Framework for Practicing Evidence-Based Early Childhood Intervention and Family Support

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ABSTRACT

An evidence-based, integrated framework for practicing and investigating early childhood intervention and family support practices is described. The framework is used at the *C*enter for the *A*dvanced *S*tudy of *E*xcellence (*CASE*) in Early Childhood and Family Support Practices for studying the characteristics of interventions having capacity building consequences, and for investigating the utilization methods promoting adoption of the integrated framework practices.

INTRODUCTION

This *CASEinPoint* includes a brief description of the integrated framework for conceptualizing and implementing early childhood intervention and family support practices used at the *C*enter for *A*dvanced *S*tudy of *E*xcellence (*CASE*) in Early Childhood and Family Support Practices and for investigating the competency-enhancing characteristics and consequences of child, parent, and family intervention practices (www.fippcase.org). The practices constituting the focus of the integrated framework are designed to support and strengthen child, parent, and family competence. The reader is referred to Dunst (2000, 2004) for more complete descriptions of the model.

DEFINITION OF EARLY CHILDHOOD
INTERVENTION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

A broad-based definition of early childhood intervention and family support is used as the foundation for operationalizing competency-enhancing child, parent, and family intervention practices. Early childhood intervention and family support is defined as the *provision of support and resources to families of young children from members of informal and formal social network members that both directly and indirectly influence child, parent, and family functioning*.

The integrated framework definition has both *process* and *outcome* elements. The kinds of supports and resources, and the experiences and opportunities afforded by social network members, are seen as the processes

(practices, interventions, etc.) used to achieve desired benefits. The outcomes from afforded experiences and opportunities include, but are not limited to, a range of capacity building consequences.

The integrated framework definition of early childhood intervention and family support differs from most other definitions by including informal experiences and opportunities as *interventions* contributing to improved functioning (e.g., Dunst, Hamby, Trivette, Raab, & Bruder, 2000; Dunst, Trivette, & Jodry, 1996). It also differs from other approaches to intervention and provision of support by its explicit focus on parent and family capacity building as the primary means of supporting and strengthening child functioning (e.g., Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1988; Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994b).

This brief report is divided into four sections: (1) Theoretical foundations of the integrated framework, (2) the conceptual foundations of a capacity building paradigm, (3) the practice elements forming the operational foundations of the integrated framework, and (4) the manner in which performance standards are used to judge the extent to which desired practices are being implemented in ways mirroring research evidence. Table 1 summarizes the key features of each component of the integrated framework. Taken together, the four components provide a basis for ensuring the experiences and opportunities afforded children, parents, and families have capacity building influences, and that practitioners conduct interventions in ways consistent with the integrated framework.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The integrated framework is based on systems theory which views human learning and development in general, and child, parent, and family functioning more specifically, as *multiply determined*, where the factors influencing learning and development emanate from different settings and relations between the settings in which children, parents, and families are participating members (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The settings include, but are not limited to, the everyday activities that children experience as part of daily living (e.g., Dunst et al., 2000), the opportunities afforded children and parents as part of parent/child interaction and play (e.g., Dixon & Shore, 1993), the interactions parents have with friends or other parents (e.g., Cochran, Larner, Riley, Gunnarsson, & Henderson, 1990), the guidance and advise made available during parenting groups or classes (e.g., Powell & Eisenstadt, 1988), and so forth. In the context of the integrated framework, any and all *support network mem-*

bers are considered potential sources of experiences, opportunities, advice, guidance, etc. influencing child, parent, and family learning and development.

Systems theory also provides a basis for operationalizing early childhood intervention and family support practices and for investigating those characteristics of practices that matter most in terms of producing optimal benefits. In terms of intervention practices, systems theory broadens the scope of where and how different experiences and opportunities are used as contexts for learning and development. In terms of research, systems theory focuses attention on which intervention characteristics account for observed effects. According to Bronfenbrenner, (1992), the aim of an ecological science of human development is the "systematic understanding of the *processes* and *outcomes* of human development" (p. 188) where "variations in developmental processes and outcomes are [considered] a *joint* function of the characteristics of the environment and of a [developing] person" (p. 197). Conceptualized in this way,

$$LD = f(P)(E),$$
where

LD = Learning and development, P = Person factors, E = Environment factors, and the relationship among the variables can be stated: *Child, parent and family learning and development vary as a function (f) of both person and environment factors and both the combined influences of and interactions between the two sets of factors.* Accordingly, the likelihood of environmental factors (e.g., everyday child learning opportunities) having capacity building influences is, in part, determined by the way in which persons having different experiences and opportunities find them inviting, sustaining, engaging, supportive and so forth (see e.g., Dunst et al., 2001).

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

There are two contrasting *world views* for thinking about the ways in which early childhood intervention and family support can be conceptualized and operationalized (Dunst & Trivette, 1997). The traditional world view considers children and families as having deficits and weaknesses that need treatment by professionals to correct problems, whereas a capacity building world view considers children and families as having varied strengths and assets, where the focus of intervention is supporting and promoting competence and other positive aspects of functioning. The integrated framework employs a capacity building paradigm for conceptualizing, designing, and implementing child, parent, and family intervention practices.

Table 1

Foundations of the Integrated Framework for Practicing Early Childhood Intervention and Family Support

Foundations	Framework	Key Elements
Theoretical	Ecological Social Systems	Systems theory considers behavior and development to be multiply determined by experiences and opportunities emanating from different settings and sources of support and resources.
Conceptual	Capacity Building Paradigms	Promotion, empowerment, strengths-based, resource-based, and family-centered models are used to ensure practices have capacity building characteristics and consequences.
Operational	Practice Elements	Interventions focus on child learning, family/community activity settings, parenting supports, parent/child interactions, participatory parenting opportunities, family/community supports, and family-centered helpgiving as the contexts for optimizing intervention benefits.
Performance	Standards and Benchmarks	Practice indicators describing the expected or operationally defined behavior or conditions that are most likely to produce desired effects are used as standards for promoting use of evidence-based interventions.

Table 2 contrasts the capacity building paradigm characteristics with those of a more traditional approach to human services intervention. The different features of the *capacity building paradigm* form the conceptual foundations of the integrated framework. This approach to conceptualizing the *purposes* and *functions* of early childhood intervention and family support emphasizes provision of informal and formal supports and resources done in a family-centered manner as the principle way of: (a) building on child, parent, and family strengths and (b) strengthening existing and promoting new competence in a manner having capacity building and empowering consequences. In other words, a capacity building paradigm places primary emphasis on those opportunities and experiences afforded to or procured by children, parents, and families that provide contexts for strengthening existing and promoting the acquisition of new assets, strengths, capabilities, etc. The different but complementary models "making up" the capacity building paradigm provide a way of structuring interventions and for judging the extent to which practices mirror the characteristics of the model.

OPERATIONAL FOUNDATIONS

The operational foundations of the integrated framework for practicing early childhood intervention and family support is shown in Figure 1. The model includes four major practice elements (children's learning opportunities, parenting supports, family/community resources, and family-centered practices) and three intersecting practice elements (everyday activity settings, parenting interactional styles, and participatory parenting opportunities). Interventions aimed at influencing learning and development using the different kinds of practices implemented in a family-centered manner (Dunst, 1995, 1997, 2002) are seen as the way of insuring that *environmental experiences and opportunities* afforded children, parents, and families have competency enhancing and capacity building consequences.

Child Learning Opportunities

Insuring that children experience development-enhancing learning opportunities is the main focus of the child learning component of the integrated framework

Table 2

Defining Features of Contrasting Approaches for Conceptualizing and Implementing Early Childhood Intervention and Family Support

| Capacity Building Paradigm	Traditional Paradigm
Promotion Models Focus on enhancement and optimization of competence and positive functioning	*Treatment Models* Focus on remediation of a disorder, problem, or disease, or its consequences
Empowerment Models Create opportunities for people to exercise existing capabilities as well as develop new competencies	*Expertise Models* Depend on professional expertise to solve problems for people
Strengths-Based Models Recognize the assets and talents of people, and help people use these competencies to strengthen functioning	*Deficit-Based Models* Focus on correcting peoples' weaknesses or problems
Resource-Based Models Define practices in terms of a broad range of community opportunities and experiences	*Service-Based Models* Define practices primarily in terms of professional services
Family-Centered Models View professionals as agents of families and responsive to family desires and concerns	*Professionally-Centered Models* View professionals as experts who determine the needs of people from their own as opposed to other people's perspectives
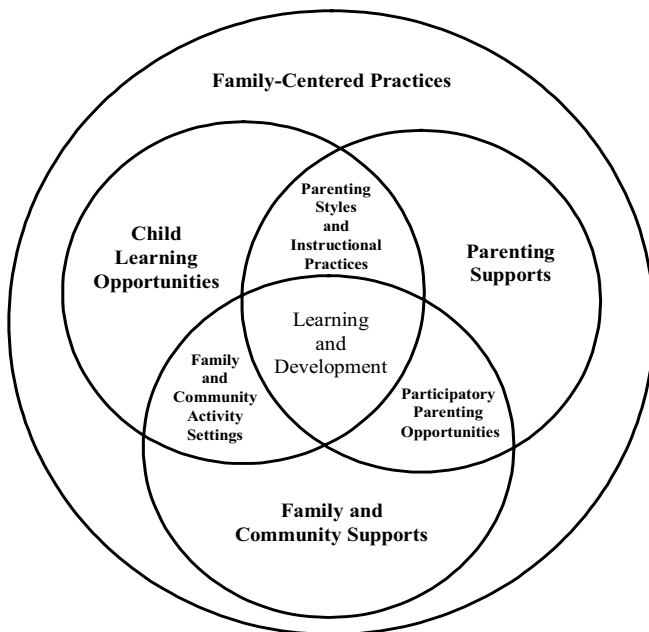
Figure 1. Seven key components of an evidence-based, ecological integrated framework of early childhood intervention and family support.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Development-enhancing child learning opportunities are ones that are interesting, engaging, and competency producing, and which result in a child's sense of mastery about his or her capabilities (e.g., Dunst et al., 2001). These kinds of learning opportunities include activities that provide children contexts for interest and competence expression and that encourage exploration and the development of a sense of accomplishment. Additional information about these kinds of learning experiences are described in Raab (2005).

Parenting Supports

The purpose of the activities in the parenting supports component of the integrated framework is to reinforce existing parenting abilities, provide opportunities to acquire new parenting knowledge and skills, and strengthen parenting confidence and competence (e.g., Dunst, 2001). Parenting supports include the information, advice, guidance, etc. that both strengthen existing parenting knowledge and skills and promote acquisition of new competencies necessary for parents to carry out child rearing responsibilities and provide their child (ren) development-enhancing learning opportunities. The reader is referred to Wilson (2005) for sources of information on capacity building parenting supports.

Family and Community Supports

The focus of activities in the family and community supports component of the integrated framework is to insure that parents have the supports and resources necessary for them to have the time and both physical and psychological energy to engage in child rearing responsibilities and parenting activities. Family and community supports include any number and type of intrafamily, informal, community, and formal resources needed by parents to engage in parenting and child-rearing activities (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994a). We now know that the kinds of resources and supports parents find helpful, and how they are provided to parents, matters a great deal if the supports and resources are to have capacity building consequences (Dunst & Trivette, 2001b; Mott, 2005).

Family-Centered Helpgiving

The focus of activities in the family-centered helpgiving component of the integrated framework is the active engagement of parents and other family members in obtaining desired resources and achieving family-identified goals. Family-centered practices place families in central and pivotal roles in decisions and actions involving child, parent, and family/community resources that strengthen existing capabilities and promote child, parent and family competence (Dunst, 1995, 1997). Findings from our research has consistently shown that parents' active participation in procuring desired supports and resources is associated with a greater sense of personal control (Trivette & Dunst, 1998).

Everyday Activity Settings

The intersection of children's learning opportunities and family/community supports defines the everyday activity settings serving as the sources of children's natural learning opportunities in the context of family and community life (Dunst & Bruder, 1999; Dunst et al., 2000). Activity settings include the many different experiences and opportunities afforded children as part of daily living, child and family routines, family rituals, special occasions and events, family and community celebrations and traditions, and so forth that are either planned or happen serendipitously, and which across time, constitute the life experiences of a developing child (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). These activities include, but are not limited to, mealtime, bath time, parent/child lap games, neighborhood walks, playing in a sandbox, interacting with friends or relatives, visiting a zoo, and so forth (see especially www.everydayleanring.info).

Parent/Child Interactions

The intersection of children's learning opportunities and parenting supports define the parenting styles and instructional practices most likely to have development-enhancing consequences. Parenting styles and instructional practices characterized by parent/caregiver responsiveness to child-initiated and directed behavior, and caregiver behavior that provides children opportunities for practicing emerging skills and elaborating on existing capabilities, are most likely to have competency-enhancing effects. Parents who are responsive, supportive, and who encourage children's display of competence are more likely to perceive themselves as confident and competent (see Wilson, 2005). Children who experience this type of parenting style are more likely to display prosocial behavior and demonstrate higher levels of developmental competence (e.g., Trivette, 2003).

Participatory Parenting Opportunities

The intersection of parenting and family/community supports defines the types of participatory and interactional opportunities parents have with personal social support network members that influence parenting attitudes and beliefs, and practices and behaviors (Dunst, 2001). According to Cochran (1992, 1993), parents' support networks influence parenting by providing emotional and instrumental support, encouraging or discouraging specific parenting attitudes and behaviors, and providing models and opportunities to learn alternative or new parenting and child-rearing interactional styles. These experiences and opportunities also provide contexts for supporting parents' efforts to provide their children learning opportunities and promote their children's social-adaptive capabilities (Cochran & Woolever, 1983; Levitt, Weber, & Clark, 1986).

Desired Outcomes and Benefits

The outcomes and benefits used to judge whether early childhood intervention and family support is effective include a number of measures of child, parent, and family functioning and capacity building. *Early childhood intervention and family support practices are considered effective only to the extent that children, parents, and families become more capable and competent.* These types of outcomes include, but are not limited to, improved child development and interactive competence, parent well-being, parent empowerment, parenting competence and confidence, and family quality of life. Major emphasis is placed on assessing both child and parent self-efficacy as indices of improved mastery and sense of one's own capabilities. This is the case because persons with strong self-efficacy and personal control beliefs are more likely to use their capabilities to produce desired effects and life circumstances (Coleman et al., 2002; Skinner, 1995; Zimmerman, 1990).

PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

Promoting parents' abilities to mediate the provision of everyday child learning opportunities and procure needed parent and family resources and supports is the standard against which integrated framework practices are judged. A performance-based approach is used for ensuing practitioner adherence to the integrated framework practices (Burger, 1998; Nickols, 2000). This approach includes *standards* for operationalizing desired practices, *benchmarks* for ascertaining the use of the practices, and *indicators* for measuring the degree to which the practices are implemented as intended (Kendall, 2001; Otis-Wilborn, Winn, & Ford, 2000). Nine scales have been developed that can be used for judging adherence to the practices (Raab, Roper, Dunst, Humphries, & Clark, 2002). Figure 2 shows which of the nine scales include indicators for which components of the integrated framework. The appendix includes several of the scales. The scale items were developed using research evidence about those practice characteristics that are associated with desired benefits.

Each scale includes *two dimensions of practices*: (1) practice indicators and (2) a capacity building continuum of practitioner competencies. The *practice indicators* constitute sets of behavioral capabilities that collectively operationalize a particular kind of evidence-based practice (e.g., family-centered helpgiving). The *capacity building* continuum operationalizes the ways in which practitioners gain knowledge and skills, and use these capabilities to support and strengthen parent and family capacity to provide child learning opportunities, acquire parenting knowledge and skills, and procure family and community resources necessary to achieve desired goals and outcomes.

The emphasis on parent-mediated provision and procurement of child, parent, and family resources, and not professionally-implemented practices, is viewed as the means for ensuring that parent/professional transactions have capacity building characteristics and consequences consist with the integrated framework practices. Doing for others may seem like the right thing to do, but it cannot but have dependency forming consequences (Dunst & Trivette, 1988). In a recently completed study, for example, we found that parent-mediated everyday child learning opportunities had positive effects on parenting confidence, whereas professionals implementing interventions in everyday activities showed no relationship to parenting confidence and had negative effects on parent well-being (Dunst,
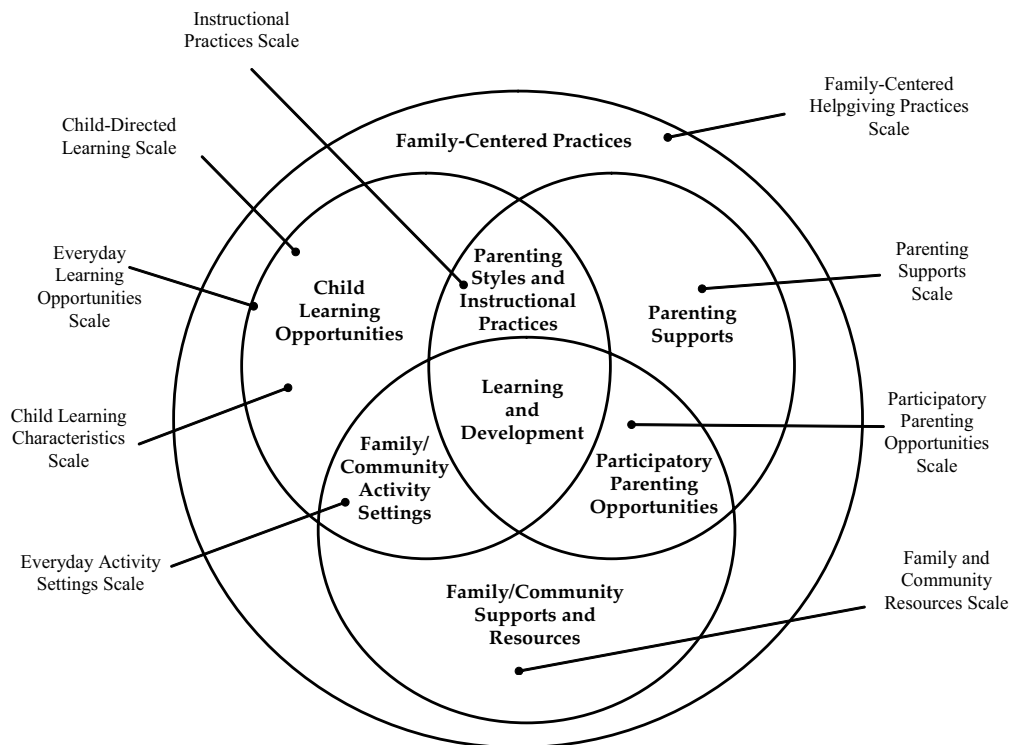

Figure 2. Scales for building the capacity of practitioners to support and strengthen parenting competence and confidence in each component of the integrated framework.

Bruder, Trivette, & Hamby, in press).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this *CASEinPoint* was to outline an integrated framework for practicing and investigating early childhood intervention and family support. The model provides an organizing scheme of one particular way of intervening with young children and their families, and for studying the characteristics of practices that are associated with the capacity building consequences. The common denomination across all components of the model is a capacity building emphasis, and the experiences and opportunities afforded children, parents, and families to use their assets (strengths, interests, capabilities, talents, etc.) to support and strengthen competence and confidence. The integrated framework is based on bodies of different but complimentary research which indicate which environmental conditions most likely to have capacity building characteristics and consequences (e.g., Dunst, 2001; Dunst et al., 2001; Dunst & Trivette, 2001a; Dunst & Trivette, 2001b; Trivette, Dunst, & Hamby, 1996).

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Appendix

Everyday Learning Opportunities Scale

Everyday Learning Opportunity refers to the frequency, variety, and involvement in activity settings promoting increased social and nonsocial child participation in everyday activities. The scale provides the basis for determining if a practitioner promotes parents' understanding and use of practices increasing child opportunity to participate in everyday activity settings having development enhancing qualities.

Think about examples that illustrate how and in what manner interventions mirror each of the practices described below. Using these examples, indicate the level of competence for each of the practices listed.	Practitioner Neither Describes Nor Demonstrates Practice	Practitioner Able to Describe Practice But Demonstrates Little or No Ability to Do the Practice	Practitioner Able to Demonstrate Practice	Practitioner Promotes Parents' Understanding and Use of Practice in a Capacity Building Manner
1. Activity settings that happen on a regular basis are used as a sources of learning opportunities.	1	2	3	4
2. Non-routine activity settings are used as contexts for shaping interests and new competence.	1	2	3	4
3. Activity settings used as sources of learning opportunities provide contexts for competence expression.	1	2	3	4
4. Activity settings used as sources of learning opportunities provide contexts for interest expression.	1	2	3	4
5. Activity settings used as sources of learning opportunities promote child production of many different kinds of behavior.	1	2	3	4
6. People, materials, and objects inviting and sustaining competence production are available in the activity settings.	1	2	3	4
7. The child is provided sufficient time in activity settings to exhibit existing competencies, practice emerging skills, and develop new abilities.	1	2	3	4
8. A variety of methods are used (e.g., reminder lists, schedules, diaries) for increasing the frequency of involvement in a wide range of activity settings used as sources of learning opportunities.	1	2	3	4

Parenting Supports Scale

Parenting Supports are the provision and/or mobilization of supports strengthening existing, and promoting new, parenting knowledge and competence. The scale provides a basis for determining if a practitioner promotes parents' understanding, and use of information, advice, guidance, opportunities and so forth in a way supporting and strengthening child rearing knowledge and skills.

Think about examples that illustrate how and in what manner interventions mirror each of the practices described below. Using these examples, indicate the level of competence for each of the practices listed.	Practitioner Neither Describes Nor Demonstrates Practice	Practitioner Able to Describe Practice But Demonstrates Little or No Ability to Do the Practice	Practitioner Able to Demonstrate Practice	Practitioner Promotes Parents' Understanding and Use of Practice in a Capacity Building Manner
1. Acknowledgement of existing parenting knowledge and skills is a focus of practitioner practices.	1	2	3	4
2. Effective parenting behavior is acknowledged and used for supporting childrearing knowledge and skills.	1	2	3	4
3. Parenting information, advice, guidance, etc., needed for strengthening childrearing skills are identified.	1	2	3	4
4. Provision of parenting information, advice, guidance, etc. is used for strengthening existing childrearing knowledge and skills as requested.	1	2	3	4
5. Information, advice, guidance, etc. about effective parenting practices is used for learning new childrearing abilities.	1	2	3	4
6. Complete, accurate, and unbiased information is used for promoting parenting practices.	1	2	3	4
7. Participatory opportunities are used to increase understanding of effective parenting practices.	1	2	3	4
8. Participatory opportunities are used to support existing and promote new parenting skills.	1	2	3	4
9. Participatory opportunities are used to support and strengthen parenting competence.	1	2	3	4
10. Reflections are made about effective childrearing practices.	1	2	3	4

Family and Community Resources Scale

Family and Community Resources are resources providing parents the time and energy to carry out childrearing and parenting responsibilities or achieve other family-desired benefits or outcomes. The scale provides a basis for determining if a practitioner promotes parents' understanding and use of family and community resources to provide their children learning opportunities or procure family-level supports and resources.

Think about examples that illustrate how and in what manner interventions mirror each of the practices described below. Using these examples, indicate the level of competence for each of the practices listed.	Practitioner Neither Describes Nor Demonstrates Practice	Practitioner Able to Describe Practice But Demonstrates Little or No Ability to Do the Practice	Practitioner Able to Demonstrate Practice	Practitioner Promotes Parents' Understanding and Use of Practice in a Capacity Building Manner
1. Supports and resources needed to carry out parenting responsibilities are increasingly identified by the parent.	1	2	3	4
2. Family needs/interests for different resources are identified.	1	2	3	4
3. Resources already known by the family or within their informal network are considered as support options for achieving desired outcomes.	1	2	3	4
4. New/other community resources are identified as support options for achieving desired outcomes.	1	2	3	4
5. The financial and psychological costs and benefits of different support options are evaluated as part of selecting desired supports.	1	2	3	4
6. A plan is developed for mobilizing desired supports and resources.	1	2	3	4
7. Responsibilities for obtaining resources are assigned to parent and/or practitioner.	1	2	3	4
8. Desired resources are obtained using existing parent/family abilities.	1	2	3	4
9. Obtaining desired resources includes parents' acquisition of new skills and abilities.	1	2	3	4
10. Participatory opportunities are used for parents to be actively involved in learning new skills.	1	2	3	4
11. Mobilization of resources and supports is reviewed and evaluated to assess their usefulness for achieving desired outcomes.	1	2	3	4