

## What Are Evidence-Based Practices?

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are interventions that have been shown through scientific research to produce positive outcomes for people involved in the justice system. These practices have been rigorously tested across numerous jurisdictions and populations. Applying EBPs, then, is just following the science. Below are the most important EBPs to guide justice policy and decision making.

### EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES IN DAILY LIFE

The following are examples of evidence-based practices that we incorporate into our daily lives:

- **Brushing our teeth, which decreases germs that cause cavities**
- **Wearing seatbelts to reduce our risk of dying in an automobile accident**
- **Washing our hands, which reduces the spread of germs**

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### Use Actuarial Assessments

Each person in the justice system is different; similarly, the paths that lead them into and out of the system are different. Knowing the factors that lie beneath their behavior and the strengths they have to work on those factors will improve outcomes. Studies have shown that the most accurate way to determine a person's strengths, challenges, and likelihood of success is through actuarial assessments. These assessments are more accurate than using professional judgment alone.

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### Enhance Motivation to Change

While some people are motivated to change, others are not...or they may not be yet. Increasing motivation begins with developing professional alliance with the person and using motivational interviewing skills to help them explore and resolve their ambivalence about behavior change. Being strength-based, attentive, empathetic, nonjudgmental, and empowering is key.

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### Target Interventions

Research indicates that to help a person succeed, interventions should focus on those factors that most contribute to the person's harmful behavior: the factors identified using an assessment. And, the more factors targeted, the better—but not all at once. That would be far too overwhelming. There may be other challenges that would be helpful to address, but working on these would usually not lead to the behavior change that would most benefit the person.

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### Skill Train with Directed Practice

Often a lack of skills is behind a person's harmful behavior. For example, they may have difficulty problem solving, coping with stressful situations, controlling emotions, recognizing unhealthy friendships, or resolving conflict. Helping people build those skills is crucial to helping them change their behavior. One of the most effective ways to teach and learn a skill is through "social learning": modeling the skill for the person, practicing it together, reinforcing the person's efforts, increasing the difficulty of the practice, and encouraging the person to transfer their learning to their day-to-day environment.

### EFFECTIVE AND INEFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS

**Risk of recidivism can be reduced by 30% on average when effective interventions, such as cognitive behavioral programming and social learning, are applied. The following are examples of interventions that generally are *not* effective in reducing recidivism:**

- **Confinement or intensive supervision without risk reduction programming**
- **Boot camps focused only on discipline and physical activity**
- **Deterrence or fear-based programs (e.g., Scared Straight)**

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### Increase Positive Reinforcements

The justice system is good—maybe too good—at responding to noncompliance. Using incentives and rewards is a more effective way to encourage and reinforce positive behavior. Studies have shown that a combination of reinforcements and responses to noncompliance is the most effective way to promote positive behavior—with rewards outnumbering responses to noncompliance by a ratio of at least 4:1. Reinforcements can be extrinsic—words of praise, certificates of accomplishment, or gift cards—or they can be intrinsic, for example, a person’s knowledge that they have worked hard toward a goal. We also know that rewards are most effective when they are genuine, immediate, customized, specific, and meaningful to the person.

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### Engage Family and Community Support

The time that justice system professionals spend with someone and the information they learn about them from assessments paint only part of the picture. Family—whether a person’s nuclear family, extended family, close friends, or community members who offer support—can provide additional insight that helps those working with them better understand and support them. Family and community members can be a positive influence in a person’s life, for example, helping them practice new skills, reinforcing their positive behavior, and working with them to address issues such as housing, employment, transportation, and childcare—all of which can be barriers to people’s participation in programming and treatment.

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### Ensure Fidelity to Processes and Practices

Outcomes improve when processes and practices are implemented as intended—that is, with fidelity. Conversely, when implementation is flawed or when “drift”—the process of slowly departing from an endorsed, proven procedure—occurs, desired outcomes are less likely to be achieved. Quality assurance (QA) and continuous quality improvement (CQI) processes help ensure fidelity. With QA, an agency looks back in time to determine whether practices have been delivered as intended; with CQI, an agency uses feedback to facilitate incremental improvements in staff performance and organizational processes. To effectively implement QA and CQI—to determine if the evidence-based practices that agencies have adopted are producing the desired results—data is needed. But first, agencies must determine the specific areas for which they want to collect data, and they must define performance measures.

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### Use Data as a Guide

Following the science means not only gathering data on a frequent basis but also analyzing, sharing, and using the data to identify the specific improvements needed, develop an improvement plan, and ensure that improvements are successful. Data are useful for determining staffing levels, training needs, programming and service gaps, and technological requirements. Data can also document savings for reinvestment or areas where additional funding is needed. Data dashboards are one way to engage stakeholders and be accountable to taxpayers.

#### THE BENEFITS OF USING EBP

**Decades of experience demonstrate that aligning justice systems around evidence-based policies and practices offers the greatest promise of success. Using EBP will help agencies achieve their mission, improve outcomes, and maximize their resources.**