. (2019). A state system framework for high-quality early intervention and early childhood special education. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*. Retrieved from <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0271121419831766>
26. Fullan, M. (2002). The change leader. Retrieved from <https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/the-change-leader>
27. Fixsen, D., Blase, K., Horner, R., & Sugai, G. (2009b). Concept paper: Developing the capacity for scaling up the effective use of evidence based practices in state departments of education. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED507440.pdf>
28. Trohanis, P. (2001). Design considerations for state TA systems. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Center, National Early Childhood Technical Assistance System.