

Resource #3: Small Test Cycle: Plan, Do, Study, Act!

PLAN: This is the first phase of the PDSA. In this phase, you will start with a simple idea that you think may improve the way something works, based on the priorities your team has identified. You will form a basic hypothesis by asking yourself the question, "What do I think this will accomplish?" Then you will plan for how you might test the idea -- simply, quickly, and on a very small scale (e.g., "by next Tuesday").

EXAMPLE:

PRIORITY AREA: *All Child Welfare Staff will make efforts to engage fathers in to all aspects of the case.*

HYPOTHESIS (what we expect to see happen): Successful engagement of fathers into child welfare cases is a part of family-centered, trauma-informed and strength-based practice. Positively engaging fathers improves child functioning, builds child and family strengths and resources and increases the likelihood of a timely and successful reunification.

WHO: One of the caseworkers at Agency X: _____

WHAT: She will send a letter to the home(s) one week before their home visit, requesting that all adults in care giving roles be available to meet with her in the home or set-up an appointment over the phone or at another location if the relationship between the parents is a barrier. In that letter she will emphasize the positive impact of involving fathers in child welfare cases.

WHERE: She will draft the letter in her office, share it with her supervisor and then the letter will be sent to the home of the mother and also sent to the home of the father (and/or other caregivers) should they live separately.

WHEN: One week before the home visit (date: _____) she will put letters in the mail.

DATA: (What data will be used?):

Was the letter drafted, reviewed and mailed in time? Was it stated in positive language that emphasized the important role of all caregivers, including father figures? Was there more than one caregiver available at the meeting to talk with the caseworker? Was the father present? If not, did she hear from the father? Did the caseworker get any requests to talk by phone or schedule a second meeting?

DO: The "Do" phase is critical because it is where you will try out your idea. You will find that if you have over-planned in your Plan phase, it will be nearly impossible to carry out the test quickly and easily.

EXAMPLE (continued): The caseworker drafts the letter on Monday and shows it to her supervisor that afternoon. The letter is finalized and is mailed to 3 caregivers involved in the "identified test case." Separate letters are addressed and sent to the mother, the father and the paternal grandmother who provided daycare for the children in the recent past. Each letter states that all three caregivers are getting copies and invited to participate in the meeting in the best interest of the child.

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STUDY: This phase is the most often overlooked phase of the Small Test model. It is easy to jump right from the “Do” to the next “Plan.” But by doing so, you lose the opportunity to improve your next Plan. Study does not need to be scientifically rigorous. Instead it is a systematic reflection on what was learned from the Do.

EXAMPLE (continued):

Look at the data! The data that the clinician planned to collect in the “Plan” phase included the following:

- 1) Was the letter drafted, reviewed and mailed in time?
- 2) Did it use positive language to emphasize the important role of all caregivers including father figures?
- 3) Was there more than one caregiver available for the caseworker to talk to at the meeting?
- 4) Was the father present? If not, was the caseworker able to schedule another appointment with the father – in person, or by phone?

These data could be collected by having the caseworker (and maybe her supervisor or team) think about and answer these questions at the conclusion of completing the meeting. The clinician and caseworker could also ask the family what they thought about receiving the letter.

ACT / ADJUST: If what you planned didn’t turn out the way we wanted or expected, it is time to adjust the plan and do a new small test! The Act (or “Adjust”) phase is the time to reflect on what was learned and think about how it may affect your next Small Test cycle. Each cycle should be related to the learning of a previous cycle because this will allow your changes and tests to snowball quickly. When you act based on what you learn, you are often already beginning to plan for your next cycle.

EXAMPLE (continued): There are several different Small Test cycles that could be tested next. If the small test was successful with this specific case, it does not guarantee it will be successful (especially, across various sites or regions of the state). The next cycle could involve testing the same approach with a different case. Or this next Small Test cycle might involve the same sort of Plan and Do, but with different professionals or a larger number of professionals testing it out. For instance, it could be tested out by 2 or 3 different caseworkers to see how it works across a range of situations and individuals. If the test didn’t work the way we wanted it to, we might make slight changes. For example, we may change the wording in the letter and/or incorporate a follow up phone call to make sure that caregivers received their letters prior to the meeting and address any barriers to attending the meeting.

As shown in the Act/Adjust phase, each cycle should be informed by the previous cycle—and the number of people testing the practice change will grow (e.g., from one, to three to possibly five). By learning from each cycle and testing the improvements on a greater number of families each time, this change might be determined to be an effective way of improving services to be more family-focused, trauma-informed and strength-based.