

Conceptualizing Best Practices for Maternal and Child Health

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Evidence-based programming and policymaking continue to be top priorities for states and communities engaged in public health work. Policymakers and funders look to evidence-based practices to assure that resources are being invested in programs that work and in programs that will provide evidence of impact. The Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs (AMCHP) is committed to sharing effective and promising maternal and child health (MCH) practices so that programs may maximize on existing knowledge and learn from peers. AMCHP aims to do so through our Best Practices program and the Innovation Station, a searchable, on-line database of programs that work. Innovation Station helps foster knowledge exchange by cataloguing programs with a strong design based on theoretical foundations and proven models, and that incorporate solid evaluation and continuous quality improvement to ensure that the program is using the evidence base to best meet health goals. In order for this resource to be valuable for our membership, we first had to develop an appropriate concept of “best practices” to drive our efforts to document and disseminate effective MCH models and tools.

DEFINING A BEST PRACTICE

“Best practice” is a commonly used term that can have a variety of meanings depending on context. A best practice could range from a recommended process and standard procedure; to an intervention showing promising outcomes; to a rigorously evaluated, science-based practice. The term can be problematic when used in public health because what works best in one situation or one population may not work in another.

In 2004, AMCHP staff, along with an expert workgroup, conducted a review of literature in public health and other disciplines to compile commonly used and accepted definitions of best practice. The review found that common elements, themes, and characteristics fell into three categories: promising practice, evidence-based practice, and science-based practice. Another common theme throughout the literature was the importance of not becoming fixated on definitions of terms. Best practices are not an attempt to simply standardize

practice, but rather to adapt practice in ways that suit the particular issue and context, as well as share stories, tools, and understanding.

AMCHP conceptualized best practice as a “continuum of practices/programs ranging from emerging, to promising, to best practice.” Based on feedback, AMCHP decided to drop the more scientific names of the categories noted earlier, and instead used the terms “emerging,” “promising,” and “best,” which seemed more appropriate for the public health community where practice cannot always be as rigid as scientific research. The continuum proposes the idea that a best practice is not a static concept, but rather an evolving process. That is, with time and opportunity, an emerging practice with a strong foundation, design, and evaluation plan would be able to demonstrate effectiveness as a promising, and eventually best, practice.

THE BEST PRACTICES CONTINUUM

AMCHP’s review panel uses the continuum to determine eligibility for inclusion in the Innovation Station database. The successfully reviewed practices range from new and emerging practices with a solid design and evaluation plan; to promising practices with data to demonstrate effectiveness; to best practices that have been peer reviewed, extensively evaluated, and replicated. Using common themes from the literature, AMCHP developed review criteria that comprise the categories across the continuum.

► Emerging Practices – Emerging practices:

- incorporate the philosophy, values, and indicators of other positive/effective public health interventions;
- are based on guidelines, protocols, standards, or preferred practice patterns that have been proven to lead to effective public health outcomes;
- incorporate a process of continual quality improvement that accumulates and applies knowledge about what is working and what is not, and incorporates lessons learned, feedback, and analysis to lead to improvement or positive outcome; and
- have an evaluation plan in place to measure program outcomes.

INNOVATIONS IN MCH

Each year AMCHP bestows awards to especially innovative emerging, promising, and best MCH practices that were accepted into Innovation Station. The awardees at the 2012 AMCHP annual conference illustrate innovation across the continuum.

- **EMERGING: Power Your Life Preconception Campaign**

This campaign aims to raise awareness of preconception health and increase consumption of folic acid through the use of social marketing. In addition to a Web site; radio/television/print/Web ads; Spanish/English media; and community outreach, the campaign distributed approximately 10,000 “Power Bags” with a 90-day supply of folic acid vitamins and other resources. Short-term results indicate increased awareness of preconception health, as well as increased daily vitamin use.

- **PROMISING: PASOs Program**

PASOs improves the health of Latino families by educating parents, caregivers, and parents-to-be on issues related to healthy pregnancies, prenatal care, child development, and resources for child health, as well as by advocating for better, more accessible services for Latinos. By providing comprehensive prenatal classes, community health outreach, and individual interventions to Latino families in 13 counties in South Carolina, the program has shown significant increases in indicators of knowledge and behavior related to healthy pregnancies.

- **BEST: Every Child Succeeds Home Visiting Program**

Every Child Succeeds is a collaborative program that provides home visits focused on proper child development for first-time, at-risk mothers; their babies; and families on a regular basis from the time of pregnancy until the child’s third birthday. The program is based on two national models of home visiting, which are guided by several theories of prevention science. Founded in 1999, the program has shown long-term health benefits, including a 60 percent reduction in the infant mortality rate for participants (compared to matched controls) and improvements in developmental delays and learning.

Find out more about these and other practices at www.amchp.org/innovationstation.

- **Promising Practices** – In addition to fulfilling the criteria of an emerging practice, promising practices have been, or are being, evaluated and have strong quantitative and qualitative data showing positive outcomes.
- **Best Practices** – Best practices result from rigorous peer review and evaluation that indicate effectiveness in improving public health outcomes for a target population. Best practices:
 - have been reviewed and substantiated by experts in the public health field according to standards of empirical research,
 - are replicable and produce desirable results in a variety of settings, and
 - clearly link positive effects to the program/practice and not to external factors.

It is important to note that submitted practices are evaluated on all criteria, and an emerging practice could possess some elements of other categories. Additionally, practices included in the “best” category should not be the only program considered for a specific population. Thus, the continuum provides structure for a review process that has criteria, but is not so rigid that new and/or innovative programs are excluded. The continuum is dynamic and takes into account that there are a wide range of programs that can offer useful information.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR PHILANTHROPY

Philanthropic organizations and MCH programs often share a variety of goals in improving the health of women, children, and families. Even with common goals, developing successful collaborations and identifying sound investments in interventions to positively affect MCH can be challenging. This continuum provides a model for MCH programs to assure that strategies are grounded in the best available evidence, while allowing for innovation and including strong evaluation and quality improvement to create best practice. The criteria can also be applied to broader public health practice. This conceptualization can be of benefit to philanthropic agencies as they look to develop their own criteria and review process for identifying promising interventions and collaborations.

RESOURCES

AMCHP Best Practices Web site: <http://www.amchp.org/bestpractices>

AMCHP Innovation Station Database:
<http://www.amchp.org/innovationstation>

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact Faith Mitchell at 202.452.8331 or fmitchell@gih.org.