The Stage of Change Approach for Quality Improvement in Early Care and Education

Policy Brief

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In Brief

Improving the quality of early care and education requires that adults who care for young children make intentional and sometimes substantial changes in their behavior. However, this is easier said than done. Behavior change is a complex process that is affected by more than just knowledge and beliefs; change is fundamentally driven by a combination of motivation, confidence, and commitment – key elements that comprise what is often described as "readiness to change." The Stage of Change Approach for Quality Improvement in Early Care and Education is a model for recognizing and responding to early educators' readiness to change their practices with children. By capitalizing on evidence-based practices for supporting readiness to change that are widely used in the fields of health care and mental health services, this approach may have the potential to promote meaningful change in the quality of early care and education and ultimately improve children's lives.

The Importance of Assessing and Supporting Readiness to Change

High-quality early care and education has a positive impact on school readiness, school success, and long-term social and economic outcomes. Currently there is a national movement to support early educators in implementing high-quality practices, as teacher quality is the most important factor affecting child outcomes. State-wide Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) hold promise for offering a systemic, coordinated approach to improving quality. Nonetheless, many quality improvement efforts struggle to meet the needs of early educators who are not motivated to enroll in the quality improvement initiatives, not interested in taking in new information, or not ready to reflect on their practices and make changes.

Readiness to change refers to the developmental point at which a person has the willingness and capacity to engage in a particular behavior change. In the field of implementation science, assessing and responding to readiness to change is recognized as a key aspect of the work that is done in the early stages of implementation[1]. Investing in capacity building is a critical element of effective implementation efforts[2,3]. Meaningful implementation of any change initiative requires time and effort to help people become ready to change. A one-size-fits-all approach that ignores differences in readiness to change may result in a waste of resources, lower program retention, and worse outcomes for educators and children.

The **Transtheoretical model** of change is a paradigm that identifies the common stages and processes that people experience when making any type of behavior change. While originally developed in the context of smoking and drug addiction programs, the model has been applied to a wide range of domains, including exercise, diet, stress management, organizational change, and parenting behaviors. Regardless of the type of behavior, people seem to progress through five common stages of change. The stages of change are best thought of as a spiral; people may progress through the stages, regress back to earlier stages, and resume progress over the course of months, weeks, or even within a day.

Table 1. Five stages of change

Stage	A Person in this Stage…	What You Might Hear	Purpose of Support Services
1-Precontemplation	Does not intend to make any change; is unaware or unconcerned about his/her behavior and its effects	"My director is making me…" "No one's ever complained about my work before." "I don't really care."	Raise awareness Raise importance
2-Contemplation	Would like to improve his/her behavior, but is overwhelmed by obstacles	"I would like to, but…" "I can't do it." "I'll try it." (but when you come back next month, he/she hasn't tried it)	Weigh pros and cons Raise confidence
3-Preparation	Has an active intent to make a change; is devising a plan of action; is aware of resources to support change	"I want to try…" "What will it look like…?" "What do I need in order to do this?"	Raise commitment Set goals and create action steps
4-Action	Is actively engaged in change; persists with the new behavior over time; seeks help when challenges occur	"I've been doing this for a few weeks and I've noticed…" "What could I do when…. happens?"	Implement changes Problem-solve challenges as they arise
5-Maintenance	Works to maintain changes and integrate them into his/her lifestyle; continually reflects on the new behavior	"I've found a new way to…" "I'm wondering how I can make this work even better…" "How can I share what I have learned?"	Integrate changes Support other learners

It is compelling to learn that, across domains, only about one in five people (20%) are ready to engage in behavior change. Programs that are "mismatched" to participants' stage of change are less likely to show effects, and can even make outcomes worse. In a recent evaluation, family child care providers who were rated by their home visitor as "ready to change" showed improvements in the quality of the child care environment, while providers in the earlier stages of change showed decreases in quality[4].

Stage-based approaches have a long history of success in the health care field. For instance, a smoking cessation program tailored to stage of change was found to be twice as effective as the standard American Lung Association program[5]. Stage-based interventions have also been effective at helping parents serve their children healthier food and encourage them to get exercise[6,7]. Stage-based interventions may also help mothers make positive behavior changes

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while pregnant, such as quitting smoking, and could increase awareness of child abuse[8,9]. One of the most widely used evidence-based approaches for supporting individuals in the early stages of change is **Motivational Interviewing**, which is described as a collaborative form of conversation to strengthen a person's own motivation for and commitment to change. Motivational Interviewing is an explicit component of the evidence-based Nurse Family Partnership national program, designed to foster long-term success of first time mothers and their babies. Motivational Interviewing has been demonstrated effective in promoting behavior change in adults that results in positive outcomes for children, such as better oral health and reduced obesity[10-12].

Based on the strong evidence for the effectiveness of these approaches for supporting parents' changes in behaviors with their children, it seems only natural to bring these models into the early care and education field, where it has the potential to promote change that would lead to quality improvements and, in turn, positive outcomes for children.

Applying the Stage of Change Approach to Policy and Practice

The Stage of Change Approach for Quality Improvement in Early Care and Education is a research-based framework, drawing on the Transtheoretical Model and Motivational Interviewing, for recognizing and responding to early educators' readiness to change their attitudes and behaviors with young children. The purpose of the Stage of Change Approach is to increase the effectiveness of early childhood change initiatives by providing people in the early stages of change with the necessary supports to increase *awareness, internal motivation, self-efficacy, and commitment to change*.

The Stage of Change Approach has implications for three types of applications for policy and practice:

1. Screen for readiness to change and measure progress

Screening early educators for readiness to change can help coaches, technical assistance providers, and early childhood supervisors understand the current level of motivation and willingness to change in the populations with whom they work. There are several reliable and valid tools for measuring individual readiness to change. The Stage of Change Scale for Early Care and Education is one such tool that was developed specifically to assess early educators' readiness to change their childcare practices. The 7-item scale can be completed by a coach or supervisor in 5-10 minutes. The Professional Manual accompanying the scale describes support strategies for responding to individuals at each stage of change. The Stage of Change Scale was used in the Getting Ready program, an initiative to support childcare providers who are thinking about enrolling in Minnesota's Quality Rating and Improvement System, Parent Aware[13]. Measuring readiness to change at multiple time points, for example before and after a professional development intervention, can assess whether readiness to change is increasing, even before behavior change can be observed.

2. Individualize supports for early educators

Individualized coaching and technical assistance programs, especially those working with high-needs populations, may find it useful to integrate readiness to change as an additional component in their existing toolkit. The Stage of Change Approach can be used in conjunction with other tools, such as ERS observations and professional development plans, to assess current quality, and set goals more effectively with staff. Technical assistance providers often experience frustration when working with educators who do not seem open to making changes in their practice. Learning how to recognize and respond to the stages of change has given many people a better understanding of how to meet individuals' needs, and may lead to an increased sense of competence and confidence in their role.

The Stage of Change Approach is being used in the Parents as Teachers home visiting program offered through the Family Resource Centers of Crestwood Children's Center in Rochester, NY, to tailor services to families and home-based family childcare providers based on their stage of change. Through a local grant, Children's Institute provided year-long consultation with the program manager and home visiting team to support their use of the Stage of Change Approach in their program. While there was a high level of initial buy-in among home visitors, it took almost a full year for some of the staff to feel confident in their ability to use these new skills in their work[14]. Changing behavior can be just as challenging for support personnel as it is for early educators. A strong commitment at the organizational and supervisory level and a long-term investment of time and resources are critical factors for ensuring that staff receive the necessary supports for increasing their commitment to implementing these new practices in their work.

3. Guide distribution of resources based on readiness

The Stage of Change Approach can help administrators, policymakers, and other decision-makers make the best use of scare resources by targeting programs to match individuals' readiness to change. One way to do this is to set eligibility requirements for more intensive professional development programs, which may be designed to help people set goals, problem-solve, and implement new practices. This approach is currently being implemented in the Partners in Family Child Care project, a 10-month home visiting program designed to help family childcare providers individualize their curriculum to meet the needs of all children in their care. Interested providers were asked to submit an application form, asking about changes they would like to make, and have already made, in their curriculum planning process. Home visiting staff reviewed the applications and selected only providers who demonstrated a willingness, capacity, and commitment to implementing changes. Evaluation results indicate that providers enrolled in this program are more engaged and are demonstrating more changes in practice, compared to providers enrolled in previous home visiting programs[15].

Another way to target programs is to offer trainings designed to respond to the needs of people who are not ready to make changes. Such trainings could be focused on increasing readiness to enroll in a QRIS, increasing buy-in for a new curriculum, or generally increasing trust and openness to consider new information about childcare quality. Children's Institute has piloted a small group intervention with the goal of increasing providers' sense of safety, trust, openness to consider another person's point of view, and willingness to reflect on the reasons why they do what they do. The small group model draws from various approaches including group therapy, counseling, and circle processes. Evaluation results suggests that the program is working as intended. By the fifth meeting, the facilitators observed that trust and openness in the group had

grown, and noted that providers' readiness to change has increased. One provider commented, "I have been a provider for 15 years and this is the first [class] I'm really learning something!"[15]

Recommendations

Following the stages of implementation[1], we recommend the following steps for administrators of childcare quality improvement programs to begin integrating the Stage of Change Approach into your ongoing programs:

Exploration

- Scan programs to determine which would be a good fit for incorporating the Stage of Change Approach
- Scan available readiness to change assessment tools to determine which tool would be a good fit for existing programs
- Determine what resources you will need to implement the Stage of Change Approach into existing programs
- Ensure that supervisors of technical assistance providers have sufficient buy-in and understanding of the Stage of Change Approach before proceeding to installation

Installation

- Assess technical assistance providers' readiness to change their practices with child care providers
- Based on the above, provide technical assistance staff with trainings designed to identify barriers to change and increase readiness to implement the Stage of Change Approach
- Provide training for technical assistance staff on the Stage of Change Approach and Stage of Change Scale or other readiness to change assessment tool
- Provide training for technical assistance staff on Motivational Interviewing or other research-based approach to supporting adult motivation and readiness for change
- Design targeted trainings for child care providers in the early stages of change, drawing on research-based approaches designed to strengthen individuals' own motivation and commitment to change

Implementation

- Technical assistance staff:
  - Measure readiness to change of early educators using the Stage of Change Scale or other assessment tool
  - Use Motivational Interviewing or other research-based support strategies matched to stage of change when working with child care providers individually and in groups
  - Offer targeted trainings for child care providers in the early stages of change, designed to strengthen individuals' own motivation and commitment to change
- Supervisors of technical assistance staff:
  - Ensure that quality improvement programs are aligned with readiness to change principles (e.g., timeline, paperwork, policies)
  - Provide ongoing support to identify technical assistance providers' barriers to implementing the Stage of Change Approach and support readiness to change

- o Monitor technical assistance providers' readiness to change their own practices, and use interpersonal support strategies matched to their stage of change in supervision
- o Based on the technical assistance providers' individual level of readiness, provide ongoing support for implementing the Stage of Change Approach, as well as the spirit and the skills of Motivational Interviewing or other readiness to change approach
- o Provide ongoing professional development opportunities for technical assistance staff to develop their communication skills for working with child care providers in the early stages of change
- o Provide opportunities for technical assistance providers to learn and practice skills as a team
- Organizational leaders:
  - o Provide supervisors of technical assistance providers with ongoing support to respond collaboratively to challenges with implementation
  - o "Champion" readiness to change principles at all levels of the organization (e.g., in staff meetings, supervision, evaluation, reporting)

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Resources

Getting Ready: Final Evaluation Report

http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2012_03_19_FR_GettingReady.pdf

Stage of Change Scale for Early Education and Care and Professional Manual
http://www.childrensinstitute.net/store/assessment-measures

Stage of Change Approach Training and Consultation
http://www.childrensinstitute.net/services/stage-of-change-approach

Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers (MINT)
http://www.motivationalinterview.net/training/trainers.html