

# Ensuring Program Fidelity

## How Well Are You Implementing Juvenile Justice Programs?

Evidence-based programs (EBPs) are often considered the gold standard in juvenile justice programming to reduce the risk of re-offending. Providers should choose to use EBPs whenever possible to ensure the best possible outcomes for youth and families. However, simply purchasing a curriculum for an EBP will not guarantee that you will achieve the same results as the program developers. Programs must be implemented and administered with fidelity.

Program fidelity refers to the degree to which juvenile justice programs are implemented as intended by the program developer. Maintaining fidelity is critical in order to ensure program results will be similar to those achieved in program evaluations. The greater the degree of fidelity, the more confident program administrators can be in achieving positive results from the program.

**Program fidelity is one of several principles of effective intervention.**

If a program is delivered in a way that does not align with how the curriculum was intended to be delivered, it may not produce the expected outcomes, such as increasing positive social connections, reducing substance use, or reducing recidivism. In some cases, deviations from the fidelity model may result in increased recidivism, despite the use of an EBP. The fidelity principle is the most often overlooked principle of effective interventions but the delivery of a program is just as important as the type of program implemented. To ensure success, program administrators should always aim to conduct programs exactly as they were designed.

Visit the NCJJ website to explore Nevada's Evidence-Based Practices Definition Matrix

## Challenges to Program Fidelity

|   |   |
|---|---|
|  | <p><b>Staff Turnover</b><br/>Staff turnover can result in untrained program administrators and loss of institutional knowledge. Jurisdictions should offer comprehensive program training for new staff, as well as ongoing support for those administering EBPs. Further, clearly written program guidance (i.e., program manuals) should be provided to all program administrators.</p> |
|  | <p><b>Inconsistent Administration</b><br/>Staff may be reluctant to administer programs, or may rely on their intuition and experience to adapt the program. It is critical staff are trained in a way that emphasizes the importance of consistency and adherence to the EBP's model to achieve desired success.</p>   |
|  | <p><b>No Measures of Impact</b><br/>Jurisdictions should take accountability for program effectiveness by measuring program outcomes (e.g., recidivism rates) and fidelity-related factors. Without these measures, there is no way to confirm the program is working as designed.</p>  |

Every jurisdiction differs in culture, staffing, protocols, and resources, so it can be challenging to administer programs exactly as the developer intended. Common challenges include staff turnover, program inconsistencies, and lack of measurement.

There may be circumstances where a program does not meet the needs of a particular client. While ensuring program fidelity typically means the implementation model should not be adapted, certain programs may permit the tailoring of some aspects of the program based on clinical judgment. The extent to which adaptations may be made should be clearly outlined in program trainings and manuals. Before making adaptations to existing curricula, contact the program developer.

## How is Fidelity Measured?

To adhere to the fidelity principle, program administrators should monitor program implementation to ensure they are following the program model. Programs should be assessed regularly to confirm the challenges mentioned above (e.g., staff turnover) are not affecting ongoing program fidelity.

There are many ways to measure program fidelity. Fidelity is commonly assessed through questionnaires, formal interviews, observational rating sheets, and checklists. Often, well-established programs will provide measurement tools designed specifically for their programs. These may be included in program documentation/manuals, posted on their website, or provided upon request.

The [Juvenile Justice Model Fidelity](#) and the [ACT Evidence-Based Practices KIT](#) provide examples of quality assurance forms, surveys, and checklists that may be used to examine program fidelity. There are also existing tools, such as the [Justice Program Fidelity Scale](#), that can be customized by the user to examine programs of interest.

Some programs may not have fidelity assessment tools readily available. In this case, program administrators should create their own systems to regularly monitor program implementation and improve their program performance. Program administrators may develop tools or adapt existing tools to assess the extent to which they are adhering to the program's implementation guidelines. A critical component of effective implementation is the creation of a strong feedback loop to improve service delivery and achieve desired program outcomes. This continuous cycle should consist of program fidelity measurements, assessment of fidelity data, identification of areas for improvement, and targeted practice changes. The [Continuous Quality Improvement in Juvenile Justice Organizations](#) training provides more details on building a structured feedback and measurement process.

## Common Measurement Methods of Program Fidelity

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b>ADHERENCE</b>           | Are administrators implementing the program as intended by developers? Is the program administered to the intended target population (risk level, offense type, age, gender) in the right setting (community or placement), for the right amount of time? |
| <b>EXPOSURE</b>            | Are youth receiving the intended number of sessions at the recommended dose? (e.g., 2 hours per week for 10 weeks)  |
| <b>QUALITY OF DELIVERY</b> | Are program staff well-prepared, interactive, engaging and knowledgeable? Do they have the qualifications outlined in the curriculum?   |

## Additional Resources

[Programming and Technical Assistance Unit Resources](#) – Florida Department of Juvenile Justice

[Bridging Research and Practice Project to Advance Juvenile Justice and Safety](#) – Urban Institute

[Guiding Principles for Systems Working with Youth Involved in the Justice System](#) - American Probation and Parole Association (APPA)

[Implementation and Fidelity in Evidence-Based Practice](#) - Child Welfare Information Gateway, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

[Implementing Evidence-Based Practices](#) - Justice Research and Statistics Association

## References

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