Endpoints

Tailoring printed materials can help improve child find and increase referrals from primary referral sources

Carl J. Dunst

Research on the characteristics of printed materials associated with positive consequences points to the importance of using tailored messages and materials to influence changes in people's behavior. Tailoring involves the preparation of printed materials targeted to a specific audience that includes a message that is especially relevant to that audience.

Researchers at the Tracking, Referral and Assessment Center for Excellence (TRACE) examined 13 studies that included more than 10,000 participants who received or did not receive tailored printed materials intended to affect changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. Carl Dunst and Deborah Hamby examined the studies to identify the printed-material design characteristics and conditions under which using tailoring printed materials were most effective.

The focus of review and synthesis of the studies examined by Dunst and Hamby were those characteristics of the printed materials and interventions that could inform improvements in child find to promote and sustain referrals to early childhood

intervention programs from primary referral sources. A number of findings and themes emerged that had special relevance for early intervention and preschool special education programs.

Findings pointed to several design features that were most effective in terms of study outcomes:

- The focus of the interventions mattered in terms of optimal study outcomes. Interventions that emphasized improved outcomes or positive consequences were more effective than interventions attempting to cease or decrease negative behavior functioning.
- Gain-framed tailoring of printed-material messages increased the effectiveness of interventions. Including both the reasons for change and the positive benefits of change contributed to improved study outcomes.
- Especially important was the inclusion of advice or guidance about the steps people could take to initiate behavior change or action. Tailored messages that enhanced recipients' motivation to change also enhanced the effectiveness of the printed materials.
- Using tailored materials in conjunction with other interventions bolstered the positive effects of the intervention. Tailored materials that were used together with other evidence-based interventions (e.g., educational outreach to physicians) increased the effectiveness of the interventions (see e.g., Dunst, 2005).

The common themes across studies in terms of producing optimal benefits were positively framed messages and materials. What does this mean in terms of preparing tailored printed materials for improving child find?

Describe the positive benefits to the targeted audience for referring young children for early childhood intervention.

Preparing Tailored Program Materials

Increasing the effectiveness of printed materials for both child find and for facilitating referrals to early intervention or preschool special education can occur by preparing and using tailored messages and materials. The table includes a checklist of features that can be used to improve brochures, letters, newsletters, and other written materials to communicate more effectively with primary referral sources.

Message Framing
✓ *Identify the target audience.* Be as specific as possible in terms of who the message is intended to reach. The more specific the target audience, the easier it is to tailor the message.

✓ *Identify the desired or expected benefit to the targeted audience.* What are the benefits both to the person making referrals and to the persons being referred? Effective messages are relevant to the desired goals of the targeted audiences.

✓ *Prepare a positive, gain-framed message.* The message that is communicated to primary referral sources should focus on the positive consequences to the children being referred. What are the benefits of participating in your program?

Material Preparation
✓ *Personalize the written materials for the targeted audience.* This can be accomplished by specifically referring to the targeted audience by profession or group membership (e.g., "Pediatricians now generally recognize the importance of early intervention"). The more personalized the tailored message, the more likely the recipient will read the materials and respond positively to the message's intent.

✓ *Describe the reasons and benefits for making referrals.* Include a description of the specific kinds of resources and services available to children served by your program and the benefits of receiving these supports. Why would the primary referral source want to make a referral?

✓ *Include advice about and guidance for how to make referrals.* Describe the process or procedure the targeted group can use to refer a child. Keep the referral process as simple and straightforward as possible. Less is more when trying to change referral rates and patterns.

Intervention
✓ *Identify the ways the printed materials will be distributed and used to promote referrals.* Take the time to identify the different ways the printed materials can be used to reach the targeted primary referral source. The same printed materials used in different ways will increase the effectiveness of child find.

✓ *Use the printed materials as part of outreach to primary referral sources.* The tailored printed materials will likely be more effective if used in conjunction with some type of face-to-face interactions with primary referral sources. The complementary intervention should be evidence-based (e.g., Dunst, 2005).

✓ *Provide tailored feedback to referral sources.* Provide immediate feedback to all referrals and personalize the feedback to the referral sources (e.g., "Dear Dr. Smith, thank you for referring your patient John Jones to the "XYZ" program").

It is important to remember that positive distribution of program materials—tailored or not—is not likely to sustain referrals. Therefore, the practices described in this *Endpoints* could be made even more effective if used in conjunction with other practices we have developed based on available research evidence. The reader should look at our other *Endpoints* and *TRACE Practice Guides* for descriptions of several different kinds of complementary practices (Dunst, 2005, 2006; Trivette & Dunst, 2006).

References
Dunst, C. J. (2005). Repeated visits to primary referral sources are likely to be more successful than one-time contacts. *Endpoints, 1*(1), 1-2. Available at http://www.tracecenter.info/endpoints/endpoints_vol1_no1.pdf

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Table
Checklist for Preparing and Using Tailored Printed Materials for Improving Child Find

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Message Framing
✓ Identify the target audience
✓ Identify the desired or expected benefit to the targeted audience
✓ Prepare a positive, gain-framed message

Material Preparation
✓ Personalize the written materials for the targeted audience
✓ Describe the reasons and benefits for making referrals
✓ Include advice and guidance for how to make referrals

Intervention
✓ Identify the ways the printed materials will be distributed and used
✓ Use the printed materials as part of outreach to primary referral sources
✓ Provide tailored feedback to referral sources