



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Navigating the complexity: unraveling the implementation of youth care guidelines

Dubbeldeman, E.M.

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Chapter 7

Summary

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Introduction

Youth care guidelines are essential for ensuring the well-being of children and families, promoting early intervention, and preventing severe developmental, psychological, and social consequences. Effective implementation of these guidelines improves long-term health, safety, and stability, helping children grow up in secure environments. However, implementing guidelines on sensitive issues like domestic violence (DV) and child abuse and neglect (CAN) is complex, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the vulnerability of families, and systemic challenges within youth care.

Recent years have seen increased focus on the challenges of guideline implementation, with frameworks developed to guide the process, focusing on implementation determinants as well as Behaviour Change Techniques (BCTs) and strategies to address these determinants. However, the influence of BCTs and strategies on determinants and implementation outcomes remains unclear. Additionally, in current frameworks, determinants are considered in isolation, overlooking the complex interconnections between them. Understanding how determinants, strategies, and BCTs interact allows for more effective, tailored strategies that maximize impact and improve outcomes for children and families.

The objective of this dissertation is to unravel the process of youth care guideline implementation, with a particular emphasis on CAN and DV guidelines. Specifically, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between determinants, strategies, BCTs, and the implementation of youth care guidelines. Furthermore, we aim to identify subgroups of implementers based on their unique profiles of implementation determinants.

Main findings of this dissertation

The implementation of guidelines is influenced by various determinants. **Chapter 2** identified relevant determinants for the implementation of CAN and DV guidelines, such as the availability of resources, time constraints, knowledge of the guidelines, self-efficacy, and communication skills. In **Chapter 3**, experts were asked to assess the relevance of determinants influencing the implementation of youth care guidelines. Their responses emphasized the importance of knowledge about guideline usage and communication skills. Other crucial factors included engaging both management and CPs, mandatory education, the presence of implementation leaders, and management support. **Chapter 5** demonstrates how the determinants interact and influence each other. Five subgroups of CPs were identified, each defined by a unique combination of determinants.

In **Chapter 3** and **Chapter 4**, implementation hypotheses were formulated and evaluated regarding the relationship between determinants, BCTs, strategies, and implementation performance. The success of BCTs and strategies depends on understanding the mechanisms that drive change. These mechanisms, such as knowledge, beliefs, and social influence, explain how and why BCTs lead to actual behaviour change, bridging the gap between applied techniques and outcomes. While BCTs are specific actions aimed at changing behaviour, mechanisms clarify the process behind the change. Understanding these mechanisms clarifies why certain strategies are effective and provides insight into how they can be refined further.

A holistic approach to implementation research

While this research has improved our understanding of the determinants, BCTs, and strategies influencing the implementation of youth care guidelines, we cannot fully conclude that our goal has been achieved. Implementation should not be considered from a reductive perspective. It would be overly simplistic to suggest: *"You lack knowledge, which hinders implementation, so we will provide instructions through educational meetings, and the problem will be solved."* In reality, this process is much more complex: implementation requires a holistic approach involving interconnected determinants, BCTs, strategies, mechanisms, and implementation outcomes. Recognizing the interconnectedness of determinants is essential because challenges in implementation typically stem from the complex interaction of multiple factors, rather than isolated barriers and facilitators, and how they manifest within different contexts. Additionally, a deeper understanding into the "how and why" certain strategies work can provide valuable insights into why some approaches succeed while others fail.

The recognition of the interconnection between implementation determinants, as well as the role of BCTs and underlying mechanisms, marks an important advancement in the field. However, research is still in its early stages, focusing more on theoretical frameworks than on practical applications. Furthermore, current frameworks do not capture the holistic approach considered in this dissertation. There is a need for a framework that acknowledges the interconnectedness of determinants, BCTs, strategies, mechanisms, and outcomes, and provides clear guidance on how to apply this holistic approach in implementation research. Specifically, such a framework should offer practical steps for examining and evaluating the relationships between these elements and how they collectively influence the overall implementation process. This would allow researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to apply more targeted, effective strategies and continuously refine their approaches to improve outcomes in real-world contexts.

A holistic framework for implementation research

These insights led to the development of a new framework that provides a structured, theory-driven approach to studying the implementation process. This framework guides researchers in identifying interconnected contextual determinants and applying BCTs tailored to these specific contexts. It also emphasizes the importance of understanding how and why strategies induce behaviour change by uncovering underlying mechanisms. The framework promotes a cyclical process of continuous feedback and refinement, allowing interventions to adapt to emerging challenges.

To operationalize this holistic approach, the framework offers guidance on suitable analytical methods and recommendations for evaluation. It emphasizes the need to account for the complex relationships between determinants, BCTs, strategies, mechanisms, and outcomes during the evaluation process. By doing so, it enables a deeper understanding of the dynamic interactions in the implementation process. The framework builds on existing models, such as Intervention Mapping and Theory-Informed Behavior Change, by addressing key gaps, such as the interconnectivity of determinants, providing a structured overview, offering analytical guidance, and incorporating a cyclical process for continuous improvement. It strengthens current models by integrating development and evaluation, offering a comprehensive approach for sustainable and effective implementation in real-world contexts.

Conclusion

This dissertation highlights the complexities of implementing guidelines in youth care, particularly in the context of CAN and DV, emphasizing that this process is often challenging and context-specific. It underscores the need for a holistic approach to implementation research, one that recognizes the interconnectedness of various determinants and the causal relationships between determinants, BCTs, strategies, mechanisms, and outcomes. The developed framework seeks to bridge theory and practice by providing insights into how and why certain strategies succeed or fail in specific contexts. Ultimately, just as every journey requires flexibility to adapt to changing conditions, implementation research must evolve to meet the needs of practitioners in real-world settings. This dissertation aims to contribute to this evolution by offering a more structured approach to implementation research—one that not only focuses on the implementation process itself but also ensures that outcomes are tailored to specific contexts, driving tangible improvements in the well-being of children and families.

