



QIC•AG

**IMPLEMENTING TUNING
IN TO TEENS (TINT)
LESSONS LEARNED
IN NEW JERSEY**

OVERVIEW OF THE QIC-AG

The National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG) is a 5-year project working with eight sites, each of which is either implementing an evidence-based intervention or developing and testing a promising practice, which if proven effective, can be replicated or adapted in other child welfare jurisdictions. Effective interventions are expected to achieve long-term, stable permanence in adoptive and guardianship homes for waiting children as well as children and families whose adoption or guardianship has been finalized.

The QIC-AG is funded through a 5-year cooperative agreement between the Children's Bureau, Spaulding for Children, and its three university partners: the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

OVERVIEW OF THE INTERVENTION

Tuning in to Teens (TINT)© was developed at the Mindful Centre for Training and Research in Developmental Health at the University of Melbourne, Australia. *TINT* is an emotion-coaching program designed for parents of youth ages 10 to 18 years. The program equips parents with strategies for not only responding empathically to their adolescent's emotions but also helping their teens develop skills to self-regulate their emotions.

TINT uses a small-group format with 7 to 10 participants. Co-facilitation is recommended, however, *TINT* can be implemented with one facilitator. Typically, caregivers participate in six *TINT* workshops, but the number of workshops can vary up to eight for caregivers whose adolescent child has complex issues. However, the New Jersey site team adapted the *TINT* curriculum as a 7-week program to accommodate the addition of adoption-specific components.

New Jersey offered *TINT* to a sample of adoptive and guardianship families in the state who (a) had a child between ages 10 and 13 years, and (b) were receiving an adoption or guardianship subsidy. *TINT* was offered as a preventative intervention, designed to address the needs of families whose case at finalization included characteristics indicating a potential for elevated risk of discontinuity. To be eligible for *TINT*, families had to meet 1 of 2 additional criteria: they either (c) achieved finalization when the child was between age 6 and 13 years; or (d) the child had been placed in a group home for a period while in foster care. Families formed through domestic private adoption or intercountry adoption with an adolescent between age 10 and 13 years were also eligible for the *TINT* intervention.



SNAPSHOT OF LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. PROMOTE RECRUITING EFFORTS WITH INTERNAL PROCESSES AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

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Create a recruitment plan that considers communication frequency, method, and timing

Be ready to support recruitment outreach with internal systems and technology

2. FORMALIZE THE STAFFING PLAN TO SECURE A TEAM WITH THE SKILLS, TEMPERAMENT, AND ABILITIES TO DELIVER THE SELECTED PROGRAM

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Invest time to prepare a comprehensive, detailed plan for searching, interviewing, and hiring well qualified staff

Recruit intentionally to hire staff who reflect the diversity of the families being served

3. FOSTER STAFF ENGAGEMENT TO DRIVE BETTER OUTCOMES AND RICHER INTERACTIONS WITH FAMILIES

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Establish frequent points for open communication and additional support to work around challenges that may emerge

Demonstrate respect for project staff through thoughtful consideration of their time, effort, and compensation

4. ANTICIPATE THE LOGISTICAL SUPPORTS NEEDED TO SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENT THE INTERVENTION

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Consider the complexity of logistics when rolling out multiple sessions in multiple venues

Build time and staffing levels into the plan for the logistical supports that make the program possible



LESSON 1: PROMOTE FAMILY RECRUITMENT WITH INTERNAL PROCESSES AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Recruiting adoptive or guardianship families to participate in an intervention is difficult, and can be even more challenging when reaching out to parents/caregivers who have not had substantive communication with the child welfare agency for many years. Once contact is reestablished, some of these families might be doing well (or think they are) making a preventative intervention seem of little value or relevance to their current needs. However, the New Jersey site team anticipated such circumstances and created the infrastructure necessary to drive interest and registration for *TINT*.

CONSIDER COMMUNICATION FREQUENCY, METHOD, AND TIMING

Converting prospective families to registered participants requires a well-documented and multi-pronged outreach plan. The New Jersey site team's recruitment strategy included letters, flyers, phone scripts, e-mails, and a dedicated website. These outreach materials were tailored to the adoptive and guardianship families and used engaging language to make families receptive to an unexpected offer of support from the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Stakeholders who were adoptive parents or guardianship caregivers expressed strong opinions that the initial outreach letter needed to come from DCF, as a recognizable source. Moreover, the New Jersey site team agreed that preserving the families' confidentiality was paramount, and therefore, the envelope should not indicate that the mailing was from the DCF Adoption Operations unit.

The New Jersey site team began outreach mailings and calls 2 months before the first scheduled *TINT* session. However, the site team found it often took longer than their estimated time to make contact and for families to decide about participating; as a result, at times the recruiters had to roll families into future classes. The recruitment plan outlined four attempts, made at various times of day and on varying days a week, to contact prospects, which is the minimum number of contact

attempts recommended by research practices. The site team relied on staff from the DCF Adoption Operations unit to conduct the outreach because these staffers were experienced in interacting with New Jersey families who attained permanence. Although the site team invested considerable time training DCF staff on the family recruitment process, it became clear that this role presented some challenges. Most important, because the *TINT* recruiting was an "other" assignment for many DCF staffers, they did not always have time to give to this project activity. In addition, the DCF staffers were available only during business hours, and therefore, it was not possible to have a pool of recruiters actively contacting families during evening or weekend hours. Eventually, the site team designated a part-time administrative assistant to attempt contacting families at times when families are more likely to be available.

BE READY WITH INTERNAL SYSTEMS AND TECHNOLOGY

Before even beginning their outreach to families, the New Jersey site team took many steps to prepare and support an outreach process that can take unexpected turns. The New Jersey team found the lack of a central data system created significant complications for creating the initial mailing list and making subsequent follow-up calls. The team found that contact information for adoptive and guardianship families was scattered across multiple sources of DCF administrative data. In addition, many case files did not include current addresses either because considerable time had elapsed since the case had closed or because the shift to direct deposit of subsidy checks did not require a mailing address. Phone calls proved most successful outreach strategy for convincing families to join *TINT*. However, the site team found many of the phone numbers in case files had changed or were disconnected, and voicemail messages were infrequently returned. The site team even contracted a paid service to find updated address and phone numbers for prospective *TINT* families, but even that firm had little success. Eventually, the site's team perseverance, creativity, and meticulous tracking ultimately yielded a pool of prospective families to contact about *TINT*.

The implementation efforts did get a boost because the agency's Information Technology unit stayed involved with the *TINT* project from start to finish. Initially, the recruiters gathered enrollment data and registration information on a shared Excel spreadsheet, but that process did not work as planned. After switching to a customized Microsoft SharePoint site, everyone could access the centralized digital files and real-time data updates. Pre-set forms with drop-down selections proved to be a better way to capture information than transcribing notes from recruiters. The site team could accurately analyze how many attempts it took to reach families, the best methods for reaching them, the time of day to reach particular families, and reasons why a family declined to participate.

LESSON 2: FORMALIZE THE STAFFING PLAN TO SECURE A TEAM WITH THE RIGHT SKILLS, TEMPERAMENT, AND ABILITIES TO DELIVER THE SELECTED PROGRAM

Identifying staff who are the right fit for a particular intervention is critically important. For the New Jersey site, the right fit meant staff who could work with families, understand the intervention, and had availability. Some projects rely on staff "volunteers" who rightfully might be more committed to their assigned roles rather than the intervention. Other times an agency might hire additional staff, but even then, finding staff with the elusive "fit" can be challenging. The New Jersey site team invested time in developing an extensive, detailed staffing plan, including recruitment procedures and a selection process that was tailored to the unique aspects of the *TINT* project and needs of the target population. With this staffing plan, the New Jersey site was ultimately able to secure a team of 20 committed, well-qualified facilitators.

PLOT OUT ALL THE DETAILS FOR THE STAFF SEARCH AND INTERVIEW PROCESS

Before beginning the search for staff, a site team should map out the recruitment procedures and selection process. In New Jersey, the site team developed detailed job descriptions that emphasized specific qualifications. For example, defining a minimum standard for adoption competence helped

ensure that facilitators had the ability to navigate the topics around adoption, kinship care, and legal guardianship that might come up during the *TINT* sessions. The New Jersey site team's job descriptions went beyond basic skills to incorporate intangible but important factors, such as the temperament to co-train and manage group dynamics.

In addition to using job boards and traditional hiring channels, the site team asked stakeholders to recommend child welfare professionals with the skills to do the job well. Potential candidates participated in a structured interview process during which the selection team posed questions to ensure that qualifications on paper would translate to the classroom. In addition, the selection team posed scenarios to candidates to get a sense of how facilitators would mesh with each other and the families.

RECRUIT INTENTIONALLY

Since *TINT* would be delivered statewide, the staffing plan targeted all areas of the state to find staff who lived in a variety of locations. This hiring strategy was used to avoid lengthy travel times that might be prohibitive given that all the facilitators had full-time jobs. The site team also worked to ensure they hired facilitators who were knowledgeable about the various ways families come to adoption and guardianship.

LESSON 3: FOSTER STAFF ENGAGEMENT TO DRIVE BETTER OUTCOMES AND RICHER INTERACTIONS WITH FAMILIES

Keeping staff engaged is a continual process that can positively affect morale and minimize staff turnover. Securing the right staff to deliver an intervention is challenging because of the professional skills required and the high staff turnover rates inherent in child welfare. The New Jersey site team was well aware of what was at stake, and therefore, the team was intentional about keeping the chosen facilitators actively engaged in *TINT*. The New Jersey site paid the clinical staff and the state staff received comp time. The site team designed activities to build the facilitators' commitment to the project and to foster their connections to one another. In addition, the facilitator training increased their competence and personal confidence in sharing the *TINT* content with families.

ESTABLISH FREQUENT POINTS FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Current best practices in child welfare include matching children and caregivers based on strengths, and creating frequent contact points at which progress can be assessed. That approach also works well with staff who deliver programs to families. Before, during, and after *TINT* training, the site staff worked through a matching process to identify co-facilitation teams. The teams were balanced to include both a private clinician and an experienced DCF staff member. The *TINT* purveyor provided a 3-day training for facilitators. The training provided an excellent foundation to assess the facilitators' styles of interaction with one another and areas of ease or discomfort as they absorbed the *TINT* philosophies and curriculum. After the first round of *TINT*, the team learned that even with the most careful matches, co-facilitation brings challenges, especially while facilitators learn each other's strengths and styles. To ensure that facilitators had the support they needed to navigate co-facilitation, the lead facilitator began conducting individual check-ins with each facilitator to discuss their experience in mastering the material and in developing partnerships.

The facilitators also participated in "booster" training sessions twice a year, which were supported by the lead facilitator and *TINT* purveyor. For these booster sessions, the 20 facilitators convened as a full team. The site team gathered feedback from facilitators on how they were experiencing *TINT*, reinforced information or skills critical to fidelity, and engaged the group in a team-building activity.

DEMONSTRATE RESPECT THROUGH CONSIDERATION

Throughout all stages of development and implementation of an intervention, there must be thoughtful considerations for the facilitators and other support staff. The New Jersey site team looked for ways to keep the needs of staff prominent during the implementation. For example, when scheduling workshops, the site team tried to minimize facilitators' travel time by factoring in the distance from where the facilitators

lived and worked to where they would facilitate the *TINT* workshops. Further, in addition to receiving compensation for their time while facilitating workshops, the staff also received compensation for time spent observing sessions for skill development. Overall, the site team's approach to staffing was similar to the approach they recommended for working with families: a strengths-based, holistic approach.

As the project progressed, facilitators reported that they felt valued and found value in *TINT*. They said the most engaging aspect of *TINT* was seeing the way the program changed families. In addition, facilitators noted that learning to coach *TINT* also improved their own emotional competence and they gained skills/strategies useful in other aspects of their work and personal lives.

LESSON 4: ANTICIPATE THE LOGISTICAL SUPPORTS NEEDED TO SUCCESSFULLY IMPLEMENT THE INTERVENTION

Before offering an intervention, it is critical to have all program supports in place. In the child welfare arena, because so much depends on a swift response to families, the first impulse is often to plunge in and start the intervention, rather than laying the groundwork. The milestones embedded in the QIC-AG framework allowed the New Jersey site team to prepare their system to deliver the intervention. This preparation included creating a thorough plan that anticipated many of the issues that could have derailed a project of this scope. Further, having a detailed plan created a stable platform to respond to unexpected occurrences.

MULTIPLE SESSIONS IN MULTIPLE VENUES MULTIPLIES LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

Implementing a program requires a solid foundation of logistical planning long before a family arrives at the first workshop. The logistical planning has to consider securing the venue, materials, and equipment. Offering *TINT* to adoptive and guardianship families across the state generated a complex web of workshops with concurrent sessions scheduled

in multiple venues. The New Jersey site team developed a detailed, almost scripted protocol, for rolling out *TINT* so facilitators in the various locations had all the documentation and supplies needed. Although the site team planned what was needed and where it needed to be, one thing they missed was how to store the materials prior to distribution. Ultimately, they decided to purchase dedicated space to store all of the technology and resources needed to implement the curriculum. With the storage facility settled, the site team was prepared to deliver equipment and materials. The facilitators knew what to expect when they arrived at each site and the procedures for setting up and breaking down the workshops.

UNDERPIN THE PROGRAM WITH TIME AND RESOURCES TO FOCUS ON DETAILS

It is important to allocate time and resources to address logistics and unforeseen challenges. Even activities secondary to the actual implementation can be a drain on time. For example, the *TINT* implementation plan included what turned out to be an especially important ingredient—food. Because meetings were held during dinnertime, providing meals removed a potential barrier to attendance. Providing a light meal as part of the program allowed families to feel comfortable and enjoy a meal with each other. Some parents/caregivers even referred to *TINT* meetings as their “date night.” The site team assembled a pool of vendors, both small and large, to take care of the meal provision for each session. However, providing a meal brought unexpected and ongoing challenges because the site’s implementation manager had to devote time to troubleshooting missed deliveries, wrong orders, and billing errors.

Securing venues to hold the sessions throughout the state was also a complex but critical task. The implementation plan guided the process to find space that was available and affordable. The space consideration had to go even further to make sure it was the right space. In one case, the venue had placed the *TINT* meeting in the next room to a gospel choir rehearsal!

To manage the details, the New Jersey site team designated a full-time site implementation manager, who focused on the logistical implementation of *TINT*; designated one staff person as a half-time administrative assistant, whose role was critical to outreach and tracking; and designated a contractual lead facilitator responsible for supporting the team of facilitators. A project of this scope could not work without staff being assigned to work solely on the implementation.



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