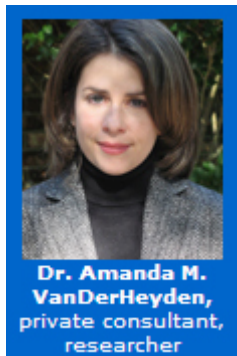


# Fidelity of Implementation Is Key



Most interventions that fail do so because they were never properly implemented. There is such a strong relationship between failing interventions and poor implementation integrity that integrity ought to be the first hypothesis tested before an intervention is abandoned.

## What is intervention integrity and why does it matter?

When an intervention does not work or does not work as well as expected, implementers typically question the efficacy of the intervention. A common scenario unfolds where the intervention is changed several times and then abandoned for a new intervention or no intervention. Intervention integrity, or the accuracy with which an intervention was implemented, is obviously essential to achieving intervention effects. When interventions fail, implementation integrity is not just one potential cause of failure, it is the most likely cause (assuming an adequate intervention was selected).

Research in the area of intervention integrity has consistently demonstrated a surprising pattern (Noell et al., 2004; Witt, Noell, LaFleur, & Mortenson, 1997). When users find an intervention acceptable, agree to use the intervention, are trained to use the intervention, are observed to use the intervention correctly following training, and are provided with all necessary materials to continue the intervention, research shows that most do not continue correct implementation beyond a few sessions. Hence, when interventions fail, integrity of implementation should be examined prior to concluding the intervention will not work and altering the intervention. This rather dismal appraisal of intervention implementation integrity is troubling where intervention effects may be used to determine the need for more intensive services and contribute to “high-stakes” decisions about which students might be in need of special education services. Indeed, intervention integrity is central to models of educational decision making where resources are allocated based on intervention response (or non-response).

## How should intervention integrity be assessed?

Research supports the use of direct measures of intervention integrity including (1) direct observation of the intervention, and (2) documentation of permanent products resulting from intervention use. Permanent products have been referred to as footprints of an intervention and include tangible items like completed worksheets or login data on a computer-based intervention that are generated when the intervention is used. Intervention integrity monitoring can be costly. However, the cost of not monitoring intervention integrity directly can lead to even more costly decision errors and wasted intervention efforts. Researchers are examining ways to reduce the costs of integrity assessment and management. Promising findings include using leaner schedules of monitoring (e.g., weekly, Mortenson & Witt, 1998) and tracking child performance (intervention response) data and examining integrity directly in cases where intervention response is inadequate (Gilbertson, Witt, Singletary, & VanDerHeyden, 2007).

## How can intervention integrity be ensured?

Certain elements of an intervention can be altered before it is begun to provide the best chance of correct implementation, including selecting an intervention that is acceptable to the teacher; selecting an intervention that is likely to work for the problem to which it is being applied, minimizing the complexity of the intervention and adapting the intervention to fit the natural classroom routine to the extent possible without reducing the efficacy of the intervention; training the teacher to implement the intervention using the actual intervention materials with the student in the situation where the intervention will be used;

providing a written script detailing all steps of the intervention; and providing all needed materials to conduct the intervention.

If implementers want interventions to work, they must provide follow-up support for correct and incorrect intervention use. This support has been referred to as performance feedback and involves collecting and sharing intervention usage data and student performance data with those responsible for implementing the intervention as an opportunity to correctly interpret intervention effects and to troubleshoot intervention implementation. Generally, an onsite intervention support person must be available to meet with intervention implementers and troubleshoot intervention implementation. Often relatively minor barriers to effective intervention use can be resolved if someone is on site and available to rapidly remove the barrier (e.g., intervention materials were unavailable). In other cases, integrity problems can be more intractable requiring consistent and persistent tracking and troubleshooting to ensure correct intervention use. In these cases, involving a school administrator may assist with attaining adequate intervention integrity. In cases where intervention response data are being used to reach decisions that are important for student success, schools owe it to students to directly measure and ensure intervention integrity. Where integrity problems are persistent and unresolved, decision makers must conclude that determining intervention success or nonsuccess is not possible.

## **Conclusion**

Intervention integrity is essential to attaining results for students and schools. Hence, systems must prioritize correct implementation and commit to support new interventions and troubleshoot implementation. Research shows that without support, interventions are likely not to be used. Research also shows that with up-front and follow-up support for implementation, interventions will be used and student learning will be improved. Rapidly emerging technological resources can help ensure correct intervention use. These resources include dashboard systems that organize student learning data and signal those responsible for implementation where the intervention is not being used or is not having the desired effect, software for tracking student data that signals when some students are not responding as expected to the intervention (again so that implementers can verify correct use and troubleshoot as needed), and even web-based consultation with other users who can share their experiences and ideas for enhancing intervention use and effects.

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