

Experience report

Evaluating The Basics' pilot implementation in the municipality of Guarujá (Brazil)

Avaliação do piloto da implementação do Cinco Básicos no município de Guarujá (Brasil)

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Abstract

This study reports the experience of social entrepreneurs identifying facilitators and barriers related to the feasibility and acceptability of The Basics' pilot implementation in the municipality of Guarujá, Brazil. The Basics is a community-level strategy that disseminates five science-based principles for families and caregivers to promote child development. It has been implemented in Guarujá since 2021 through social assistance reference centers. Staff and families' feedback was leveraged through interviews and surveys and analyzed using content analysis. The lessons learned implementing this pilot strategy contribute to the Brazilian early childhood innovation field, considering that the main facilitators include the engagement of local leadership, coaching and training professionals, the use of technology for dissemination, and the usefulness of content for educators, healthcare, and social workers. Barriers include the need for cultural adaptation and implementation guidelines. This evaluation allows to identify improvements to support the implementation and qualification of early childhood public policies and services.

Keywords: Child development. Parenting. Implementation science.

Resumo

Este estudo relata a experiência de empreendedores sociais identificando facilitadores e barreiras relacionados com a viabilidade e aceitabilidade da implementação piloto do The Basics no município de Guarujá. The Basics é uma estratégia comunitária que dissemina cinco princípios, baseados na ciência, para que famílias e cuidadores promovam o desenvolvimento infantil. Foi implantado no Guarujá a partir de 2021 por meio dos centros de referência de assistência social (CRAS). A opinião das equipes e famílias foram exploradas por meio de entrevistas e questionários e analisadas com análise de conteúdo. As lições aprendidas na implementação da estratégia piloto contribuem para o campo da inovação para a primeira infância, tendo em vista que os principais facilitadores foram: a participação de lideranças locais, a capacitação e formação de profissionais, o uso de tecnologia para divulgação e a utilidade dos conteúdos para educadores, assistentes sociais e de saúde. As barreiras incluíram a necessidade de adaptação cultural e diretrizes de implementação. Essa avaliação permitiu identificar melhorias para apoiar a implementação e qualificar as políticas e serviços públicos para primeira infância.

Palavras-chave: Desenvolvimento infantil. Responsabilidade parental. Ciências da implementação.

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Introduction

Globally, 250 million children younger than 5 years in low-income and middle-income countries are at risk of not reaching their developmental potential. Therefore, equitable early childhood policies and programs are crucial for meeting the Sustainable Development Goals and for children to develop the intellectual skills, creativity, and well-being required to become healthy and productive adults (Black et al., 2017).

Brazil has advanced its efforts to prioritize early childhood. The Early Childhood Legal Framework was approved in 2016, establishing national guidelines for the implementation of policies that prioritize the first years of life and child development (Brasil, 2016). However, Brazil is one of the nations with the highest inequality rates globally, which significantly limits the developmental opportunities of the most vulnerable children. According to Fundação Maria Cecília Souto Vidigal (FMCSV, 2021), one-third of Brazilian children aged 0–6 live in poverty. Only 37% of all children aged 3 years and younger are enrolled in early learning programs, and in the lowest-income families, this number drops to 28% (Todos pela Educação, 2021). Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the stark inequalities in the country, with the most vulnerable families having been disproportionately impacted in the last couple of years.

In this context, innovative strategies designed to support child development and promote positive parenting practices are crucial. The Basics is a community-level strategy aimed at reaching whole communities with information, social reinforcement, and reminders. The Basics strategy mobilizes local organizations from multiple sectors, such as healthcare centers, schools, libraries, and shelters, to disseminate five science-based principles that every family with young children can practice to promote child development, namely (1) maximize love and manage stress; (2) talk, sing, and point; (3) count, group, and compare; (4) explore through movement and play; and (5) read and discuss stories (The Basics, 2020).

Aspects of implementation, such as sustainability, acceptability, and feasibility, are key to improve programs and services targeting children and their families. This study is an experience report evaluating the pilot implementation of The Basics in a municipality, as a crucial effort to identify what is working and what is not and understand the current progress and improvements that can be made. Our aim is to report the experience of social entrepreneurs identifying facilitators and barriers related to the feasibility and acceptability of The Basics' pilot implementation in the municipality of Guarujá, Brazil.

Methods

This is a report of the experience of social entrepreneurs evaluating the pilot implementation of The Basics in Guarujá, a municipality with 325,000 inhabitants located on the coast of the State of São Paulo, Brazil.

The pilot implementation of The Basics in Guarujá started in 2021, when frontline professionals in the city reached out to The Basics Inc., sharing their desire to implement the strategy integrated into their work at Social Assistance Reference Centers. In the same year, the mayor of Guarujá signed a partnership agreement with The Basics Brasil for the City to implement the strategy. This agreement enabled them to lead the dissemination of the strategy across different publicly funded services in the city.

In accordance with the partnership agreement established with the city, The Basics Brasil has supported the implementation in Guarujá by disseminating materials in Portuguese, including workshop presentations, videos, handouts, tip sheets, and banners. Technical assistance also involves mentoring, with monthly implementation check-ins with the local leaders and access to monthly Basics Learning Network meetings. The theory of change of The Basics Brazil is illustrated in Figure 1.

The implementation of The Basics in Guarujá was evaluated with regard to its feasibility and acceptability through qualitative data collected from 12 key informants (seven public servants of Guarujá and five participant families). Feasibility was defined as how feasible it

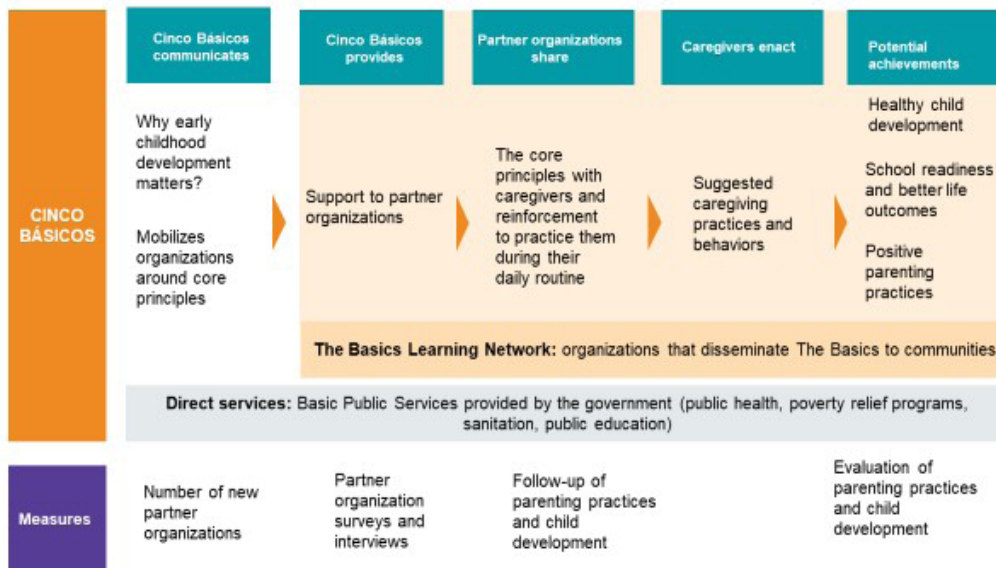


Figure 1. Theory of change of The Basics Brazil. São Paulo, 2022.

was for frontline professionals and local leaders to implement The Basics in their setting. The perception of families and professionals about The Basics and how acceptable it was for them was analyzed as acceptability. The source of data for this analysis were (1) interviews with local leaders and five participant families and (2) a feedback survey with frontline professionals and local leaders. Content analysis was used to analyze data.

Interviews with local leaders implementing the strategy centered around three main questions: "What were the initial steps of implementing The Basics in Guarujá?" "How was the work structured?" and "What are the facilitators and barriers of the implementation?"; interviews with families engaged in The Basics strategy in Guarujá were conducted to understand their perception about the content and the program's dissemination strategies.

The visits to four social assistance centers disseminating The Basics in Guarujá included visiting places where the strategy is disseminated to families and talking to frontline professionals to understand their perception about the acceptability of the strategy and the feasibility for dissemination at their daily practice.

The main topics of the feedback survey with frontline professionals included questions about their preparedness to disseminate the principles, strategies to share the principles with families, the semantics fidelity to The Basics principles, the outreach of the intervention, the perception of the strategy's effectiveness, and the frequency of engagement with families. Specific questions for local leaders included their opinion about the training and technical support they received from The Basics Inc., the materials received to implement The Basics, the importance of connections they may have had with other organizations implementing the strategy, and their main challenges; further, they were provided space for general feedback to the backbone organization.

Results

Our experience evaluating the initial implementation of The Basics in Guarujá revealed facilitators and barriers related to the implementation trajectory, as detailed in Chart 1.

The experience of implementing The Basics strategy in the municipality of Guarujá provided relevant lessons about the feasibility and acceptability of an innovative strategy connected to public policies that provide services to vulnerable families with young children. The lessons learned, rationale, and implications for the future are presented in Chart 2.



Chart 1. The implementation trajectory of The Basics in Guarujá. São Paulo, 2022.

Timeline	Activity	Stakeholders	Results
May 2021	Partnership with the municipality of Guarujá	1-The Basics Brazil. 2-Mayor of Guarujá	Partnership agreement
May 2021-ongoing	Coaching of local leaders implementing The Basics in Guarujá	1-The Basics Brazil. 2-Local leaders of Guarujá	Knowledge exchange and ongoing work planning
May 2021-ongoing	Beginning of the dissemination of The Basics to vulnerable families enrolled in social services in-person (group sessions) and online (sending videos and cards with text and illustrations via WhatsApp) once a week for 7 months	1- Leadership of the City's Office of Social Development	40 families reached
May 2021	Introductory presentation about The Basics strategy for management team of the City's Office of Social Development	1-Management team of City's Office of Social Development. 2-Local leaders of Guarujá.	15 frontline professionals reached
May 2021 -ongoing	Introductory presentations of The Basics strategy at inter-agency meetings (100 attendees) and in one meeting for early childhood educators (40 attendees).	1 - Other public leaders working for the City of Guarujá. 2- Local leaders of Guarujá.	140 frontline professionals working in different departments/agencies of the city of Guarujá
July 2021	Local leaders of Guarujá join The Basics Learning Network (BLN)	1-Local leaders of Guarujá. 2-The Basics Inc	A strengthen shared learning community
July 2021	Capacity-building workshops (in-person) for frontline professionals of four social assistance services	1-Leadership of the City's Office of Social Development. 2- Local leaders of Guarujá.	Four frontline professionals reached
August/September 2021	Dissemination of The Basics at foster care shelters in Guarujá	1-Leadership of the City's Office of Social Development. 2- Local leaders of Guarujá.	23 frontline professionals reached. One foster care shelter
April – December 2022 – Planned	Further expansion of The Basics with breastfeeding workshops at public health centers, daycares, and three additional foster care centers.	1- City of Guarujá. 2- Local leaders in Guarujá	Training workshops for frontline staff being scheduled

The lessons learned from the pilot implementation of this initiative that can support the early childhood field in Brazil include the importance of investing in the engagement and training of local leaders, particularly technical professionals on the front line of social assistance services, as well as producing and supporting the dissemination of materials from the initiative to families through channels such as WhatsApp, culturally adapt and co-create materials with



Chart 2. Lessons learned, rationale, and implications for the future of The Basics Brazil. São Paulo, 2022.

Lessons learned	Rationale	Implications for the future
Feasibility: having a highly engaged and committed local leadership was crucial.	The leadership of two public servants and their commitment to disseminate the initiative to frontline professionals and families was pivotal.	Building a Brazilian Learning Network to promote shared learning opportunities between local leaders would support the continued engagement and mobilization of more local leaders.
Feasibility: training and coaching local leadership has been positively evaluated.	Coaching with multiple checkpoints was essential to discuss challenges that emerge during the implementation. In the partner survey, all respondents indicated additional training for staff as needed.	Having a dedicated staff, instead of only part-time volunteers, would support the sustainability of this initiative. Additional capacity can be complemented by self-paced training resources, such as short video lessons and online training programs for frontline workers.
Feasibility: The COVID-19 pandemic opened a new possibility of using technology for remote interaction with families.	Frontline professionals used WhatsApp to constantly communicate with families, sending videos, text messages, and illustrations of activities that caregivers could practice with their children at home, and they evaluated this strategy as effective.	An automated text messaging program could support expanding The Basics' dissemination with fidelity.
Feasibility: Implementation guidelines and other training resources that can be easily understood are mandatory.	Providing overwhelmed frontline staff with materials that can be easily understood helps to engage them to understand and disseminate the strategy.	A toolkit with detailed implementation guidelines for frontline professionals that work with families is needed and could be further strengthened by self-paced training resources for frontline workers.
Acceptability by frontline professionals: The content of the strategy is useful for services/sectors such as early childhood education, foster care, social assistance, and primary healthcare services.	The Basics principles can be helpful for a variety of frontline professionals, such as pediatricians, nurses, early childhood educators, and social workers.	Understanding the specific needs of frontline professionals in a co-creation process would help to create or adapt materials to specific settings across different sectors.
Acceptability by families: There is a need to adapt The Basics materials to the Brazilian context beyond language.	The activities and examples from the existing materials illustrate families that do not look like Brazilian families and practices, such as meditation and exercises to manage stress, that Brazilian caregivers had not identified themselves.	Considering that a critical component of the success of The Basics strategy is the flexibility and adaptability in implementation in each community, cultural adaptation for the Brazilian context could improve the acceptability by families.

the target-population and develop an implementation guide that allow to scale the initiative with fidelity to the core components.

Discussion

Evaluating the pilot implementation of an innovative strategy developed to qualify public policies and services targeting vulnerable families with young children enabled to understand what worked under a certain context and what can be improved. The lessons learned can support innovators of the early childhood field to develop, implement, and evaluate



their innovations. Facilitators and barriers related to the feasibility and acceptability of the implementation of The Basics in the municipality of Guarujá (Brazil) were revealed.

Regarding feasibility, the implementation was facilitated by the engagement and commitment of the local leadership, the coaching provided for them, and the use of technology (such as WhatsApp) to disseminate the principles of The Basics to families with young children. A barrier related to feasibility was the lack of implementation guidelines (in Portuguese) or other training resources for frontline professionals.

Similarly, the experience of implementing the Programa Criança Feliz (Happy Child Program), which aims to promote child development with a home visiting strategy that targets the most vulnerable families nationwide through social assistance reference centers (Centro de Referência em Assistência Social [CRAS]), showed that capacity building strategies and the use of technology such as WhatsApp facilitate implementation. High-quality training for local leaders and frontline professionals was reported as critical for achieving the fidelity of implementation (Buccini et al., 2021). The implementation evaluation also showed that face-to-face training was an important moment for sharing experiences, good practices, and making new connections that support staff overcoming daily challenges. The home visitors of this program also reported using WhatsApp as a communication channel with families, but their experience was limited to send reminders and scheduling appointments (Brasil, 2019).

Regarding acceptability, the content of The Basics was evaluated as useful by early childhood educators, healthcare professionals, social workers, and caregivers of shelters. Disseminating the five principles across agencies and sectors can help to create a common understanding of child development that may facilitate intersectoral collaboration between critical sectors such as education, social assistance, and health. The barrier identified for acceptability was the need to culturally adapt the content to represent Brazilian families, habits, language, culture, and context.

Similar needs regarding cultural adaptation were reported during the implementation of the program *Primeira Infância Melhor* (PIM; [Better Early Childhood]). This is an intervention to strengthen families' skills and to promote the development of early childhood, in articulation with prioritizing healthcare, social assistance, and education. Similar to The Basics' strategy, this program proposes to welcome and respect the singularities of each family, investing in the co-construction of a dialogical relationship based on ethical conduct, which includes differences and values the potential of each context. Efforts have been made to adapt the program considering the cultural values and context of life of "traditional communities" such as indigenous and quilombolas (Verch, 2017).

Our experience evaluating the pilot implementation of an innovation to qualify early childhood public policies and services generates knowledge that can inform the next steps of this implementation and support social entrepreneurs and actors of the public sector in qualifying public policies targeting families with young children. The main learnings of this experience that can be useful in the early childhood field included the engagement of local leadership and coaching and training professionals, the use of technology for dissemination, and the content being useful for educators, healthcare, and social workers as facilitators. It was also possible to identify barriers for implementation that included the need for cultural adaptation and implementation guidelines. However, some limitations of this report include the use of qualitative sources of information, such as interviews and feedback surveys.

Future analyses of the implementation process should consider the adoption of quantitative and qualitative research methods to understand the most suitable strategy to provide staff training, the channels to disseminate The Basics to Brazilian families, and strategies to promote intersectional actions across the education, health, and social assistance sectors. Research about the effects of The Basics on parenting practices, child development, and school readiness should also be conducted to address the impact of this strategy.



Conclusion

Our experience evaluating the initial implementation of an early childhood innovative strategy such as The Basics in the municipality of Guarujá (Brazil) allowed us to identify improvements to support its implementation in the future and qualify early childhood public policies.

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Conflict of interest

None.

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