Using a Structured Learning Process to Strengthen Two-Generation Service Delivery

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Abstract

Two-generation initiatives intentionally combine intensive, high quality adult-focused services with intensive, high quality child-focused programs to improve outcomes for children, primary caregivers, and families. The goal of integrating services for primary caregivers and their children is to achieve better outcomes than those accomplished by serving each generation in isolation (Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn 2014; Sama-Miller et al. 2017). Research suggests that to effectively support families, these services should be high quality, intensive, and intentionally aligned (Sama-Miller et al. 2017).

This brief is the second of three briefs that aim to support future evaluations in the field of two-generation approaches. This second brief highlights the experiences of the four initiatives participating in NS2G to demonstrate how practitioners of other two-generation initiatives can use research techniques to strengthen the implementation of their initiative before evaluating program effectiveness. This brief is intended for practitioners who provide two-generation services and seek to strengthen their initiative using formative evaluation, as well as their evaluation partners. Appendix A in this brief includes a tool designed to help practitioners (1) identify a key implementation challenge related to delivering services to achieve outcomes for children, primary caregivers, and families, and (2) develop solutions to address the challenge.

Introduction

In the NS2G project, researchers from Mathematica (referred to in this brief as technical assistance, or TA, liaisons) partnered with four two-generation initiatives to conduct formative evaluations. These evaluations aimed to help the initiatives strengthen the quality, intensity, and intentionality of the services they offer to primary caregivers and their children. To conduct their formative evaluations (defined below), the four NS2G sites defined the services and core components of their initiative, assessed participant satisfaction with services, identified barriers to participating in services, and brainstormed strategies to test whether they strengthened the initiative. The NS2G sites and TA liaisons used a structured learning process called Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI^2), which is an approach to conducting formative evaluations through continuous learning to improve an initiative's model. Through LI^2 (depicted in Exhibit 1 on page 4 and described further below), participating initiatives identified strategies to strengthen two-generation implementation and developed plans to test those strategies using rapid-cycle learning.

- The first brief presented a two-generation logic model and discussed essential considerations for practitioners who want to tailor the model to their two-generation initiative.
- This second brief describes the learning process that two-generation initiatives used to identify implementation challenges and develop strategies to address the challenges.
- The third brief in this series will discuss the strategies that initiatives tested in the Improve phase and insights for the two-generation field based on those tests and their results.

Next Steps for Rigorous Research on Two-Generation Approaches project

The Next Steps for Rigorous Research on Two-Generation Approaches (NS2G) project is sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families to build the evidence base for fully integrated, intentional models for two-generation service delivery with adequate intensity and quality of services for parents and their children. Activities include partnering with four sites on formative evaluations, facilitating a learning community of 10 two-generation initiatives (including the four formative evaluation sites participating in NS2G), and developing a measure of mutually-reinforcing two-generation partnerships. The initiatives participating in NS2G formative evaluations include:

- Garrett County Community Action Committee, Garrett County, Maryland
- Northern Kentucky Scholar House at Brighton Center, Newport, Kentucky
- San Antonio Dual Generation, San Antonio, Texas
- Valley Settlement, Roaring Fork Valley, Colorado

For more information about NS2G, please visit https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/next-steps-rigorous-research-two-generation-approaches-ns2g-2019-2023-0.

LI²: An approach to formative evaluation

Before conducting a rigorous test of effectiveness, formative evaluations provide critical information about the intervention being evaluated. TA liaisons from Mathematica used the LI² approach to shape the formative evaluations of the two-generation initiatives. Grounded in implementation science, LI² is a structured learning process for and an approach to program improvement that helps practitioners unpack program challenges, develop evidence-informed solutions, and use analytic methods to gather data to assess the success of a solution (Derr 2022).

In this project, we used questions specific to two-generation models to help apply LI² with the sites participating in NS2G. We identified these questions in earlier OPRE-sponsored research to strengthen two-generation initiatives (Ross et al. 2018):

1. Are families (including primary caregivers and their children) as engaged as initiative staff and leaders expected? Why or why not?
2. To what extent are services for each generation and for the family as a whole offered with high fidelity and quality?
3. Are families' experiences participating in two-generation services aligned with expected pathways to improving outcomes?

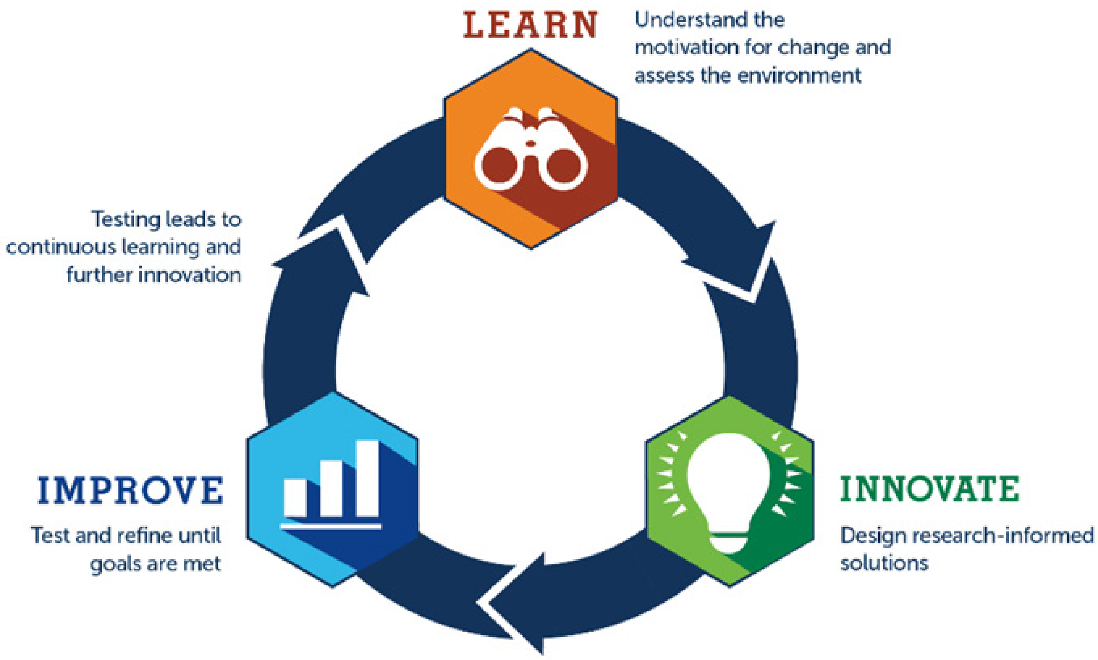
We used these questions to shape our approach to the Learn phase, in which initiative staff refined their understanding of the initiative, and in the Innovate phase to guide the brainstorming and prioritization of strategies that could address a key challenge (see below).

Formative evaluation (also called process or implementation evaluation) is a type of evaluation that is intended to strengthen the implementation of an intervention. Formative evaluation is important for understanding what services a program offers, the level of participation by clients and their satisfaction with services, challenges to participating, and ideas for improving the program (Rossi et al. 2003; Smith 2009).

This type of evaluation enables practitioners to define the core components of the initiative, develop a logic model, understand participant satisfaction with services, identify barriers to participation in services and areas for improvement in the model, and test strategies to see whether they strengthen the model.

Two-generation initiatives intentionally combine intensive, high quality adult-focused services with intensive, high quality child-focused programs to improve outcomes for children, primary caregivers, and families. We use the term "initiative" instead of "program" because it is a broader term that encompasses diverse ways that organization(s) may combine programs and services. For example, San Antonio Dual Generation is an initiative of the United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County that encompasses a number of adult workforce development and early childhood education programs delivered by a wide range of providers in the San Antonio area.

Exhibit 1. The three phases of Learn, Innovate, Improve (LI^2)



Source: Derr, M. "Learn, Innovate, Improve: A Practice Guide for Enhancing Programs and Improving Lives." Prepared for the Office of Family Assistance, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, DC: Mathematica, 2022.

Collaborative workshops were an important component of these formative evaluations. Initiative staff and TA liaisons co-led the workshops, during which initiative staff identified challenges and brainstormed solutions. The collaborative workshop included participants with a variety of perspectives and implementation expertise, such as administrative staff and frontline staff, and directors of partnering organizations. Collaborative workshop participants drew on their experience to address the questions listed above. Specifically, they identified challenges to engaging families in services or implementing the services as intended, as well as opportunities to strengthen processes and integrate services more intentionally for caregivers and children. Then, collaborative workshop participants selected one priority challenge and began brainstorming strategies to address this challenge. Practitioners from other two-generation initiatives can use qualitative data and program data in meetings guided by similar questions to learn about recruitment, enrollment, retention, and completion of services and to identify opportunities for improvement. In the next sections, we describe the data collected and used to support formative evaluations conducted by the initiatives participating in NS2G.

Learn: Work with staff and participants to refine your understanding of the initiative's implementation

During the Learn phase, practitioners first need to explore and ask the three questions above: Are families as engaged as expected? Is the initiative implemented as intended? In what ways does participation in the initiative lead to changes in outcomes? Together, initiative staff and TA liaisons engaged in the following three activities to build an understanding of successes, challenges, and opportunities to strengthen implementation. It is important to take time to fully understand an implementation challenge to help ensure that the solution will be responsive. Practitioners could conduct similar activities to support their own formative evaluations of two-generation initiatives or other types of programs. The call-out boxes provide examples of these activities.

1. **Use a logic model to identify implementation challenges.** Mapping out an initiative's two-generation services in a logic model is a powerful way for initiatives to articulate intended outcomes and related services for families (Box 1). Through NS2G, Mathematica developed a two-generation logic model template that shows the pathways from activities to intended outcomes for a two-generation initiative (for more information, see the Defining a Two-Generation Logic Model brief). Initiative staff and TA liaisons at each NS2G initiative worked together to develop or refine a two-generation logic model that described the initiative. They then shared the logic model with a small group of initiative staff, frontline staff of partnering organizations, and directors of partnering organizations to review the model and identify where the model could be strengthened.

Box 1. Example from NS2G: Identifying challenges based on a logic model

Collaborative workshop participants at the Garrett County Community Action Committee two-generation initiative identified challenges related to:

- Building capacity within the organization to provide two-generation services to families
- Coordinating among departments within the organization to better serve both generations in the family
- Working with community partners to improve coordination for families
- Using data as a tool to improve coordination and delivery of two-generation services
- Initiating and maintaining engagement with families throughout their participation in two-generation services

2. **Seek the input from practitioners at all levels of the initiative.** Engaging a group of people with a variety of perspectives and expertise can help uncover areas for improvement, identify hidden assumptions, and surface biases and areas of marginalization or exclusion in initiative services. Practitioners can offer insight on the questions guiding the formative evaluation. For NS2G, TA liaisons met with initiative leaders and managers, supervisors, frontline staff (including partner frontline staff), and partner directors to learn about their experience providing two-generation services. In these interviews, staff discussed the services available to families, challenges staff often encountered when delivering services, and the factors that support two-generation services. TA liaisons shared themes from the interviews with initiative staff.
3. **Incorporate participant voice.** Engaging participants can be just as important as engaging staff during improvement efforts (Box 2). Feedback from participants can help practitioners identify areas for improvement and barriers to accessing services. Participant feedback can also help practitioners consider participant-centered strategies that address participant goals. TA liaisons led small focus groups with parents and caregivers to discuss the goals they hoped to achieve, challenges they faced, and their experiences participating in the services of the two-generation initiative. Some NS2G initiative staff also sought to include feedback from parents and caregivers who participated in services. These staff used information about participants' successes, challenges, and opportunities to improve their experience participating in services.

Box 2. Example from NS2G: Incorporating participant voice

One initiative participating in the NS2G project, Northern Kentucky Scholar House, prioritized equity and minimizing participant burden throughout service delivery. During the collaborative workshops that the TA liaisons led (as described in the LI2: An approach to formative evaluation section), it was important to Northern Kentucky Scholar House staff to include participants' perspectives. To achieve this, they created several opportunities to include participant voices in the collaborative workshops. For example:

- Northern Kentucky Scholar House staff conducted a community assessment—which included participant input—and then shared findings with staff and TA liaisons to help incorporate assessment findings into collaborative workshop activities.
- Two participants contributed to the collaborative workshops with the initiative staff and TA liaisons to offer their perspectives on Northern Kentucky Scholar House activities. Their input helped ground the identified challenges in families' practical concerns and encouraged Northern Kentucky Scholar House staff to prioritize strategies that could improve program experience by reducing burden on participants. Participants were compensated for their time using NS2G project funds and received gift baskets from Northern Kentucky Scholar House for their participation.
- After the collaborative workshops, parents and caregivers who participated provided feedback directly to TA liaisons. Specifically, they indicated their preference for strategies to pilot using rapid-cycle learning.

Innovate: Brainstorm and prioritize strategies to address a key challenge

During the Innovate phase, practitioners brainstorm and prioritize strategies that might address a key challenge using data and research-informed practices. In addition to identifying opportunities for improvement, practitioners can also use collaborative workshops to further understand challenges and to guide brainstorming about which challenge is greatest or which to address first, and how to do so. Through the collaborative workshops, NS2G initiatives narrowed their focus to one clearly defined challenge related to the three topics of discussion: whether families were engaged as expected, whether services were provided as intended, and the extent to which participating in services led to changes in outcomes. Then, they brainstormed strategies to solve it and prioritized the strategies. With their TA liaisons, they defined the priority solution strategy, what success would look like, how it would be assessed, who would be responsible for all aspects of the strategy, and a timeline to hold initiative staff accountable for progress.

To support practitioners who want to implement and test a strategy, Mathematica developed a tool that reflects these collaborative workshop activities intended to define a challenge and pose questions (Appendix A). The tool can help practitioners in two-generation initiatives articulate a plan and independently move toward innovative strategies. The next sections describe how this worked in practice for NS2G initiatives, based on the questions the initiatives addressed using the tool.

What is the current challenge and why?

To identify appropriate strategies to address the key challenge identified, practitioners need to understand the underlying factors that contribute to the challenge. TA liaisons helped NS2G initiative staff do this by drawing on input collected during the Learn phase and guiding collaborative workshop participants through a problem tree analysis for the key challenge the participants had selected for their initiative. Problem tree analysis is a human-centered design activity for brainstorming and mapping root causes contributing to and effects related to an issue. In this activity, collaborative workshop participants identified a variety of contributing factors, including some outside the control of initiative staff, such as COVID-19 and federal regulations. See Box 3 for examples of root causes identified by initiatives participating in the NS2G project.

> **Human-Centered Design (HCD)** is a problem-solving and design approach that emphasizes designing for and with those who will ultimately use the solution (in other words, the end user). (Rosinsky et al. 2020).

Box 3. Examples from NS2G: Identifying root causes and effects

Most initiatives in the NS2G project focused on challenges related to intentionally providing services for adults and their children. Here, we offer two examples from participating initiatives.

- Northern Kentucky Scholar House participants focused on the challenge of integrating services for families in times of uncertainty and with limited resources. According to those who participated in the collaborative workshop, causes included the following: limited knowledge among initiative staff about the services available, unclear processes for helping families access services, and a lack of communication among providers. This challenge led to low staff morale, delayed progress toward outcomes for families, and difficulty meeting expectations for initiative staff and families.
- Participants in the Garrett County Community Action Committee collaborative workshops focused on the challenge of collaborating and coordinating referrals across departments. Through the problem tree analysis, collaborative workshop participants identified that a lack of a systematic process for tracking internal referrals, a reduction in inter-departmental meetings, and changing initiative staff capacity and turnover contributed to the challenge of integrating services for families. These challenges were amplified by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as the organization lost some of the in-person collaboration it once had, and technology issues persisted for initiative staff and families. Collaborative workshop participants identified that all these causes led to a frustrated, siloed, and less confident staff; fewer interactions with families; and missed opportunities to support positive outcomes for families.

What do you hope will change? How will you know if you're on the right track? And what is the opportunity for change?

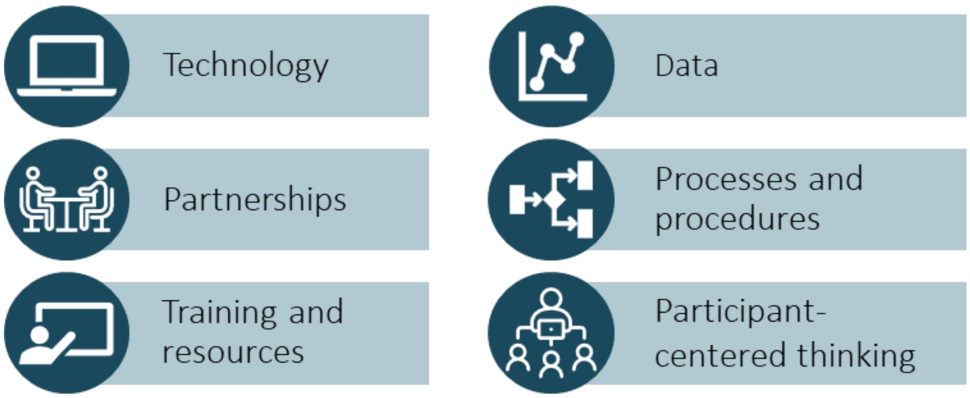
Practitioners can frame key challenges as opportunities by describing what would happen if the challenge was resolved; identifying the intermediate and long-term outcomes; and clarifying the processes, outputs, or outcomes that might need to change to achieve the identified outcomes. Collaborative workshop participants developed and refined aspirational "how might we" statements to guide brainstorming based on the key challenges. For example, Garrett County Community Action Committee developed the following statements:

- How might we develop an improved, standardized process for referrals and monitoring within our integrated data system to better serve participants?
- How might we create a hybrid work approach where we can support participants and staff?
- How might we improve onboarding and professional development so all initiative staff approach their work in the same way and have opportunities to grow?

How can you get better outcomes?

Practitioners can consider strategies and the various components of a strategy that might address a key challenge. It is also helpful for practitioners to consider multiple categories of strategies. For NS2G initiatives, TA liaisons offered collaborative workshop participants six categories of strategies to guide their brainstorming (Exhibit 2). Collaborative workshop participants began brainstorming **principles, processes, and products** that could address the challenge using the six categories to structure brainstorming (See Appendix A for more detail). For example, in one category, participant-centered thinking, practitioners put themselves in the position of caregivers accessing services to understand how they might see a service and perceive its benefits, and some of their concerns or barriers. While brainstorming, practitioners could consider how strategies might address the challenge and what the strategy might mean for caregivers and their children participating in two-generation services.

Exhibit 2. Categories of strategies used to guide brainstorming



Note: The LUMA Institute developed these categories. This organization provides training on human-centered design thinking. It uses these categories as a structure to support brainstorming while using a creative matrix. (Luma Institute 2022)

After brainstorming strategies (see Box 4), collaborative workshop participants ranked the strategies in terms of priority and feasibility, before planning for implementation of the strategy by placing strategies into the rings of a bullseye. TA liaisons instructed collaborative workshop participants to place one to two strategies that were the highest priority strategies in the center of the bullseye. In the secondary ring, participants placed three to four strategies that were a priority but not the highest priority. They placed strategies that were lower priority in the third ring of the bullseye.

Box 4. Examples from NS2G: Strategies brainstormed by participants

Northern Kentucky Scholar House challenge: Intentionally providing services for adults and their children

- Review paperwork to eliminate redundancy and reduce burden
- Develop a system that supports frequent communication between postsecondary partners and families
- Conduct monthly meetings between initiative staff and families to support communication and engagement with services

Garrett County Community Action Committee challenge: Collaborating and coordinating among departments to improve referrals made by frontline staff

- Develop expectations for responding to referral requests to create accountability
- Develop standardized processes for making internal and external referrals
- Create a standard monthly report of referrals and the departments receiving referrals

How will it get done? And what is the timeline for implementing your change strategy?

Testing the strategy that practitioners prioritize for addressing their key challenge requires a clear plan. The plan should define the supports needed for successful implementation and the method of accountability for those conducting the test. Practitioners of two-generation initiatives might have several responsibilities that compete for their time and expertise. A detailed plan can hold practitioners accountable for implementing the strategy and assessing its progress on a timeline that is useful and responsive to the needs of the initiative. NS2G initiatives worked with TA liaisons to articulate this detailed plan by identifying the motivation, capacity, and organization needed to support the implementation of the strategy. They also identified the staff members responsible for implementing and assessing whether the strategy works (see Appendix A for more detail).

Improve: Carry out the plan and test it

During the Improve phase, practitioners using LI^2 implement the plans they articulated during the Innovate phase and collect data over a short period to rapidly learn how a strategy addresses the priority challenge identified during the collaborative workshops. NS2G initiative staff moved into the Improve phase by testing their strategy for addressing the implementation challenge through rapid-cycle learning. In their plans, initiative staff identified the metrics they would measure to assess progress and outcomes. Given the two-generation focus of NS2G, TA liaisons encouraged staff to consider how the challenges and staff's plans for assessing progress would touch each generation and the family overall. Over a short period, initiatives then collected data to measure against those outcomes. With rapid-cycle learning, two-generation practitioners can continue innovating by tweaking their strategy based on the data they collect and using subsequent data to assess progress toward addressing the challenge and its effects on each generation. We share some lessons from their rapid-cycle learning process in the next brief in this series.

OPRE's Portfolio on Coordinated Services

This project is part of a portfolio of research focused on coordinated services to support children and families. Projects within this research portfolio address the intentional coordination of two or more services. These projects span OPRE's program-specific research portfolios, including child care, Head Start, home visiting, child welfare, and welfare and family self-sufficiency. More information about OPRE's Coordinated Services projects can be found at https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/coordinated-services-research-and-evaluation-portfolio.

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Appendix A. Roadmap for Developing a Strategy to Address a Two-Generation Initiative Implementation Challenge

Your challenge

What is the current challenge? *Describe the problem using data to illustrate or support.*

What do you hope will change? *Write a short narrative to describe what would happen if the challenge was resolved. Specify intermediate and long-term outcomes that would change for parents and children, as well as for other relevant stakeholders (for example, program staff; the community).*

Intermediate outcome(s)	*Long-term outcome(s)*

How will you know if you're on the right track? *What short-term changes (to processes, outputs, or outcomes) do you want to see? These short-term changes are precursors to the intermediate and long-term outcomes you specified. Estimate when you could expect to see each short-term change.*

Short-term changes	*When do you expect to see results?*

What potential obstacles should you account for? *What could hinder the implementation of your strategy and/or the changes you hope to see?*

Your change strategy

What is the opportunity for change? *Frame your opportunity as a question beginning with the words "How might we…"*

How can you get a better outcome? *List the components of your strategy.*

Principles: What theories or beliefs explain the change?

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-
-

Processes: What activities will you do? Specify who is responsible for each activity.

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Products: What resources will support the change? Specify who is responsible for procuring or developing each resource.

-
-
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How will it get done? *List the supports you will provide for successful implementation.*

Motivation: How will you encourage, engage, and empower staff making the change? Specify who is responsible for each support.

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-
-
-

Capacity: How will you support staff knowledge, skills, and habits? Specify who is responsible for each support.

-
-
-
-

Organization: How will you support staff to execute the strategy? Specify who is responsible for each support.

-
-
-
-

What is the timeline for implementing your change strategy? *When will you start, when will you finish, and how will you check in on progress?*

Instructions: Follow the instructions below to complete each box on the worksheets. When completed, you will have a roadmap to guide implementation of your strategy.

Your challenge

What is the current challenge? Describe the challenge that you have chosen to focus on. Where possible, use data to describe the challenge.

What do you hope will change? Provide a narrative to describe what would happen if your challenge was resolved. List the intermediate (6-12 months) and long-term (12-18 months) outcomes that you hope would change if you successfully addressed your challenge. These may include outcomes for parents, children, families, or other relevant stakeholders, such as staff. They should align with the intended program outcomes in your logic model.

How will you know if you're on the right track? Think of a short-term outcome that would let you know you are on the right track. This could be a process outcome, such as observed staff behavior or an output, like an increase in the number of enrollments or participation. Set a concrete benchmark, or target, to achieve. Use existing data if possible. For example, if your current completion rate for a workshop is 60 percent, then set a benchmark to raise that rate by a reasonable amount, such as 15 points (a 25 percent improvement). For each benchmark, pick a date to assess whether you are on the right track. The date should be reasonable and take your program calendar into account. For example, if your workshop is 8 weeks long, then set a date that is 8 weeks from the date you plan to begin implementing your change strategy.

What potential obstacles should you account for? List the contextual factors that could get in the way of the strategy's success. These could be roadblocks within staff (e.g. change fatigue, lack of training), your organization (e.g. recent turnover, compliance-oriented organizational culture), the community (e.g. participants' limited access to transportation), or the broader policy environment (e.g. legislative requirements).

Your change strategy

What is the opportunity for change? The opportunity for change is a question, often beginning with the statement "How might we…", that reframes the challenge as an opportunity to try something new or different to strengthen two-generation implementation. The opportunity to change should address the root cause of the challenge you face and be specific to your program context and the population you serve.

How can you get a better outcome? This box should include a description of the strategy you want to try. It should provide an answer to your opportunity for change. The description should have three components: the theory behind the change (why you think it will work), the activities you will do, and the resources that support the change (such as trainings and materials).

How will it get done? List the supports that are necessary to successfully carry out your strategy. You should think about providing supports to address the potential obstacles you identified. Implementation supports can be thought of in three categories: *Motivation* (getting staff buy-in and engagement in carrying out the strategy with fidelity), *Capacity* (building staff knowledge and skills to successfully carry out the strategy), and *Organization* (removing barriers or providing support to make it easier for staff to execute the strategy).

What is the timeline for implementing your change strategy? Pick a date when you will begin implementing the strategy to hold yourself accountable. This could be the start of a new workshop, the date of a training, or a date by which you expect to be ready to implement the strategy. Give yourself time to be prepared, but not so much time that you lose momentum. Using the short-term outcomes as a guide, pick an end date for when you will assess whether your change strategy has been successful and what changes you might need to make. Indicate how frequently you will monitor implementation and check in on your progress.

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