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## **A Formative Evaluation with Extension Educators: Exploring Implementation Approaches Using Web-based Methods**

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*The article describes the formative evaluation of a bullying prevention program called Be SAFE from the perspective of Extension educators. Twelve regional and county educators from Family and Child Development and 4-H Youth Development participated in our study. We used a web-based, mixed methods approach, utilizing both Qualtrics, an online survey software platform, and Scopia, a video conferencing application, to collect survey data and do a focus group. The results of the survey show that three activities, Clear Mind, Mud Mind, Take a Stand, and The Relationship Continuum, were perceived as garnering the most participation from students. However, focus group data indicated that while there was often a high level of participation, the subject matter of the curriculum was too advanced for students in the fifth grade and that classroom size affected how well educators could teach lessons. Furthermore, school access was not an implementation challenge, but the amount of days available to implement the full curriculum was sometimes limited. The data collected through this formative evaluation were used to improve implementation efforts. The process outlined in this article can be used as a model to help program leaders who are interested in using web-based tools to evaluate implementation processes.*

*Keywords:* evaluation, formative evaluation, implementation research, synchronous focus group, online survey

### **Introduction**

Extension educators have long known the importance and necessity of evaluating the outcomes of their programs and services (Rennekamp & Arnold, 2009). While all curricula have learning outcomes, understanding implementation practices is also an important area in the program development and evaluation process. Formative evaluation is a tool that can be used to assess the implementation practices of a program during its evaluation efforts (Dane & Schneider, 1998; Duerden & Witt, 2012; Dusenbury, Brannigan, Hansen, Walsh, & Falco 2005). Formative evaluation is “an assessment that focuses on the internal dynamics and actual operations of a program in order to understand its strengths, weaknesses and changes that occur in it over time”

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(Scriven, 1996). Chambers (1994) also asserts that formative evaluation provides the data needed to modify the initial intervention and its delivery so that the final program is more effective.

Data from the implementation process provides Extension program leaders insight into how their programs are working, ways they can be improved, and techniques educators use to conduct programs in communities (Duerden & Witt, 2012). Since implementation varies widely, a program implemented in multiple sites may experience varying degrees of success due to different degrees of program integrity (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). In order to capture the nuances of program implementation, this paper discusses the process of conducting a formative evaluation with Extension educators implementing an anti-bullying program called *Be SAFE*.

Alabama Cooperative Extension System is using a collaborative approach between Family and Child Development regional educators and 4-H Youth Development regional and county educators to work to reduce bullying behaviors in Alabama schools. Students at participating schools are engaged in a seven-week series using a curriculum called *Be SAFE: Safe, Affirming, and Fair Environments* (Olsen & Pace, 2013) that teaches students about physical, verbal, and indirect bullying (rumors, etc.), as well as cyberbullying. The curriculum takes a positive youth development approach, largely focusing on promoting the development of emotional and social intelligence and offering ways to help youth become allies when they observe bullying behaviors (Olsen & Pace, 2013). This article describes our effort to gather information on the strengths and challenges of implementing *Be SAFE* from the perspective of Extension educators.

## Methods

Online software was used to conduct a mixed method study on the implementation of *Be SAFE*. A mixed method approach was used to understand implementation strengths and challenges from more than one perspective (for review of mixed methods, see Newman, Ridenour, Newman, & DeMarco, 2003). We used a sequential transformative design in our study, collecting quantitative data first, then qualitative data. In accordance with the design, no priority was given to either form of data, and the data were analyzed together (Handon, Creswell, Plano Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005). The sequential transformative design was used because it ensures that the voices of diverse and alternative perspectives are heard (Handon et al., 2005).

### Quantitative Data Collection

Survey data about the implementation of *Be SAFE* were collected through the online survey design tool, Qualtrics (Qualtrics; Provo, UT). Qualtrics was used because it generates customized surveys that are easy to create and are in accordance with IRB protections. Educators who implemented *Be SAFE* were sent a non-identifying link to the survey to collect

data anonymously. Twelve out of the thirteen Extension educators who implemented Be SAFE completed the survey. The survey questions specifically asked about their perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum (e.g., Based on your experience, which lesson was the most difficult to implement? Based on your observation, which lessons had the most participation? Which activity did you find the most difficult to get participation? According to your observations, which activities had the greatest impact on students?) The next section asked educators to rate their overall experiences using a 3-point Likert scale (exceeds expectations, equals expectations, short of expectations). They ranked the following areas: activities in the curriculum, the length of time they had to complete the activities, the number of lessons they are required to do, and the overall level of youth participation during the program. Quantitative data collected were based on the perceptions of the educators and are subjective.

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

Synchronous focus groups were conducted with six of the twelve regional and county educators using the video conferencing software, Scopio (Version 8.2.1; Avaya; Santa Clara, CA). Synchronous focus groups are characterized by participants engaging in a chat room or online conferencing forum at the same time (Murray, 1997). In online synchronous focus groups, participants speak and type their comments over the course of the session. A running transcript of these comments is continuously visible to all of the participants. As in face-to-face focus groups, the moderator follows a written moderator's guide, and the participants share their opinions (Gaiser, 1997). While there has been some debate about the effectiveness of online focus groups (Schneider, Kerwin, Frechtling, & Vivari, 2002), there are clear advantages when collecting data from both county and regional educators located across the state. For example, online focus groups are inexpensive because they do not require a meeting room, refreshments, video recording, or travel (Landreth, 1998). While online focus groups allow people to attend meetings without transportation constraints, it is also easier to opt out of attendance, as was the case in our focus group. While all thirteen educators were invited, only six logged in to our chat room.

In order to facilitate discussion, four open-ended questions were asked (What were some strategies you used to engage youth during the activities in the curriculum? Did you do anything outside of the curriculum? If so, what did you do that was outside of the curriculum during implementation? What were some of the challenges of implementing the curriculum?). With participant approval, the session was recorded.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics for each item. Response tables were generated through Qualtrics that include percentages and ranks for each question. Qualitative

data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). Data from the written chat transcript and the transcript from the recorded session were read by the two authors and coded inductively. During analysis, specific themes were developed based on repeated words and phrases that captured core messages reported.

## Findings and Discussion

### Quantitative Assessment of Strengths

Educators were asked to indicate which lessons they perceived to have the highest level of student participation and involvement. They were also asked to indicate which lessons they thought had the greatest learning impact. Table 1 shows that the activity, *Clear Mind, Mud Mind*, had the highest level of participation from youth. Educators indicated that *The Relationship Continuum Activity, Take a Stand, and Who am I* lessons had the next highest rates of participation.

As it relates to perceived learning outcomes, Table 1 also indicates that *Clear Mind, Mud Mind* was perceived as having the greatest impact, *Take a Stand* had the second highest percentage, followed by an even percentage ranking for *The Relationship Continuum Activity, Who am I, What Makes Bullying Real to You, and Speaking up and Standing With: Skills for Being an Ally*.

**Table 1. Activities with the Greatest Strengths**

Lesson Name	Rate of Participation	Greatest Learning Outcomes
Standing up Assertive versus Aggressive Responses	8%	23%
Speaking up and Standing With: Skills for Being an Ally	15%	46%
What's the Difference Activity	15%	38%
Taking Action to Stop Cyberbullying	23%	23%
What Makes Bullying Real for You	23%	46%
Who Am I	31%	46%
Take a Stand	38%	54%
The Relationships Continuum Activity	46%	46%
Clear Mind, Mud Mind: Understanding State of Mind	62%	69%

### Quantitative Assessment of Challenges

Educators were asked to indicate which lessons they perceived to be the most difficult to implement and which activities they perceived to be the most difficult to get participation. Table

2 shows that forty-six percent of the educators indicated that both nothing in the curriculum was difficult to implement as well as there was not an activity in the curriculum that was difficult to get student participation. Three activities, *Who Am I*, *The Relationship Continuum Activity*, and *Speaking up and Standing With: Skills for Being an Ally*, had similar percentage rates as it relates to difficulty in implementation and student participation.

**Table 2. Activities with the Most Challenges**

<b>Lesson Name</b>	<b>Found the Lesson Difficult to Implement</b>	<b>Found the Lesson Difficult to Get Student Participation</b>
Take a Stand	0%	0%
What Makes Bullying Real for You	8%	8%
Clear Mind, Mud Mind: Understanding State of Mind	8%	8%
What's the Difference Activity	8%	8%
Taking Action to Stop Cyberbullying	8%	0%
Standing up Assertive versus Aggressive Responses	15%	0%
Speaking up and Standing With: Skills for Being an Ally	15%	15%
The Relationships Continuum Activity	15%	15%
Who Am I	15%	15%
Nothing was difficult to implement	46%	46%

Overall, we found that the activity, *Clear Mind, Mud Mind*, had the highest observed level of participation and was perceived as having the greatest learning outcomes for youth participants. When asked about the difficulty of implementation, educators indicated that there was very little difficulty, and most of the activities from the curriculum had adequate participation. While the survey provided important information about educator experiences, the study would have been strengthened by utilizing objective measures of implementation process and skill. Although this is a limitation in our quantitative data, our qualitative data provide more information to help understand the implementation experiences of educators.

### **Qualitative Assessment of Strengths and Challenges**

Analysis of the focus group data generated three themes related to the strengths and challenges of implementing Be SAFE: access into schools, the grade level of participants, and the classroom size (numerical and spatial).

**School access.** School access is often cited as an issue for many programs; however, it was not cited as an implementation challenge by our educators. The positive experiences of our

Extension educators can be attributed to the positive relationships we have with schools and our history of helpful, effective programming. The ease of access in schools can also be attributed to the high need for bullying prevention in schools. Administrators understand that bullying prevention efforts are legally mandated for all schools in Alabama, particularly as they relate to adopting measures to prevent harassment and creating a plan of action when bullying is reported (Crain, 2012). Therefore, Be SAFE achieves an important actionable step for schools.

Although educators have experienced minimal resistance gaining access to schools, the length of time allotted to educators in each school has varied. When asked about school access, regional and county educators stated that some schools welcomed the seven-day series saying, “They were happy for me to come as many times as I needed,” while other schools preferred a one-time presentation. One agent stated, “I enjoyed doing the PowerPoint presentation at the schools because most principals were more willing to have me or some trained leaders come and present, rather than doing a series of lessons.” The range of time allotted raised questions about reducing the number of activities offered. During the focus group, we presented a chart of all of the activities in order to determine which ones to remove. However, instead of omitting lessons, educators suggested combining lessons to help reduce the days spent in each school. Lessons were thus combined so that Be SAFE could be implemented in five days instead of seven days.

**Participant grade level.** Be SAFE is a curriculum designed for youth ages 11–14; therefore, Extension educators conducted the program in fifth through eighth grades. Feedback from the educators indicated that participation was highest in sixth and seventh grades. The educators’ perception of the students’ comprehension and interpretation of specific lessons was consistently connected to the age and maturity level of the students in their class. In particular, educators reported that maturity, as it relates to youth behavior, affected the classroom environment. Maturity, as a psychosocial construct, is the capacity to function adequately on one's own, to contribute to social cohesion, and to interact adequately with others (Greenberger & Sorensen, 1974). In the context of implementing Be SAFE, youth’s ability to contribute to social cohesion and interact adequately with others was challenging for some students in the fifth grade. One educator stated, “the fifth graders didn’t take the program very seriously in the same way sixth graders did . . . especially during some of the activities.” Another agent stated, “Sometimes they were just not as well behaved.” Furthermore, cognitive maturity was also perceived to play a role in younger youth’s ability to participate in and understand certain concepts and activities. During our focus group discussion, an educator stated, “Each class, the wording of the curriculum had to be explained to the fifth graders.” Another educator agreed by stating, “Yes, it was hard to explain some of the concepts to the fifth graders.”

In contrast, one educator reported that her experiences implementing the curriculum with fifth, sixth, and seventh grade students led her to believe that seventh grade, around age 13, was the ideal age for the range of activities. Research suggests that during early adolescence, individuals

show marked improvements in reasoning (especially deductive reasoning), information processing (in both efficiency and capacity), and expertise (Keating, 2004). Since many of the activities require students to process through bullying scenarios and to reflect on how their individual actions can affect others, it is conceivable that cognitively, some things were too advanced for many fifth graders. As it relates to psychosocial maturation, research suggests that as youth mature, there are increases in self-control and a stronger resistance to peer influence (Monahan, Steinberg, Cauffman, & Mulvey, 2009; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1996). These two factors could have contributed to educators experiencing a less challenging classroom setting when working with older adolescents. In response to these observations, we determined that the lowest grade level for implementation would be the sixth grade.

**Classroom size.** The implementation of Be SAFE was affected by the physical classroom size and the number of students. According to Finn and Achilles (1999), smaller classes allow less time to be spent on classroom management and more time to be spent on instruction, while larger classes constrain teaching and learning interactions. The Extension educators in our focus group reported similar findings. During our discussion, it was clear that large classroom settings were the most difficult context in which to implement the program. It was not only the number of students but the classroom space that made a difference. The Extension educators specifically talked about implementing the curriculum activities in gym spaces, which they noticed created a context that reduced participation and created more opportunities for disciplinary problems. One agent stated, “The larger the class, the harder it is to complete the lessons and activities.” Another agent stated, “It is hard to get everyone’s attention and keep it in such a large space. It was really challenging.” Since this educator felt that she was losing fidelity to the program, she decided to stop the series and do a one-time presentation. Educators who implemented the curriculum in smaller classroom settings enjoyed more class participation. One agent stated that in her small group of students, everyone was engaged and she had no problems getting through the curriculum. As a result, we decided that if schools cannot provide a classroom for implementation, educators should do a one-time assembly instead of a series.

Overall, school access, grade level of participants, and classroom size were discussed in depth by educators. While school access was not an issue, the length of time educators were allowed to implement Be SAFE varied. Classroom size was also important to the perceived participation of the students. Large classroom settings and large class sizes were difficult to manage, while smaller classroom settings and sizes were more manageable. The grade level of participants was also important to understanding why some lessons may have had lower rates of participation. When examining the activities, *Who Am I*, *The Relationship Continuum Activity*, and *Speaking up and Standing With: Skills for Being an Ally*, it is apparent that these activities require higher level thinking skills by youth to problem solve and be introspective about their lives. While we learned valuable information about the implementation process, we would have benefited from

having all of the educators participate in a focus group. The data only reflect the experiences of half of the individuals who are implementing the program.

### Conclusion

We used the data collected through the formative evaluation to understand the strengths and challenges of implementing Be SAFE and to improve the implementation quality of the program. We shared a report of our findings with those who were not able to join the focus group and included the lessons learned from Extension educators in the field during our next program training meeting. We also used the formative evaluation to reduce the number of lessons implemented by the educator from seven lessons to five.

Through formative evaluation with Extension educators, we were able to foster a space for dialogue between educators in the community and state specialists. Our use of web-based technologies allowed us, at a low cost, to discuss strengths, challenges, and effective implementation strategies for the Be SAFE program. Overall, the evaluation data provided valuable information that can enhance the assistance we give educators who are newly joining the project.

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