

Strategic Use of Consultants: An Interactive Guide for Head Start and Early Head Start Leaders



THE NATIONAL CENTER ON
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Voices From the Field

Promoting Children's Social-Emotional Development

Program:

Southeast Kansas Community Action Program, Inc. (SEK-CAP), Girard, KS

Contact:

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Brief Program Description:

The SEK-CAP Head Start program provides Head Start (HS), Early Head Start (EHS), and Maternal Infant Early Childhood Home Visitation (MIECHV) services to more than 900 children throughout 12 counties in rural southeast Kansas. The program began in 1966 and has a history of delivering innovative, quality, comprehensive services, using both home-based and center-based options; its established child care partnerships throughout the service area enhance the home-based program model. The community action agency that houses the program spans a service area of more than 7,400 square miles, encompassing very isolated communities in the extreme southeast corner of the state. The focus of the agency is to change people's lives, embody the spirit of hope, improve communities, and make America a better place to live.

Program Improvement Goal:

To develop a system of support that addresses challenging behavior and increases the social-emotional development of enrolled children by improving the skills and abilities of program staff.

Training and Technical Assistance (T/TA) Plan:

Staff were struggling daily with trying to provide quality teaching and learning while constantly "putting out the fires" of challenging child behavior. This led the supervisors and program managers to engage in crisis management of behavioral issues rather than in mentoring staff and supporting continuous program improvement. With this in mind, program leadership developed a T/TA plan to hire a consultant to increase staff, partner, and family members' knowledge of practices to promote social-emotional development and prevent challenging behavior in young children. The consultant was expected to

- work with the leadership team on an ongoing basis to develop a plan for a program-wide process to promote appropriate social-emotional development and positive behavior among enrolled children;
- conduct trainings for the leadership team, program staff, community partners, and families on promoting social-emotional development and preventing challenging behavior in young children;
- review current policies and procedures and help with revisions to better support program-wide change;
- determine a schedule and procedure for ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the new process for promoting social-emotional development and positive behavior;
- assist with “hands-on” monitoring and evaluation, as needed; and
- review progress every three months to monitor implementation and make adjustments, as necessary.

Consultant Qualifications:

The program leadership sought a consultant with both a background in early childhood education and experience in working with children with challenging behavior. Program leaders also wanted the consultant to have the expertise to help develop a program-wide process for addressing children’s challenging behavior that was based on understanding the purpose of the behavior and teaching children new skills to replace challenging behavior. In addition, program leaders sought a consultant who (a) was familiar with Head Start, (b) had experience delivering services in rural environments, (c) lived in the area and was available to be onsite frequently, (d) was recognized as an expert, and (e) would be able to relate in a nonthreatening manner to all program staff as well as parents.

Consultant’s Work:

Under the contract, the consultant performed the following tasks:

- Met with program administrator and management team to discuss issues faced by the program
- Facilitated discussions and provided resource options to help the management team solve problems and prioritize issues
- Assisted with the development and training of the leadership team
- Conducted training sessions for all staff and community partners (child care, school, and mental health) to highlight the benefits of using the Teaching Pyramid model for promoting social-emotional competence in young children
- Worked with the leadership team to develop a program-wide action plan for the delivery of staff support services

- Worked with the leadership team to create a flow chart to illustrate how the new system of support would be implemented, revised policies and procedures to incorporate the new system of support, and set up a training schedule
- Assisted the leadership team with the development of training materials
- Provided ongoing weekly support to the leadership and management teams
- Worked with the leadership team to develop safeguards that would ensure that professional development efforts affected classroom practice
- Assisted with the annual review of policies and procedures
- Provided individualized support and training for staff and families when a need was identified
- Facilitated the functional behavior assessment (FBA) process
- Trained staff on the FBA process to build internal expertise and capacity
- Conducted debriefing meetings with all parties and supported the monthly review and evaluation of the new system for promoting social-emotional development among enrolled children
- Collected and analyzed outcomes data
- Supported the efforts of the program through positive reinforcement, active listening, encouragement, and celebration of successes

Outcomes:

Following the work with the consultant, the program was able to meet its initial goals of building program expertise, decreasing episodes of challenging child behaviors, reducing referrals to outside experts, and improving staff satisfaction. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation documented the following outcomes across the program, its children, and its staff:

Program Outcomes

- Referrals to outside experts were reduced.
- Time-out was eliminated as a practice.
- Overall program quality was improved.
- The use of comprehensive strategies and team planning increased.
- Staff turnover was reduced by 50 percent.
- Staff satisfaction improved.
- The leadership team was able to support staff when challenges arose.

Child Outcomes

- The number of children identified as having challenging behaviors and referred for mental health services decreased.
- Children understood and followed behavior expectations.
- Children supported each other in following classroom expectations.
- Children were able to transition without difficulty from one classroom to another.
- Children were able to adjust more quickly to their classrooms.

Staff Outcomes

- Staff viewed themselves as having the skills to better support children in their classrooms.
- Staff felt they had the “tools” to address the individual needs of children with challenging behavior.
- Staff were intentionally teaching children social-emotional skills.
- Staff began to look to one another as sources of additional resources and support.
- Staff demonstrated the use of program-wide supports in their classrooms.
- Staff were more confident in their interactions with families and children.

Advice to Others:

- It takes time! Don't expect a quick fix!
- Taking the time to find the right consultant is imperative.
- Allow time for relationships and trust to be developed within the consultant's time frame. This is especially important for coaching and mentoring.
- Use action plans; they promote the accountability of all involved.
- Involve families from the beginning.
- Involve the leadership team throughout the process; it helps to promote buy-in and sustainability.
- Celebrate successes and learn from your mistakes.