Improving the Effectiveness of Programs for Youth: Two Complementary Paths to Apply Evidence

This brief presents two ways practitioners can use evidence to improve the effectiveness of their programs: adopting and installing **evidence-based programs (EBPs)** and incorporating a **core components approach**. It answers the questions:

- What are two ways practitioners can use evidence to improve youth programs?
- What is the difference between adopting an EBP and using a core components approach?
- When should I use one or the other, or both, in my organization?

EBPs and core components are complementary approaches, with the same goal of improving outcomes for youth and their families, but with important differences.

What are two ways practitioners can use evidence to improve youth programs?

Evidence-Based Programs (EBPs) are supported by high quality experimental or quasi-experimental evidence. They often come with a brand name and an implementation manual. Researchers typically identify EBPs by systematically reviewing the evidence against a set of research quality standards and providing a rating that signifies the level of confidence the public should have in the evidence – that is, how confident we should be that the program really "worked" with the population and in the setting in which it was tested. The results of these reviews are often listed on model program registries with a particular focus like youth violence, employment training, home visiting, or adolescent pregnancy prevention. Criteria for the designation of "evidence-based" vary across systematic reviews and model program registries. Some use meta-analysis to summarize the findings of many studies, while others rate findings from individual studies. Practitioners can select EBPs designed to impact specific outcomes that fit the best with the participants and settings in which they work.
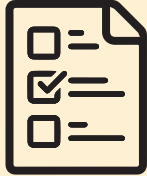
Core Components are the parts, features, attributes, or characteristics of youth programs that research shows are associated with strong outcomes.[1] Many components of a program can contribute to outcomes, such as the program activities or content, how the services are delivered and by whom, the length and frequency of services, and whether and how service delivery staff are trained and supervised. While there are different ways to identify core components, one way analyzes evidence from a large body of research to identify the components that are present in studies with the strongest outcomes. Researchers then translate the components into actionable recommendations for program improvement. This approach to core components relies on the availability of a large body of well-controlled research that can include both EBPs and unbranded or "home grown" programs.

EBPs and core components approaches are both working toward the same goal – applying evidence to improve outcomes for youth – but use the evidence in different ways.

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[1] Ferber, T., Wiggins, M. E., & Sileo, A. (2019). *Advancing the use of core components of effective programs.* Forum for Youth Investment.

What are the key differences between these two approaches?

Features of the Approach	Evidence-Based Programs	Core Components Approach
What gets implemented	Involves implementing a **program model:** a defined set of activities with implementation protocols and procedures designed to achieve a specific outcome for specific participants.	Involves implementing or adjusting discrete **practices** or **elements** that can be incorporated into any program.
The underlying evidence	Based on evidence from experimental or quasi-experimental studies of a particular program model.	Based on correlational analysis (e.g., meta-analysis) of evidence from hundreds of experimental or quasi-experimental studies.
Fidelity of implementation	Requires fidelity to certain prescribed features of the program model.	Requires assessment of the extent to which existing programs are aligned with the evidence on core components.

When should you consider using one or the other approach?

Depending on local needs, priorities, and resources, you might use an EBP with a specific set of participants or in a particular program area and apply the core components approach to another program area within your organization or service delivery system. There is no need to choose one over the other. Both contribute to our understanding of how to improve the well-being of youth, their families, and communities. Knowing the different purposes of each approach will help inform your decisions about when and how to apply them in your own work.

Use Evidence-Based Programs When…	Use a Core Components Approach When…
• The EBP is a good match for your priority population, service delivery setting, staff capacity, the outcome(s) you wish to change, and the community context. • You are seeking to scale a program to impact a population with which the EBP has shown effectiveness. • You wish to test whether the EBP is effective with populations and settings different than those with which it was originally tested, or to test an adaptation of the EBP. • Funders require an EBP from a model program registry.	• You wish to adjust existing programs to align with available evidence on the components that may have the strongest effect on the outcome(s) of interest. • There is no EBP available that meets the needs of your priority population, community context, or aligns with available resources. • You are developing a new or innovative program and making decisions about content, length, delivery format, and other key elements. • Funders do not require an EBP but expect an 'evidence-informed' approach.

Building the evidence base about youth programs is a broad undertaking that includes different ways of using and applying evidence. EBPs and core components are complementary approaches that youth-serving organizations can use depending on their specific needs. By expanding what is considered evidence-based programming to include a core components approach, practitioners can apply evidence in ways that are relatively inexpensive and that may open the door to new opportunities to continue learning how best to improve the well-being of youth, their families, and communities.