

Tips and Recommendations for Successfully Pilot Testing Your Program

A Guide for the Office of Adolescent Health and Administration on Children, Youth and Families Grantees

Simply put, a pilot is a trial run, a small-scale version of your larger project. A program pilot is an important step that can help you catch potential problems and prevent them from escalating as well as accomplish several goals before full implementation occurs. This tip sheet explores the advantages of pilot testing, explains how to prepare for pilot testing your program and provides general tips to consider when setting up your pilot test.

Why conduct a pilot test?

- **A pilot test will help confirm if you are ready for full-scale implementation.** A pilot test can serve as a trial run for your program and can help determine if any adjustments to your implementation plan or adaptations to the program are necessary. It can also reveal unforeseen challenges that might arise during implementation (i.e., issues with the setting and logistics, particular lessons or activities for which more staff training or attention may be necessary, etc.) and ensures that your staff are well prepared to handle issues that come up during the full-scale implementation.
- **Pilot testing is an opportunity to gauge your target population's reaction to the program.** It is best to select a pilot group that is demographically similar to your program's specific target population, also called the intervention group. The feedback from these youth can offer a glimpse into how the intervention group may respond to the curriculum. Most importantly, it can help confirm whether or not your program is a good fit for your population and whether minor adaptations to the program are appropriate and/or necessary.
- **Pilot testing can help you make better decisions about how to allocate time and resources.** Pilot testing your program can help you determine if you need to spend more time or resources on particular aspects of the program. For example, you might learn that changes to your recruitment strategy are necessary or that you need to allocate more time for completing the evaluation activities than you had originally anticipated.
- **Pilot testing can help ensure that you are well prepared to measure the success of your program.** A pilot test can highlight any adjustments to your evaluation plan that might be necessary to ensure that you are measuring the desired outcomes in the best way possible. The pilot test will be an opportunity to test your evaluation instruments as well. The pilot test will give the evaluation team and the implementation team a chance to work together before full implementation and troubleshoot any logistical issues that might arise with the distribution and collection of the evaluation data.

Are you ready to pilot test your program?

If you are ready to pilot test your program, you should have already taken several steps to prepare. Many of these steps are included in the logic model you developed for the project. Before you begin a pilot test, consider whether you have completed the following steps:

- Engaged a working group of community partners who are invested in your project and will meet regularly to discuss your progress, will provide input on the activities, and will champion your program in the community. This might include school personnel, staff from community-based organizations, faith leaders, parents, and youth themselves.
- Assessed your community's needs and assets (who are they, how do they behave, what other positive influences and negative influences might exist in their environment/community? What services or programs currently exist, and what gaps are there in the current services or programs?).
- Identified the core components and activities of your program and hired and trained staff with the skills to carry out those components.
- Chosen an evidence-based program that meets the needs and assets of your community.
- Developed a work plan and timeline to guide program implementation and to ensure that all tasks are completed as scheduled to successfully run the program.
- Selected a pilot test group, which may be at one of the sites where you have arranged to implement the full program or with a community partner organization with whom you have an existing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). If the pilot test is not at one of the sites where you will be implementing the full program, consider finding a site and a group of youth as similar as possible to the intervention group. You should have also considered how you will recruit and retain the youth for the duration of the program at the chosen site.
- Developed an evaluation plan and evaluation instruments/tools to capture the necessary information about changes in attitudes, knowledge, and behavior of the pilot group.

Helpful Tips for Pilot Testing

While every program is different, here are a few tips to ensure that your pilot test is successful:

- **Have a system in place to monitor and capture information about how well the program is working.** Since your pilot test is the best opportunity to learn what goes well and what doesn't before full-scale implementation, it's important to have a plan for soliciting feedback, tracking the activities and outcomes and recording any adjustments you make – or need to make – to the curriculum to get the desired results. For example, you may want to set up reflection time for facilitators after each session during the pilot test to give staff a chance to complete process evaluation forms that have been developed. These process evaluation forms will help to monitor fidelity/adaptations and will give facilitators a systematic way to report any issues that come up during each session (difficult questions, things that needed further explanation with the youth, what facilitators felt well prepared to address, issues with the setting and logistics, etc.). If you are not planning to develop process evaluation forms for the full-scale implementation and the developer does not include them in the curriculum, you might want to create simple forms for the pilot test to help record this feedback. You might also consider regularly soliciting brief feedback from the participants themselves to learn if facilitators might need more training on specific lessons or topics. It is critical that facilitators understand the importance of data collection and evaluation for this project and are well-trained to ensure that the relevant tasks are completed.

- **Implement according to your plan, and then adjust as necessary...** Once you have piloted the program as it is written, things may come to light about implementation you may not have considered. Think about creative ways to address issues that need more attention before full-scale implementation.
- **...But don't succumb to the temptation.** The pilot test will raise issues that may make it tempting to overhaul your plans, but remember these findings are preliminary. Make moderate adjustments as necessary, but resist the urge to make sweeping predictions or assumptions about the full-scale implementation based on these early findings. If you have chosen your program based on a recent assessment of the youth you plan to serve and of the needs and resources in the community, it is unlikely that a complete overhaul is necessary.
- **Share the good news and involve the community.** Though the results from your pilot test are not the same as evidence from a large-scale evaluation, it can provide you with some early information about positive effects that your program has on youth that can be shared with those in the community who are interested in your program, such as funders and policymakers. Do the youth enjoy the program? Do they report an increase in knowledge and positive attitudes about preventing teen pregnancy? Spread the information about your program being well-received with the caveat that the pilot test results are preliminary findings. For example, you might be able to say "early indications are that the program appears to help young people," based on the pilot test results, but probably could not say "we have evidence the program is reducing teen pregnancy." The pilot test is also a good opportunity to begin building community awareness and strengthening key partnerships, which will be important and helpful for a successful full-scale implementation as well as with sustainability of the project. You might consider inviting members of the community to a gathering to celebrate the kick-off of your project once you have compiled the results.

Additional Resources

More information about what to do before piloting your program is available in the *Little (PSBA) GTO* handbook available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at: <http://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/adolescentreprohealth/PDF/LittlePSBA-GTO.pdf>

More information about the advantages of a pilot test is available from the Center for Teaching and Learning at: <http://www.uis.edu/ctl/writing/documents/ctlths7.pdf>

More information about program replication is available in *Copy That: Guidelines for Replication Programs to Prevent Teen Pregnancy* available at: http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/CopyThat_FINAL.pdf

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