



Measuring Fidelity to Early Childhood Special Education Practices

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Governing legislation asserts the rights of children and their families to receive high-quality early childhood education services aligned with national standards, research, and professional wisdom. Despite mandates and ample guidance from national organizations (Division of Early Childhood, Council for Exceptional Children, Early Childhood Personnel Center, Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center), early intervention practices often need support to align with the evidence-based standards promoted by the field. A recent CASEmaker bibliography (Clark & Sexton, 2023) on the FIPP website (www.fipp.org) includes sources of information about fidelity to evidence-based practices in early childhood special education. The references in this CASEmaker provide a foundation for understanding and measuring intervention fidelity. The CASEmaker includes a list of existing fidelity checklists that can measure and monitor a practitioner's degree of alignment with an evidence-based standard of practice.

Conceptualization

Fidelity refers to a practitioner's adherence to a specific set of evidence-based practices and can be referred to as adherence to practices or integrity to intervention. Implementation science has developed a framework for implementation fidelity and intervention fidelity.

Implementation fidelity is the process taken to support adopting practices and intervention methods. In contrast, intervention fidelity is the degree to which evidence-based intervention practices are used as intended by early childhood practitioners or other intervention agents (e.g., caregivers) and lead to intended benefits (Dunst et al., 2008).

Operationalization

The most common type of fidelity measure is the checklist due to its ease of use and ability to support planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Existing fidelity checklists address the degree to which the intervention is being delivered as designed and largely ignore the degree to which the intervention's dosage, frequency, and intensity match the research recommendations or the participant's engagement in the intervention.

Outcomes and Benefits

Fidelity measures can help bridge the gap between research and practice. Practitioners with high degrees of alignment to evidence-based practices are likely to achieve the outcomes that have been associated with those practices. Regularly measuring and monitoring intervention fidelity ensures families' access to high-quality services associated with positive outcomes.