Research in Brief:
Implementing health promotion programs in schools

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Implementing health promotion programs in schools: a realist systematic review of research and experience in the United Kingdom

Schools have long been seen as a primary source of health promotion programs for children. Current health promotion practices in schools include such topics as: alcohol consumption, drug use, smoking, obesity, physical activity, sex and relationship education, and well-being.

Recent reviews suggest that these programs make a substantial contribution to improving children's health. Despite the importance of these programs, there has been a general lack of information on how to implement health promotion programs in schools.

This review is the first study to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of various implementation strategies.

What are effective strategies for implementing a new health promotion program in schools?

A recent review of 18 different implementation strategies available in the UK revealed that some strategies were important in effective delivery a program.

Some of the common characteristics of these successful strategies include: facilitating communications between school staff and parents, engaging teachers and pupils in a program, and integrating a program into the pre-existing school schedule and educational goals.

Why does this matter?

⇒ Early health education leads to numerous positive physical and mental health outcomes as well as reduction in problem behaviours.

⇒ North American schools and communities are now demanding more effective health promotion programs

⇒ The authors identified that 18 different implementation strategies have been used in the literature to deliver health promotion programs.

⇒ This review found that certain strategies are more effective than others in implementing health promotion programs in schools.

Implementing health promotion programs in schools

Most studies were less than 2 years in length, which may be too short to evaluate the outcome of the programs. This may limit the strength of the evidence.

What is a realist review?

The purpose of a realist review is to summarize the best strategies for implementing a new program. This is done by bringing together the outcomes of previous programs, and comparing their contextual settings and program strategies. Studies included in the review are screened for quality, so that the findings of a large number of studies can be combined.

What did they do?

The research team collected information from policy documents, editorials, opinion pieces, letters, commentaries, reflections on practices, process evaluations, surveys, and research articles found within the UK.

The total of 9579 citations were retrieved, but only 63 sources met the defined inclusion criteria. 22 of them were used for identifying various implementation strategies that are available in the UK. A comprehensive list of existing strategies was produced. The remaining 41 studies were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies.

Implementation strategies were categorized into four different program theories based on their characteristics. The four program theories were: 1) preparing for implementation, 2) introducing a program within a school, 3) embedding a program into routine practice, 4) adapting and adjusting program elements.

What did they learn?

While 18 different implementation strategies were identified, only 8 of them were demonstrated to be effective (44%). The rest were either ineffective or had insufficient evidence to evaluate their outcomes.

There were 4 effective strategies in the category *preparing for implementation*. One strategy was to assist parents and school staff to appreciate the importance of the program topics through pre-delivery consultations. Active discussions between parents and staff could aid this process as well. Additionally, providing teachers with educational support to help them learn and about their roles before the programs begin was found to be effective.

Integrating the programs to the pre-existing school activities and class schedules also motivated staff to participate more actively in the programs. Presenting students with short-term and long-term benefits of learning about the topics will increase their interest.

The other 4 effective strategies were in the category *introducing a program within a school*. The introduction phase should include practical training sessions for staff . Active support and encouragement by senior staff in schools helped younger teachers be more confident in playing their roles in the program.

Employing program coordinators was helpful in management and sustainment of the program. The designated coordinators should be credible, responsible, and capable individuals.

Successful strategies also involved engaging teachers and pupils. Teachers were engaged by aligning the goals of the programs with their personal values. Pupils in public school were effectively engaged when the programs were fun, however designing a fun program was insufficient to engage those in secondary schools;. For secondary students it was important that the programs were relevant for their ages.

None of the strategies that were categorized as embedding a program into routine practice, or adapting and adjusting program elements provided promising evidence. This may be because research timeframes were generally too short (less than 2 years) to analyze these longer-term effects

This brief summary was prepared from:

Pearson, M., Chilton, R., Wyatt, K., Abraham, C., Ford, T., Woods, H., & Anderson, R. (2015). Implementing health promotion programmes in schools: a realist systematic review of research and experience in the United Kingdom. *Implementation Science, 10*(1), 149. http://www.implementationscience.com/content/10/1/149