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Putting quality standards into action: An implementation guide



Knowledge Institute
on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions



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About this guide

Implementation science can help you be more efficient, planful, and intentional. Our implementation guide is designed to support all quality standards produced by the Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions (the Knowledge Institute). This guide provides essential information for planning, doing, and sustaining organizational change using implementation science.

Each quality standard has been informed through comprehensive literature reviews and consultations with the Quality Standard Advisory Committee (QSAC), which includes system and agency leaders, clinicians, scientists, and people with lived expertise. This evidence base has guided components in each quality standard that align with this implementation guide, including:

- **Practical examples.** Found in the “Practical examples” section of each quality standard, these illustrate how aspirational core principles are currently being put into action across the child and youth mental health, substance use health, and addictions sector (the sector). They offer concrete, real-world examples that organizations can look to when considering what may be most meaningful and relevant to implement within their own context.
- **Implementation considerations.** These sections outline potential barriers and mitigating strategies to support more effective action on each core principle. Reviewing these early in the implementation process can help organizations anticipate challenges and identify approaches that may be feasible and well-suited to their goals.

This guide describes three stages of implementation: **Plan, Do, Sustain** (Knowledge Institute, 2024). Following these three stages can help you better manage the complex process of implementing a quality standard. However, they don’t need to be followed in sequence. Implementation is often non-linear and iterative, so you may move back and forth between stages or complete some activities concurrently. These stages can be adapted and customized to your local context.



While each quality standard may require certain adaptations, such as determining the most appropriate team members or tailoring specific changes, the overall process of implementation remains fundamentally the same.



After identifying the quality standard you want to implement and reviewing it completely, use this guide to determine:

- What is being done well, and what changes you want to see.
- What can be expanded or leveraged.
- Who needs to do what differently.
- How you will bring about change.

You may already be doing a lot of work that aligns with and complements the quality standard. Our goal is to help you identify that work and find areas of improvement, document your change processes, and measure your progress.



It can take a long time to see change. We're here to help! Reach out to the Knowledge Institute (standards@cymha.ca) for more information about our dedicated support.

Getting started

What it means to implement a quality standard

Implementing a quality standard is an intentional, ongoing process toward a common aspirational vision, rather than a one-time effort. Implementation requires continuous work to demonstrate each quality statement and embody the core principles in everyday practice.

Implementation is both a process and an outcome. Progress, rather than perfection, is evidence of meaningful, intentional action toward greater consistency and better-quality care.

Principles-based implementation

The Knowledge Institute's quality standards are principles-based. Principles-based standards promote a flexible, community-centred approach where each quality statement can be applied uniquely within the context of communities. Each principle can be demonstrated in different ways to account for contextual opportunities and barriers.

It can be challenging to implement principles-based standards, as they rely on guiding values and ideals rather than specific actions or prescriptive rules. While this approach offers flexibility and promotes equity, understanding the actions you need to take to demonstrate each core principle can be tricky.

The process or initiative you're implementing could include actions that demonstrate a promising practice from the quality standard. For example, one agency might develop a new intake process, while another might focus on improving an existing relationship with a local healthcare organization to streamline referrals and transitions in service. Even though these agencies are working to implement the same quality standard and enhance access, their specific approaches and actions vary. How you put the principles of a quality standard into practice should align with your local context, ensuring changes are tailored to the needs and resources of your agency.

Document your progress! Use the [Implementation process cheat sheet](#) to reference the Plan, Do, Sustain process and your activities.

Implementation tips

Regardless of where you begin, the following ideas can support your implementation journey.

Use shared methods across projects.

- Quality improvement activities, engagement principles, program evaluation, implementation science, and knowledge mobilization can guide your efforts and create synergy across initiatives.

Align new and existing initiatives with the standard.

- Consistently identifying points of alignment with a quality standard supports system-level impact. Draw on quality standards to help shape decisions with and across initiatives.

Leverage existing supports and spaces.

- The use of coaching supports, communities of practice, resources, and tools can strengthen implementation and make the process easier.

Embrace creativity.

- Implementation is likely to vary between organizations and contexts. Don't be afraid to try something different or new.



Resources

Throughout this guide, we refer to a number of our toolkits and resources that can support your work.

- [Moving ideas to action: An implementation toolkit](#)
- [Doing more with what you know: Knowledge mobilization toolkit](#)
- [Clearer insights, greater impact: Program evaluation toolkit](#)
- [Measurement guide for quality standards](#)

Check out the [Youth engagement quality standard](#) and [Family engagement quality standard](#) to learn more about engagement in organization- and systems-level initiatives.

The process is the practice: Implementation is strengthened when equity and engagement are embedded throughout. You can use these reflection questions to guide your thinking and turn insights into concrete actions

Engage young people and caregivers

Meaningful youth and family engagement can ensure your implementation efforts align with the unique needs and preferences of potential service users and clients.

As you proceed through the implementation stages, ask:

- Are there opportunities to co-develop materials, strategize, and make decisions with young people and caregivers?
- What outcomes matter most to young people and caregivers in your community?
- What would meaningful involvement look like from their perspective?
- At which stages of implementation is their insight essential?
- How can we ensure involvement is timely, purposeful, and respectful?
- How can we offer multiple ways to participate to accommodate comfort levels and communication styles?
- Can we gather insights through advisory meetings, storytelling, co-design sessions, surveys, or focus groups?
- How can we show that their feedback and input matter?
- Do participants have relevant experience with the quality standard topic?

Design with equity in mind

While quality standards integrate equity considerations through principles and guidance, equitable outcomes cannot be realized through the standard alone. They depend on how implementation is planned, resourced, and monitored. Applying an equity lens to the implementation process helps ensure that decisions reflect community needs, reduce barriers, and prevent unintended harm.

As you proceed through the implementation stages, ask:

- What social positions, experiences, and identities shape the perspectives brought into this work?
- What information or perspectives are missing, and how can they be included?
- How do power dynamics and bias influence decision-making?
- Could this activity unintentionally reinforce inequities, and how can that be prevented?
- How are we monitoring differential impacts and equity-related outcomes?
- How can feedback from affected groups guide ongoing adjustments?
- How can we reduce or remove barriers?
- What positive impacts could this project have? How can we maximize the positive outcomes of this project for all?
- How do we ensure interventions are relevant, desired by communities, and feasible to implement?



Stage 1: Plan

The planning stage involves preparing for change and intentionally identifying the people, documents, and information needed to support quality standard implementation. In this stage, you can:

- Develop a culture of change.
- Create a team.
- Assess your current state.
- Define your goals.
- Draft an implementation workplan.

Develop a culture of change

A **culture of change** is reflected in a space where shared values, support, and resources enable people to adopt new ways of working aligned with the quality standard.

- **Build leadership support** for implementing the quality standard.
 - Identify the people in decision-making roles at your organization who are committed to implementing the quality standard.
 - Empower organizational leaders and decision makers to understand why implementing the standard matters to your organization by explaining how it advances organizational values.

Members of the leadership team should be prepared to model the behaviours needed to turn values into action, anticipate what changes may occur, and allocate resources to the project.

- **Review organizational procedures or policies** related to the standard-specific topic.
 - Engage decision-makers in discussion about the goals, benefits, and potential challenges of implementing the quality standard.
 - Discuss how the quality standard aligns with your organization's vision, values, and strategic priorities.
- **Establish a shared language and understanding of key concepts** so everyone involved in implementing the quality standard is aligned on the same ideas, goals, and principles.
 - Share the accompanying resources for the quality standard, like the executive summary and videos, with staff. Consider: Will you share this information in a meeting, town hall, newsletter, email, or webinar? How will it impact workflows? How can staff get involved in learning more?
 - Encourage anyone involved in implementation to read the quality standard.
- **Identify who is interested or will be affected by implementing the quality standard.** Key partners you may want to engage could include:
 - young people and caregivers
 - leadership or managers
 - project management and quality improvement staff
 - service providers
 - other child and youth mental health and addictions organizations in your community
 - other mental health organizations, including adult mental health
 - education sector partners
 - Indigenous organizations and service providers
 - Francophone organizations and service providers
 - other youth-serving organizations in your community
 - funders or systems partners

Are you new to implementation?

Learn more in our implementation toolkit, [Moving ideas to action!](#)

Refer to the [Measurement guide for quality standards](#) and reach out to the Knowledge Institute (standards@cymha.ca) to access the standard-specific indicator workbook.

Create a team

- **Bring together an implementation team.** The implementation team will be responsible for implementing the quality standard, reporting on progress, and sustaining positive changes.
 - Identify and include people who will bring the necessary skills, expertise, decision-making authority, and commitment.
 - Establish clear roles, responsibilities, and ways of working.
 - Set up regular team meetings and communicate meeting times, agendas, locations, and expectations.
 - Enhance your team's knowledge, skills, and capabilities so they can be more prepared to contribute to the implementation project.

Assess your current state

- **Collect data about your processes and practices** to understand what resources contribute to the standard-specific topic.
 - This process will help you understand the current state, including what's working well and where there are opportunities for improvement.
 - Review how your current work contributes to each component of the quality standard using the quality indicators provided within each core principle.
 - To identify other factors influencing implementation, like potential barriers or facilitators, make sure to:
 - Review the implementation considerations provided within the quality standard.
 - Have discussions with staff.
 - Review any literature and data specific to your services, area, or community.
 - Interview and survey partners for their perceptions.
 - Host focus groups with young people and caregivers.



Check whether you are prepared to proceed.

You can discuss the following questions with your implementation team to see if the necessary facilitators are in place to help you take initial steps (adapted from Collaborative for Implementation Practice, n.d.). If there are gaps, focus on putting supports in place to help your team get ready for implementation – for example, you can establish clear roles, schedule regular check-ins, or identify a dedicated implementation lead.



Leadership

- Does your organization's leadership team have a shared understanding of the goals and principles of the quality standard?
- Have implementation leaders created opportunities for teams to come together and learn about the quality standard and why it is relevant and meaningful?
- Have organizational and implementation leaders created opportunities for teams to come together and develop an implementation plan?



Organization

- Have you collaboratively developed tools to establish partner roles and responsibilities?
- Do you have resources allocated to collect and evaluate data?



Competency

- Have you engaged young people and caregivers to identify what they need from mental health, substance use health, and addictions services, and where to access services?
- Are there opportunities for training and development to enhance competencies in the quality standard (coaching, clinical supervision, other)?
- Is there a dedicated team or individual responsible for overseeing the implementation process?

Define your goals

Refer to the practical examples in the quality standard for ideas about what the core principle could look like in practice. Remember, there isn't a single way to demonstrate the promising practices in a quality standard. Examples can be adapted to fit your needs,

- **Decide where to focus your implementation efforts.** Use information about your current state to validate strengths, gaps, and opportunities for improvement.
- **Determine what you will do to align with promising practices in the quality standard.** Consider starting with the work you are already doing. Here are some questions to help define what you will do for each quality statement.
 - What work are we already doing or planning that aligns with the quality standard? How can we build on this work?
 - What are the gaps that exist between our current state and the promising practices in the quality standard?
 - Are we fully or partially meeting the criteria in the quality statements? Or, not at all?
 - If this quality standard were fully embedded, what would look and feel different in how we work?
- **Stay informed of any emerging priorities or work in your organization that align with your implementation goals.** Consider how they can be leveraged to support implementation of the quality standard.
- **Consider prioritizing “quick wins”** – changes that require low effort. Sometimes, quick wins are smaller, achievable goals. You can conceptualize these as the building blocks toward larger, overarching long-term goals:

Short-term

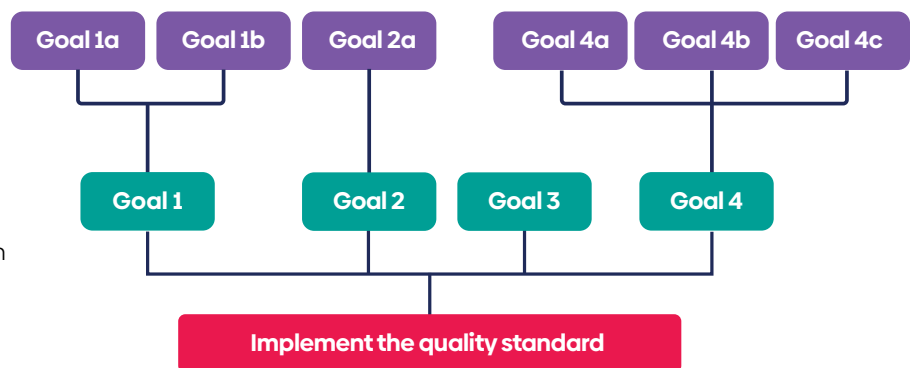
Quick wins (milestones that contribute to your larger goals)

Medium-term

Larger scale goals that will inform your implementation workplan

Long-term

Project goal



- **Record your ideas based on what you plan to do and how you can evaluate it.**
 - Use the [Goal-planning template](#) (Appendix A) to record and prioritize your ideas.

Draft an implementation workplan

Include timepoints to “reflect and revise” throughout your workplan to proactively address barriers and assess progress toward your goals.

- **Organize your goals based on priority to help determine where to start.** For lower-priority goals that may be implemented later, decide when you will revisit them.
- **Choose your implementation strategies.** Think of strategies as **how** you will reach your goals. Strategies often address specific barriers. For instance, if a key barrier is that people in the community don't know about the services or when they are available, the goal can be to increase education and promote service availability and hours within the community.
- **Identify and request any resources** needed to make changes happen (staff, equipment, honoraria for young people and caregivers).
- **Develop an implementation workplan** to organize who will do what, and by when. Include the changes you want to see happen based on your current state and priorities. This workplan can be used by the implementation team to track timelines, accountability, and milestones.
 - Adapt this [Implementation workplan template](#) (Appendix B) to suit your needs.



Stage 2: Do

The doing stage involves putting your plan into practice by carrying out the activities, testing changes, and using the foundations established during planning. In this stage, you can:

- Action your plan.
- Make adaptations as needed.
- Start small.
- Use improvement cycles.

Action your plan

- **Follow through on your goals** by putting into action the strategies in your implementation workplan. Consider tackling any quick wins first, to build momentum toward achieving your longer-term goals.
- **Ensure roles and responsibilities are clearly communicated** across the team. For each activity, assign the most responsible person (MRP) and attach a specific timeline for completion. This can help ensure committed action and accountability and can help keep the team on track.
- **Consult with the partners you identified as you developed a culture of change** so there is ongoing support for your implementation initiatives. Remember to communicate early and often about progress and changes with everyone involved.

Make adaptations as needed

- **Recognize that as you put your implementation workplan into action, new barriers may arise.** Being transparent with your team about these challenges is key. Challenges are normal, and you can take steps to address them.

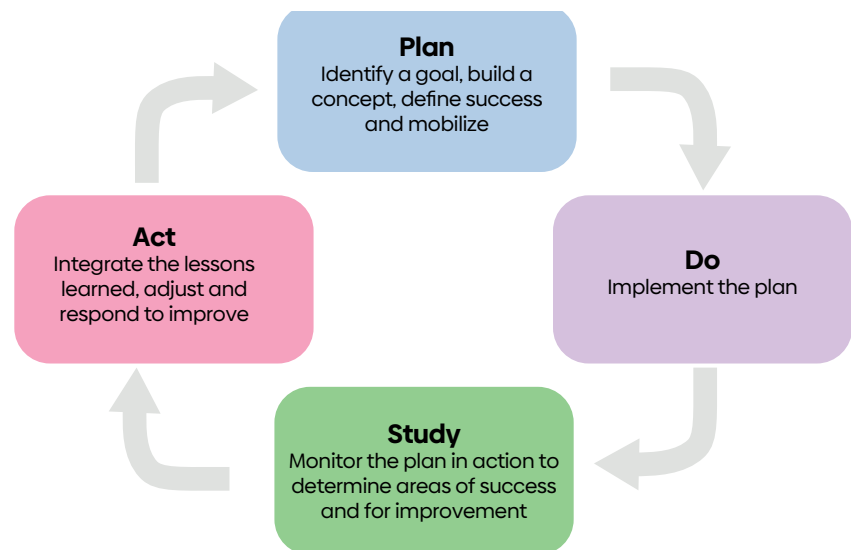
We identified [barriers and mitigating strategies related to implementing quality standards](#).

Consider: Are any of these relevant to your area? How might you address similar barriers in your context?

- **Use feedback loops to assess new barriers.** Activities can include team huddles, check-ins with partners, reflective sessions, data monitoring, or progress reviews. Strive to use feedback loops on a regular cadence. As well, the data you've collected on indicators (participation rates and engagement activities, for example) can show how barriers may be impacting your objectives.
- **If needed, tailor your strategies.** Adapt your approach to address specific barriers, promote equity, or respond to local needs. For example, if in-person training presents a challenge due to travel time or accessibility for participants, consider offering the training online.
- **Acknowledge that barriers vary between communities.** Each community is unique. Some challenges may be resolved with minor adjustments, while others require more innovative and intensive solutions. It may be helpful to consider multiple strategies and choose those that best suit your community's particular situation.
 - Use the [Barriers and strategies template](#) (Appendix C) to record your ideas. You can also review the specific Implementation considerations found in each standard.

Use improvement cycles

- **Integrate continuous improvement methods** to review and revise as you move through implementation. An effective method to advance your implementation outcomes and build sustainability is through plan, do, study, act (PDSA) cycles (The W. Edwards Deming Institute, 2022). The PDSA cycle has four steps, but it works as a cyclical process:
- Remember to document any changes in your implementation workplan.



Start small

Start small with a pilot-test project to help refine your implementation strategies on a smaller scale before full deployment or expansion. Insights and feedback from this smaller-scale test could help refine the process for full implementation across the organization. Think about initiating your change with:

- a single staff department or service team
- a specific client population
- smaller geographical areas
- shorter time frames
- a limited number of clients
- champions of the quality standard



For example, if your larger implementation goal is to introduce a new client intake process in your organization, a pilot project could focus on first testing the process within one department. It would follow the same steps to implement, like training staff and incorporating change management strategies, but with fewer staff and clients involved.



Stage 3: Sustain

The sustain stage focuses on reviewing implementation impacts and applying lessons learned so that quality standard practices are integrated into everyday practice. In this stage, you can:

- Evaluate your progress.
- Maintain momentum.

For more information about planning, doing, and using evaluation, check out our program evaluation toolkit, [Clearer insights, greater impact](#).

Refer to the [Measurement guide for quality standards](#) for more information on monitoring your progress and communicating your findings.

Evaluate your progress

- **Track your progress.** Implementing the quality standard is an ongoing process rooted in continuous quality improvement. You can follow your progress in meeting the promising practices in each quality statement through surveys, focus groups, data monitoring, and informal conversations. From the beginning of your implementation journey, you will assess your implementation efforts by evaluating processes and outcomes.
 - Implementation processes: Focus on tracking how the implementation is carried out, including timelines, adherence to planned steps, and overall efficiency of the intended workplan.
 - Implementation outcomes: Show the impact of the implementation, like whether the desired changes and quality standard goals are achieved as a result of implementation.
- **Summarize and share your evaluation results** to inform all key partners and guide your decision-making.
- **Adjust your course of action** as needed. It may be necessary to revisit your goals and make changes to your implementation workplan. Remember, implementation is a non-linear, iterative process.

Maintain momentum

To learn more about knowledge mobilization strategies, refer to our knowledge mobilization toolkit, [Doing more with what you know](#). This toolkit can help you decide how to use information to make improvements and increase your impact.

- **Celebrate your wins.** Achieving and celebrating milestones ensure everyone sees the impact of the work they do. Recognizing your successes can also increase support for changes that may affect the way people work.
- **Communicate and share your progress.** As you monitor and evaluate your progress, continue to share “lessons learned” to promote accountability and transparency. Remember to share your progress using methods and messages that are tailored to your intended audience (staff, community members, other organizations, or funders).
- **Participate in collective spaces** to foster collaboration, knowledge-sharing, problem-solving, and skill-building. Connect with others who are implementing quality standards, through online forums, conferences, workshops, expert tables, or communities of practice.

Moving forward together

Implementation is an ongoing and intentional process. To sustain your implementation efforts, you will need to review changes as they happen and work toward all quality statements over time. The mental health and substance use health needs of infants, children, young people and their caregivers are always in flux; to be responsive and to continue providing quality services, we must continually adapt.



Pause and reflect. Take the time to step back and reflect on your progress, experiences, successes, and challenges. Reflective practice can help you think about why certain outcomes occurred and the factors that influenced them. Consider:

- What is going well that we should **keep doing**?
- What feels challenging or isn't working that we should **stop doing**?
- What else is needed or missing that we should **start doing**?



If you have questions about this guide or quality standards, please get in touch with us at standards@cymha.ca.

References

- Collaborative for Implementation Practice. (n.d.). [Driver's best practices checklist](#).
- Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions. (2024). [Moving ideas to action: An implementation toolkit](#).
- The W. Edwards Deming Institute. (2022). [PDSA Cycle \(Plan-Do-Study-Act\)](#).

Appendix A: Goal-planning template

This goal-planning template can help your team decide how to begin implementation by focusing efforts, resources, and timelines. To use this template, work through these steps with your implementation team to set, score, and prioritize goals aligned with a quality standard.

1. **List your goals.** Include any main objectives and elements that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). Ensure each goal is linked to a core principle and quality statement (or more than one, if appropriate) and begin thinking about how to assess the results of the goal.
2. **Score each goal** on a scale (0 – 5) for these dimensions:
 - **Feasibility:** How feasible is it to achieve this goal given your resources, time, and current capacity?
 - **Importance:** How important is this goal to your organization's vision and mandate, and meeting the needs of clients and caregivers?
3. **Total the scores** for each goal by adding the scores for feasibility and importance.
4. **Rank the goals** based on total scores as Low, Medium, or High priority. Higher total scores indicate higher priority relative to each other, but you can weigh some dimensions more heavily if needed.

Download a [fillable and customizable template](#) here.

Quality standard: [Title of standard]

What we will do	Core principle and quality statement	How will we know we are doing it?	What do we need to make this work?	How feasible is this?	How important is this?	Total score	Priority
How this will look in practice (goals)	List the core principles and quality statement that this aligns with most	How success will be measured (refer to the Measurement guide for quality standards and the standard-specific indicator workbook ¹ for ideas)	List any required resources (staff, space, funding)	(0 – not feasible to 5 – very feasible)	(0 – not important to 5 – very important)	Sum of feasibility and importance scores	(Low, Medium, High)
Goal 1. Example ² : <i>Services are offered in inclusive, friendly, accessible, and inviting spaces, and in the client's preferred language.</i>	<i>Core principle 3:</i> Levels of care advance equitable care and outcomes. Levels of care include specific and actionable considerations to provide equitable pathways to and outcomes of care.	Percentage (%) of children, young people and caregivers who report that they have access to care that is culturally specific, identity-affirming, and safe	Bilingual staff, all forms available in both official languages, and translation services	2	5	7	High
Goal 2.							
Goal 3.							

1 To access a standard-specific indicator workbook, please contact us at standards@cymha.ca.

2 This example is based on the [Levels of care quality standard: Matching to the right care needs and goals \(2025\)](#).

Appendix B: Implementation workplan template

Project title:

Team members:

- Name

Project goals:

- Goal

Last updated: dd/mm/yyyy

Download a [fillable and customizable template](#) here.

Activity	Deliverable	Notes/considerations	Start date	End date	Most responsible person (MRP)	Required resources	Status (Not started, in progress, complete)
Identify specific tasks, strategies, or actions you will take to accomplish your goal.	Define the outcome or result expected from the activity.	Include any insight or contextual details relevant to each activity.	dd/mm/yyyy	dd/mm/yyyy	Name	List any necessary tools, personnel, or budget items to support the activity.	Change the status to reflect the progress of the activity.

Appendix C: Barriers and strategies template

For **each goal** you have prioritized in the Goal-planning template:

- Identify **potential barriers** (challenges you might encounter that will impact feasibility).
- Develop a **mitigation plan** (how you can overcome or address your identified barriers) .
- Identify **accountability** for the mitigation plan (who will action and monitor the plan; how often you will review progress).

Consider barriers and mitigation plans related to various contextual factors including the system, setting, and organization, as well as individuals – their capabilities, opportunities, and motivations to change. Also consider the intervention and implementation process.

Download a [fillable and customizable template](#) here.

Use this template to guide your assessment

What we will do	Potential barriers	Mitigation plan	Accountability
Goal 1.			
Goal 2.			
Goal 3.			



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