

Developing Child Welfare Practice Frameworks

A San Diego County
Case Study

October 2016



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Safety Enhanced Together: Why, What, and How

A Brief Overview from County of San Diego Child Welfare Services Perspective

In 2010, the County of San Diego Child Welfare Services (CWS) began on a journey to strengthen our agency's approach to serving children and families when we implemented Safety-Organized Practice (SOP). As we began to adopt SOP, we saw some promising outcomes, but knew that SOP did not define our organization as a whole.

We began to explore ways to integrate SOP with best case practices such as: trauma-informed practice, Quality Parenting Initiative (QPI), Pathways to Well-Being, and cultural responsiveness, while also firmly establishing Child Welfare as a learning organization and strengthening our Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) process. We determined that creating a practice framework that defined our vision, top priorities and core values was the next step in enriching our practice.

We quickly realized this would be a vast undertaking and sought out contracted support from National Council on Crime and Delinquency Children's Research Center, Harder+Company Community Research, and experts in the field, like Dr. Anita Barbee, to assist in this endeavor. We partnered with them to understand the research in the field of practice frameworks, establish the best strategy to create one for San Diego, and plan for the project ahead.

After those internal preparations, we formed work groups of former foster youth, birth parents, foster parents and a cross section of child welfare staff from each region and main classifications to inform the development of our practice framework, Safety Enhanced Together (SET). From June 2012 through February 2015, the development and implementation teams along with many subcommittees worked to establish the framework, rooted in SOP and incorporating each of our initiatives. From this work we created our vision, defined our top three priorities, and six core values. With each core value, concrete behavioral details were compiled to explain what each value looks like in day to day practice for line staff, supervisors, and managers. Our CQI case and referral review tools were updated to reflect our now consistent standards and key expectations to infuse SET actions and to evaluate the fidelity to SET and have a way to grow the practice. Additionally, a rating scale was developed for the tools ranging from Novice to Emerging, Accomplished, Distinguished, and Master; with Accomplished being the goal for practice fidelity. It is important to note that feedback from every level of staff within CWS was sought out at every major decision point in the development of SET.

Once SET was established, we knew we could not leave it at the development on paper; we needed to build awareness and continue to have a focus on it while it took root in the organization. The Learning Cycle format was utilized from July 2015 through May 2016 to give line staff, supervisors, and managers the opportunity to understand the values of SET, critically think about how the values can shape and shift practice, and begin to take action steps. It also helped to identify successful practices and challenges and brainstorm solutions to best support implementation of SET.

Developing Child Welfare Practice Frameworks

Over the last year since CQI tools have been in use and the Learning Cycles have been conducted, over 500 SET referral and case reviews have been completed. Some preliminary findings we are proud of are:

- An increase of “accomplished” use of SOP in referrals from 21% to 28%
- An increase of accomplished use of SOP in cases from 30% to 68%

With implementation complete, we still have next steps we are excited to take to further sustain SET as the way we do our work. Some of these include: a pilot beginning September 2016 of Quality Supervision tools, a fidelity assessment, aligning our internal and external CWS websites, embedding the values and practice behaviors in trainings and policy, and adapting our practice behaviors for our administrative support staff.

A practice frame work can take several years to fully implement and to show fidelity to the model. We are committed to continuing to build awareness and measure our progress so that we can link the actions to better long term outcomes for the children and families we serve. 🇺🇸

Introduction

Across the nation, child welfare systems are considering the critical role that social worker practice plays in producing better outcomes for children, youth, and families. They are turning to approaches, such as safety-organized practice (SOP) and structured decision making® (SDM), as guides to social worker practice. Yet, these individual approaches are often introduced to social workers independent of one another and are disconnected from an overarching vision or unified support structure. In 2011, the Children’s Bureau of the Office of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) sought to address this issue by developing a relevant, accessible, and practical guide to design, test, spread, and sustain effective practice in child welfare.¹ The result was the beginning of a practice framework. The ACF encouraged CWS agencies across the nation to develop practice frameworks tailored to their context to explain and integrate existing approaches and initiatives, and to create a framework for addressing organizational factors such as leadership; organizational culture, climate, and structure; workforce development; and evaluation necessary to ensuring success.

This paper outlines the practice framework implementation in the County of San Diego’s CWS department, one of 58 county-administered departments in the state of California. In particular, it identifies the specific steps San Diego took in translating the conceptual and visionary aspects of the practice framework into observable and measurable social worker practice. CWS leadership and staff worked closely with Jennifer James and Casey Mackereth, from Harder+Company Community Research, to design a comprehensive implementation process that addressed all staff levels, organizational processes, and structures.

The County of San Diego Child Welfare Services (CWS) was an early adopter of the practice framework concept in California. CWS leadership recognized that practice frameworks are an opportunity to:

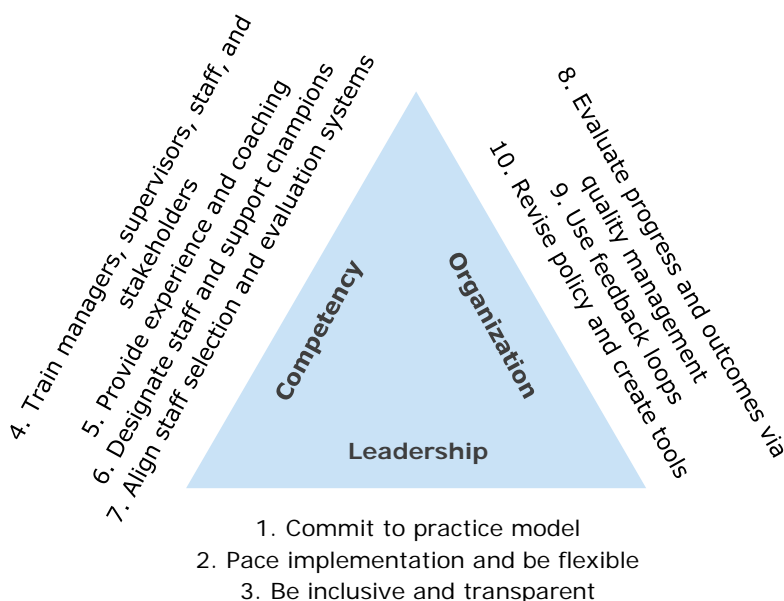
1. clearly define how, why, and what CWS does;
2. provide clear, written explanations of policies and procedures of how services should be provided (with flexibility); and
3. establish key metrics of optimal child welfare practice.

Implementation Science and Change Management

The importance of process. Practice frameworks are powerful guiding documents for establishing shared understanding of agency practice.² However, these frameworks are only fully realized when an intentional process to support the framework’s implementation is established. With this in mind, we developed an implementation process that incorporated two complimentary processes—implementation science and change management.

- **Implementation science.** Implementation science is based on the concept that three integrated drivers are essential to putting frameworks into practice: leadership, organization, and competency (Exhibit 1).³ Agencies may start with any of these drivers, but in the end, all are linked and contribute to successful implementation. Leaders in the implementation science field note the paramount importance of *leadership* in the implementation science triangle.⁴ To strengthen the *competency* and

Exhibit 1. Implementation Drivers



organization legs of the triangle, we added elements of organizational change management to our process.

- **Change management.** *Organizational* change management uses methods intended to re-direct the use of resources, business processes, budget allocations, or other modes of operation to significantly reshape individuals and teams within the organization. It assumes that change within an organization is larger than executive leadership, and requires concerted, coordinated, and sustained reworking of multiple work systems.⁵ With this in mind, our team helped design the internal communications, articulating current strategy, vision, and values; knowledge management, including how current tools and practices are reorganized to align to Safety Enhanced Together (SET); culture, through developing a learning-based, personal change dialogue; and risk/rewards, aligning with the continuous quality improvement (CQI) process that would optimally position the practice framework's implementation.

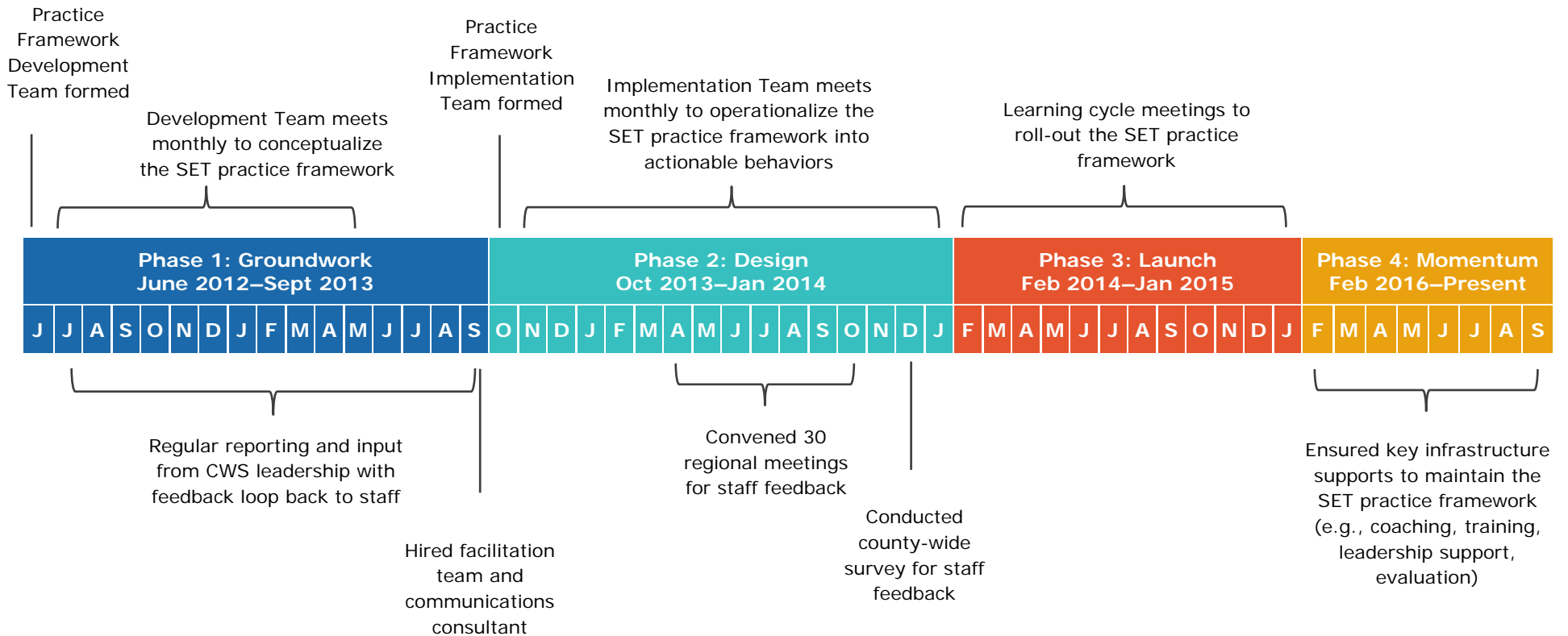
By combining the elements of implementation science and change management, we developed a robust implementation process that both influenced individual behavior and structured the organizational processes in order to "hard wire" the change into the entire County of San Diego CWS system.

San Diego Child Welfare Services Practice Framework Development

After AFC's missive to create practice frameworks, California began to develop the California Child Welfare Core Practice Model to guide a more consistent statewide approach for CWS. At the same time, San Diego CWS leadership voluntarily began to plan, prepare, and organize their own practice framework. Through a robust and inclusive process, San Diego CWS leadership led the development of the SET San Diego practice framework.

Over the past five years, the County of San Diego's CWS underwent a change process that fell into four distinct phases: (1) lay the groundwork for organizational change; (2) design the tools and processes; (3) launch the practice framework; and (4) maintain the momentum of a learning organization. The remainder of this article will review steps related to each phase and the requisite investments of time and resources required to successfully implement the work. 🏠

Exhibit 2. Overall San Diego County Practice Framework Development and Implementation Timeline



Phase 1: Lay the Groundwork for Organizational Change

The initial phase in the process sought to highlight the agency's needs while ensuring that it had the capacity to implement a practice framework to address those needs. The steps in this phase included (1) identifying the approach, (2) establishing goals and priorities, and (3) ensuring and investing in the infrastructure to support change.

Step 1: Identify the approach. San Diego's CWS has multiple emerging and established initiatives and practices. In 2006, CWS implemented the SDM system to increase consistency, equitability, and accuracy of decision making. In 2010, CWS added the family-centered, solution-focused engagement skills of SOP to enhance overall outcomes. CWS leadership recognized that these approaches, as well as the myriad of other intersecting practices, including trauma-informed practice⁶ and pathways to well-being,⁷ were all critical, but lacked an overarching unifying vision and model.

CWS first considered a theory of change approach to providing this unifying model. This approach attempted to organize the work through a description and illustration of how and why CWS is using particular practices and the anticipated results they will achieve. However, the linear nature of the theory of change approach did not match the complexity and dynamic nature of social work, nor did it provide a clear roadmap for social workers in their practice.

The practice model approach under consideration at both the federal and state levels offered a more appropriate method to developing a San Diego-specific conceptual map. A San Diego-specific practice framework could support practitioners to rationalize the various tools and initiatives that CWS adopted over the years by embedding them in a set of values and principles that are essential to child welfare work. With the approach identified, CWS needed to develop the core guiding vision, values, and principles.

Step 2: Establish goals and priorities. CWS leadership recognized that they needed broad agency participation to create buy-in of the practice framework and to re-emphasize that this is not an additional activity for social workers, but a way to organize and clarify the current initiatives and approaches. Given the County of San Diego's size and its decentralized management structure,⁸ CWS leadership thoughtfully assembled a team of staff—the PFDT—from multiple levels, regions, and units in June 2012 to define the framework's main elements. The PFDT not only included CWS staff from all levels but also included parent partners,⁹ alumni youth, and foster parents. The broad base of stakeholders ensured that the core elements were informed by many perspectives and that both agency and community end-users would be invested in the outcome. For nearly a year (July 2012–May 2013), the PFDT met monthly to develop the agency's new mission statement, logo, top three priority statements, and core value and principle statements. The PFDT named the agency's new practice framework Safety Enhanced Together (SET) Through Teamwork and Family Engagement: In San Diego, Our Families are SET to *Live Well*.


CWS: What It Took

Establishing Goals and Priorities

- Convened a voluntary Practice Framework Development Team (PFDT) that represented child welfare, including CWS staff, parent partners, alumni youth, and foster parents
- Held 11 PFDT meetings over a period of nearly a year to develop core guiding elements, including logo, vision, priorities, values, and guiding principles
- Instituted internal CWS feedback loop: presentations by PFDT team members to their programs & regions to get further ideas and to see how they resonated

Step 3: Invest in the infrastructure to support change. Once the general elements of the SET Practice Framework were completed, the next step was to operationalize these concepts in social worker practice. Leadership brought in a process design and facilitation team from Harder+Company Community Research, a California-based consulting firm, to develop and guide the process. The Harder+Company team co-designed a process that included

1. regular meetings of a SET Implementation Team (IT): a cross-regional and cross-unit team that would consider how to operationalize SET's visionary elements;
2. a comprehensive staff engagement process to vet the work of the IT and to support concept adoption at multiple levels;
3. a comprehensive communications and marketing approach, including intranet redesign, videos, and collateral material, to reinforce the SET message; and
4. a process for launching the work once completed.

The steps in Phase 1 created the foundational elements and support needed for Phase 2. 

CWS: What It Took

Investments to Support Change

- Hired professional support to co-develop and facilitate the process (approximately 1,000 contracted hours per year)
- Hired a communications consultant to help create narratives and visuals to support culture change (approximately 250 hours per year)

Phase 2: Design Tools and Processes to Move the SET Practice Framework into Action

In Phase 2, Harder+Company Community Research facilitated translating the SET values into observable social worker actions. This phase also began to lay the foundation for quality improvement and necessary policy revisions. The steps in this phase included (1) operationalizing the SET practice framework into actionable behaviors; (2) engaging staff from all regions to build on and clarify the work of the PFDT, ensuring their focus and building buy-in; (3) developing the narrative and managing the knowledge and; (4) developing a CQI process.

Step 1: Operationalize SET practice framework into actionable behavior.

The SET IT was established in October 2013 to identify observable, actionable behaviors that would signal the use of SET values and principles. Once identified, these behaviors would be used for training, communications, and for the CQI process needed to ensure fidelity. Similar to Phase 1's Development Team, the IT was intentionally selected to be inclusive of staff at all levels of CWS. Over the next 16 months, Harder+Company facilitated this group to develop observable agency practices and behaviors for each of the six values. Each value had six core steps:

- 1. Initial value meeting.** This meeting included a general presentation and group discussion to ensure a shared understanding of the value and associated principles. The group chose one principle to collectively answer two questions: (1) "What practices will line staff exhibit to show the value in action?" and (2) "What behavior, skills, or tasks will be present for us to know they are happening?" This activity created a common frame of inquiry and understanding of the value. For the remainder of the meeting, the group split into small groups and used the same two questions to develop the remaining principles.
- 2. Homework.** Between the initial value meeting and the follow-up meeting, the IT broke into "homework groups" that met to further refine the practices and behaviors of the value in action. Homework was sent to the facilitation team for compilation.
- 3. Sharing and refining practices.** The group reconvened to review one another's work. Each practice and behavior was reviewed and discussed, and real time changes were made to the document. The gradients of agreement were used to ensure full buy-in.¹⁰

Step 2: Engage staff from all units and functions to verify the work of the Design Team, ensure their focus, and build buy-in. CWS leadership recognized that all staff should have input on the practice behaviors for them to be adopted in everyday use. The Harder+Company team developed a process for 1300 staff across the county to see how each value's practices and behaviors resonated with workers at regional meetings and to give staff the opportunity to modify the language for further buy-in. The facilitation team coached IT

CWS: What It Took

Operationalizing SET Principles

- 20 staff volunteered 100 hours over a year, in addition to their normal work, to devote to the IT meetings and "homework" in between meetings. These staff ensured the input of staff from all regions and functions and became "SET Champions" for their units.

CWS: What It Took

Staff Engagement

- Convened regional meetings to poll all CWS staff agreement with the defined observable behaviors (a total of 30 meetings)
- Surveyed staff for input

representatives in presentation of the values, provided them with a PowerPoint and script, and supplied polling equipment to gather real-time agreement from all staff on each principle's practices. The polling equipment was particularly powerful because it publically displayed average scoring about how each practice and behavior resonated with the group. It also gathered the level of agreement of each practice and behavior by level of staff, region, and unit. This offered valuable information to CWS leadership about what may require more support for implementation.

Results from the region were shared at the IT meeting and adjustments were made. Final behaviors were presented and verified with staff via a county-wide survey. The final product was a SET practice standards workbook that outlined values, principles, and agency practices along with key social worker, supervisor, and manager behaviors for distribution.

Step 3: Develop the narrative, manage the knowledge. Implementation science tells us that an approach such as SET must be consistently and systematically implemented. Recognizing that targeted, timely, and consistent delivery of SET messaging is key to facilitating the new practice framework, Harder+Company hired a communications consultant to: (1) re-design the CWS intranet for staff to have ready access to SET information, including to interactive diagrams (e.g., case flow diagrams) and to connect staff to key SET tools and resources; (2) create video clips and case studies to help staff think about and clarify what each SET value means for them in their everyday work; and (3) create SET posters, handouts, brochures, and other documents for both internal CWS and community partners and families use to clearly articulate SET vision and values.¹¹

Step 4: Develop a CQI process. Harder+Company worked closely with the CWS CQI team to redesign key elements for CQI. A key purpose of SET is to organize the evidence-based practices CWS staff used under a common approach. CQI was specifically redesigned to address SET and serves the dual purpose of assessing effective, consistent implementation (fidelity to SET as an evaluation measure) and providing the necessary information to support individual, unit, and departmental improvements. This included re-designing CWS's case and referral review tools to detect if case practice is consistent with the SET key expectations. The fidelity assessment process is intended to strengthen the ability to detect challenges and improve training, coaching, and system support for the practice framework.

With the learning tools and processes in place, CWS was poised for a comprehensive launch of the SET practice model. 🏠

CWS: What It Took

Narrative Development and Knowledge Management

- Dedicated IT staff to re-design intranet with the communications consultant
- Creation of collateral materials, including video clips, case studies, posters, handouts, and brochures
- Dedicated policy analyst to assist with the design, review, approval, and dissemination of all materials

CWS: What it Took

CQI Redesign

- Re-designed case and referral review tools (1,000 hours put into 24 drafts)
- Pilot test these tools (over 800 reviews in a 15 month period of time)
- Ongoing review of CQI data

Phase 3: Practice Framework and Learning Cycles Launch

In keeping with implementation science's focus on the appropriate pace of implementation, we rolled out SET values over approximately one year. This built commitment through inclusive and transparent communication. This phase also began to lay the foundation for quality improvement and necessary policy revisions. The steps in this phase included (1) developing a staff learning process, (2) facilitating staff learning and goal setting, and (3) engaging leadership to make real-time changes to support SET implementation.

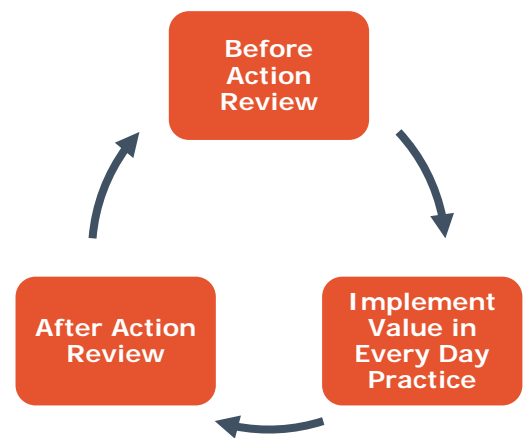
Step 1: Develop a staff learning process. The Harder+Company facilitation team worked with CWS to develop a learning cycle implementation process. A learning cycle is a reflective learning approach to nurturing an organizational culture in which all levels of leadership and staff intentionally implement SET. Learning cycles were rolled out over the course of a year, one for each SET value, to pace learning, practice, and reflection. Each learning cycle followed three basic steps, including

1. a Before Action Review (BAR)¹² to understand the SET value and to provide a dedicated space and process for staff to consider how they demonstrate the value in their practice
2. an implementation of the SET value in everyday practice for two months, and
3. an After Action Review (AAR)¹³ for staff to consider how they demonstrated the SET value in their practice and what additional supports they needed to fully realize the value in their everyday practice.

BAR and AAR results were summarized and presented to CWS leadership to make real-time changes to policy and practice to support SET implementation.

Step 2: Facilitate staff learning and goal setting. Over 12 months, the six SET values were rolled out according to the SET learning cycle design to all 800 social workers, supervisors, and managers by region across the County. Staff were purposely invited to attend learning cycles within their regional cohorts (facilitated by their peers in each region) to promote peer-to-peer conversation and authenticity. At each BAR meeting, SET Champions used a facilitator's guide developed by Harder+Company to lead the conversation. The meeting included a presentation of the value aided by a tailored video that featured San Diego CWS staff talking about the value in practice, guided questions that staff worked on individually and then reported out as a group, and goal setting for the next two months. Individual work was recorded in SET reflection worksheets, and facilitators recorded the group's conversation and their own insights in an online journal that was submitted to the Harder+Company team. After two months of putting the value into action, the SET learning cycle groups reconvened to review what they thought they would achieve (as they identified in their BAR), what they actually achieved, and what additional supports they may need for the future.

Exhibit 3. The SET Learning Cycle



CWS: What it Took

SET Learning Process Development

- Approved "SET Champion" time to lead learning cycle meetings
- Utilized SOP Coaches to provide ongoing support to CWS teams
- Leadership approved time and encouraged staff to attend learning cycle meetings
- Leadership identified and communicated to staff solutions highlighted in the SET learning cycle summaries

Step 3: Engage leadership to make real-time changes to support SET implementation. After each learning cycle's BAR and AAR, the Harder+Company team summarized key findings for review by CWS leadership. Leadership prioritized discussion of results, identified ways they could address challenges and support SET practice, and communicated to all CWS staff expectations and changes. Examples of changes they implemented included reallocation of funds to ensure the financial and personnel resources that are needed, training modifications, and outreach or education to organizational partners.

The steps in this intensive phase reflected several best practices in implementation science, including (1) CWS paced the work to ensure digestibility of the change requested; (2) CWS established a consistent message about how the practice framework will support staff work; and (3) CWS nurtured champions at multiple levels within the organization. They ensured broad-based agency participation and inclusion in the process of a large staff with full transparency about the work. Finally, but one of the most important steps to maintaining momentum, they ensured robust feedback loops and a CQI process to monitor and make real-time adjustments. 🇺🇸

Phase 4. Maintain Learning Organization Momentum

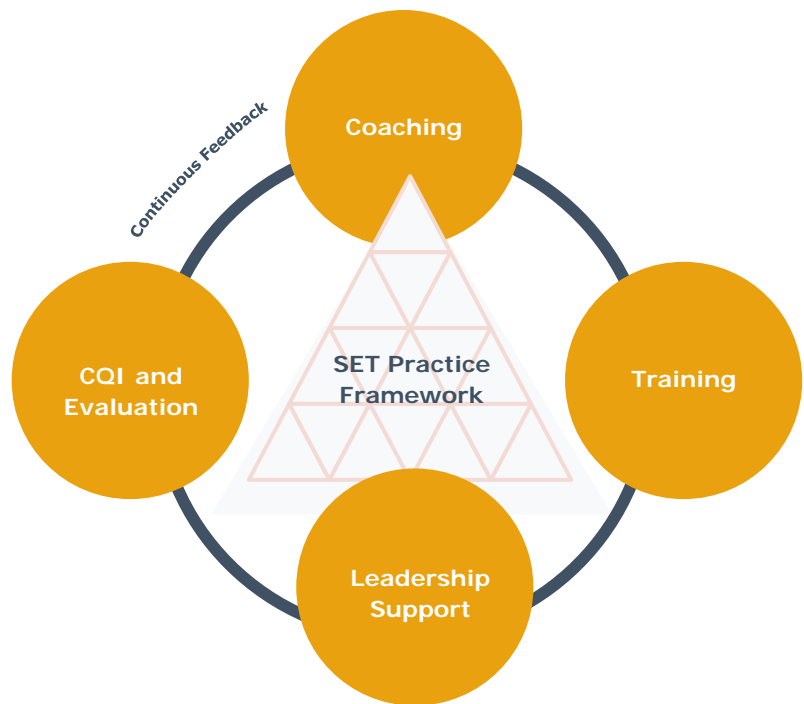
The agency dedicated significant resources to the development and roll out of SET. The focus now is to structure the routinization of SET behaviors. Harder+Company and CWS worked together on two approaches to routinize and reinforce SET: (1) establishing a culture of learning to support SET (i.e., leadership, coaching) and (2) aligning key work systems (i.e., coaching, CQI, evaluation, training).

A culture of learning to support SET. A culture of learning is nurtured through two key activities: learning cycles and coaching. The learning cycle process was a powerful change process for SET implementation. Continuation of this process will support an organization focused on learning for program improvement. It also structures a direct line of communication between staff and leadership to remove barriers and create supportive policies and practices. Learning is also supported by coaches dedicated to providing ongoing support to project teams.

Key work systems. For a practice framework to be sustained, fidelity to practice and the resulting impact on outcomes must be assessed, discussed, and utilized for improvement. Elements to ensure sustainability include:

1. Approve staff time to work with coaches to provide ongoing support to CWS teams
2. Modify new case worker training to include SET
3. Revamp supervision protocols to include SET key expectation monitoring
4. Incorporate SET into current statewide Program Improvement Plans to ensure mandated responsibility
5. Measure short- and long-term child outcomes and their link to SET behaviors (via modified case review tools).

A combination of a supportive learning culture and reinforcement activities will create an environment in which the SET practice model thrives. 🏠



Conclusion

This paper outlined the key phases and steps the County of San Diego CWS and their design contractor, Harder+Company Community Research, took to develop and implement the SET practice framework. We hope that the descriptions provide the County and its stakeholders with a framework for how to implement an effective practice model. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us. 📧

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Notes

¹ The Children's Bureau, *A Framework to Design, Test, Spread, and Sustain Effective Practice in Child Welfare*,

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/pii_ttap_framework.pdf

² The Child Welfare Policy & Practice Group, *Adopting a Child Welfare Practice Framework*,

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/reform/approaches/practicemodels/>

³ Dean Fixsen and Karen Blase, Triangle Concept, 2008.

⁴ Dale Curry, ed., special issue, *Training and Development in Human Services* 8, no. 1 (2014),

<http://www.aphsa.org/content/dam/NSDTA/PDF/Resources/NDSTA10.27.pdf>

⁵ Gregory Shea and Cassie Solomon, "Change Management is Bigger than Leadership," *Harvard Business Review*, March 29, 2013,

<https://hbr.org/2013/03/change-management-is-bigger-th>

⁶ Trauma-informed practice refers to the knowledge of different types of traumatic stress that impact children and families, and the tools, skills, techniques, and resources that can be utilized to alleviate or minimize the impact of trauma on those same children and families.

⁷ The County of San Diego's implementation of the Core Practice Model Guide in response to the Katie A. lawsuit focused on the need for screening the appropriate services being provided to address the mental health needs of children or youth in the child welfare system.

⁸ San Diego County's Health and Human Services is a matrix organization in which employees have dual reporting relationships. The policies and practices of specific departments, such as CWS, are developed centrally, but they are implemented regionally. Thus, CWS social workers generally report to both regional and central management, requiring that practice changes such as SET be understood and adopted at multiple levels.

⁹ Parents Partners are individuals who were CWS-involved and were successful in their referrals or cases. They are hired by CWS contractors to provide peer support to currently involved CWS parents.

¹⁰ We used a gradation of agreement process in which members would hold up the number of fingers for agreement, five fingers meaning "love it!" and one finger being "no way!". If any member held up less than 3 fingers, the principle did not move forward and further discussion was had until the group was in general agreement.

¹¹ Contact: Jessica Ripper (jessicaripper@yahoo.com).

¹² BAR asked three basic questions: (1) How will you incorporate more of this value's action, including SOP tools, into your everyday work? (2) What challenges do you anticipate in achieving these actions? (3) Given these challenges, what solutions and supports will you seek?

¹³ AAR asked four basic questions: (1) In the past 2 months, how were you able to change your practice in relation to the value? (2) What challenges did you experience in implementing this value in your practice? (3) What supports did you receive from colleagues or leadership? (4) What SOP tools or other supports do you need to continue to integrate this value in your everyday practice?

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