



Sustained Use of an Evidence-Based Parenting Program in Portugal's Child Protection System

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Abstract

Background While there is increasing emphasis on initial implementation efforts, few studies have investigated the extent to which evidence-based parenting programs are still in use over time. Addressing this gap, this study examines the sustained use of an evidence-based parenting program five years after 16 practitioners became accredited program providers.

Methods Through individual semi-structured interviews, we sought to (1) assess the extent to which the practitioners sustained or not sustained Standard Triple P use over time in Portugal's child protection system and what factors influenced it and (2) explore the perspectives of practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives of the child protection system bodies on the characteristics of this system that may be influencing the sustained use of evidence-based parenting programs, analyzed with the framework of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Results In the current study, five practitioners sustained Standard Triple P use within their organization up to five years post-accreditation. Our thematic analysis, underpinned by the Integrated Sustainability Framework, found that organizational factors played a stronger influence on both practitioners sustaining implementation and those who were non-sustainers. In addition, we identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives perceived to be promoting or limiting the sustained use of evidence-based parenting programs.

Implications This study contributes with practical considerations into the sustained use of evidence-based parenting programs in real-world settings and underscores the importance of planning for sustainability to support program delivery over time, which is key to guaranteeing that such programs will reach the families that would benefit from them the most.

Keywords Implementation · Sustained use · Evidence-based parenting programs · Child protection system

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There is limited evidence on the delivery of evidence-based parenting programs (EBPP) in real-world service delivery systems, such as the Child Protection System (CPS). Even though the effectiveness of EBPP has been ascertained in several studies, more attention should be given to the practice of implementation to address the gap between what we know from research and what we do in real-world practice (Pinto et al., 2024). While increasing emphasis is placed on initial implementation efforts, evaluating the extent to which an EBPP continues to be used over time is often neglected (Chambers et al., 2013; Dakof et al., 2022; Margolies et al., 2023). The present study addresses this gap by examining the sustained use of an EBPP in real-world settings delivered to families involved with child protection services in Portugal, interviewing practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives of CPS bodies.

The range of terminology presented in the literature related to sustainability has challenged the field with several

conceptualizations. Building on existing research, recommendations, and definitions already used in the literature, Moore et al. (2017) comprehensively describe sustainability as the continued delivery of a program after a defined period of time, potentially after adaptation, at a sufficient level to ensure the continued benefits of the intervention for individuals and systems. In line with this definition, recent studies recognize two key sustainability dimensions: the sustained benefits (i.e., the program outcomes are maintained over time) and the sustained use or sustainment (i.e., a program continues to be implemented over time) (Berta et al., 2019; Song et al., 2022). In our study, we adopted the definition of Moore et al. (2017), and we will address the latter dimension – the sustained use of an EBPP.

Sustainability is a key implementation outcome, intrinsically linked to the quality of implementation (Byrne et al., 2023; Proctor et al., 2011). However, it has received too little attention from most empirical studies, and a gap remains between implementation science and practice (Westerlund et al., 2019). For instance, Greenhalgh et al. (2004) systematic review noted the near absence of studies focusing on the sustainability of interventions in service delivery organizations. Twenty years later, Pinto et al. (2024) scoping review on the implementation of EBPP under real-world conditions found that only 12% (18 out of 145) of the included studies from 2005 to 2022 reported program sustainability. Additionally, existing literature primarily focuses on predictors of sustained implementation of EBPP at a future time (e.g., Ma et al., 2023). Fewer studies have investigated the extent to which an EBPP is still in use beyond initial training, so many questions remain regarding what influences the program's sustained use over time (Aarons et al., 2016; Byrne et al., 2023; Dakof et al., 2022; Reardon et al., 2023).

Literature suggests multilevel and dynamically related factors influencing the extent to which EBPP are sustained across settings, and several conceptual frameworks in this regard have emerged over the years. Developed to organize these influential multi-level factors, the Integrated Sustainability Framework proposes five domains: (1) outer contextual factors (e.g., policy/legislation, sociopolitical context, funding environment, external partnerships), (2) inner contextual or organizational factors (e.g., financial resources, leadership support, climate/culture, staff stability), (3) intervention characteristics (e.g., adaptability, fit with context and population, benefits/effectiveness), (4) process factors of intervention delivery (e.g., training, strategic planning, and supervision), and (5) practitioner and population characteristics (e.g., skills, attitude, motivations, literacy) (Shelton et al., 2018). Despite its relevance, the five-domain categorization, which is generally consistent across different implementation frameworks, has mainly been theory-driven and based on reviewing prior literature without being

comprehensively used and evaluated in empirical studies (Hailemariam et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2023; Proctor et al., 2015; Tricco et al., 2015).

Along with assessing whether a program is still being delivered and evaluating the processes and factors that may facilitate or hinder the program's continuation, the literature highlights the importance of providing additional information on the level of the program's institutionalization. Institutionalization is conceptualized as a more intensive form of sustained use. It occurs when the program is not just being used but is fully routinized and embedded into the organization's service delivery processes and practices (Rabin et al., 2008; Reardon et al., 2023).

Sustained implementation is required for EBPP to promote children and their families' well-being, and such programs also showed good value for money in a recent systematic review of economic evaluations (Sampaio et al., 2024). The good return of EBPP sustained use spans a wide range of stakeholders involved, including (1) researchers who develop, test, and disseminate interventions and programs expecting to see them sustained in real-world practice; (2) organization leaders who seek a return on their provider training investments; (3) professionals who are wary of researchers who bring new interventions to their services only for the duration of grant funding and leave little sustainable change at study's end; and (4) funders whose grants support research and want sustained impact from those discoveries (Proctor et al., 2015; Shelton et al., 2018). With the current study, we give voice to CPS professionals from the practice, organizational, and system levels to improve our understanding of EBPP sustained use.

In our previous research, we addressed the effectiveness of Standard Triple P delivered in real-world settings to Portuguese parents of children involved with CPS (Canário et al., 2021, 2023). Standard Triple P is a level 4 parenting program of the Triple P – Positive Parenting Program System suitable for parents of children aged 2 to 12 with moderate to severe behavior problems. It includes 10 sessions delivered in an individual format, in person, and on a weekly basis. Through the program, parents identify the causes of their child's behavior problems, set their own goals for change, and learn a range of parenting strategies to promote and develop positive behavior for their child (Sanders et al., 2013). Within our work, family support professionals became accredited providers and started delivering the program as part of the routine care practice delivered in their organizations. However, over time, it became evident that the professionals displayed different patterns regarding the use of the program. To better understand these, the current study sought to (1) identify the practitioners who have sustained and did not sustain Standard Triple P use as part of their routine care practice in child protection services, five

years after completing the program's accreditation process; (2) examine what factors influenced practitioners to sustain or not sustain the use of Standard Triple P, analyzed within the Integrated Sustainability Framework (Shelton et al., 2018); and (3) explore the perspectives of practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives of CPS bodies on the characteristics of this system that may be either promoting or limiting the sustained use of EBPP, placed within the framework of a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis (Puyt et al., 2023).

Materials and Methods

Participants

The participants of this study are professionals at the practice, organizational, or system levels of the CPS in Portugal. At the practice level, participants are the 16 frontline practitioners who became Standard Triple P accredited providers (See Table 1 for practitioners' characteristics). At the organizational level, participants are three organizational managers of CPS local bodies, specifically Centers for Family Support and Parental Counselling, where Standard Triple P was currently being implemented. At the system level, participants are three key actors, i.e., system-level representatives, at the CPS national coordination bodies. Specifically,

Table 1 Practitioner characteristics

| Characteristic | CU (<i>n</i> =5) | SU (<i>n</i> =3) | NI (<i>n</i> =8) | Total (<i>N</i> =16) |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>M</i> |
| Age | 39.20 | 35.67 | 34.50 | 36.19 |
| | <i>n</i> (%) | <i>n</i> (%) | <i>n</i> (%) | <i>N</i> (%) |
| Education Level | | | | |
| Master's degree | 4 (80) | 3 (100) | 1 (12.5) | 8 (100) |
| Bachelor's degree | 1 (20) | 0 (0) | 7 (87.5) | 8 (100) |
| Profession | | | | |
| Psychologist | 1 (20) | 3 (100) | 2 (25) | 6 (37.5) |
| Social worker | 4 (80) | 0 (0) | 5 (62.5) | 9 (56.3) |
| Early Childhood Education | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 1 (12.5) | 1 (6.2) |
| Workplace | | | | |
| CAFAP | 4 (80) | 0 (0) | 2 (25) | 6 (37.5) |
| CPCJ | 0 (0) | 2 (66.7) | 3 (37.5) | 5 (31.3) |
| IPSS | 1 (20) | 1 (33.3) | 1 (12.5) | 3 (18.8) |
| School | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 1 (12.5) | 1 (6.3) |
| GOV | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | 1 (12.5) | 1 (6.3) |
| | <i>M</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>M</i> |
| Working with families (years) | 10.20 | 7.33 | 4.50 | 6.81 |

Note. CU=current users; SU=stopped users; NI=practitioners who never implemented standard triple P; CAFAP=centre for family support and parental counselling; CPCJ=local commissions for the protection of children and young people; IPSS=private non-profit social solidarity institutions; GOV=local government body

one is a representative of the National Commission for the Promotion of the Rights and the Protection of Children and Young People, another is a representative of the Social Security Institute, and the other one is a representative of the National Network of the Centers for Family Support and Parental Counselling. The organizational managers and the system-level representatives are between 50 and 67 years old and have significant experience in management positions in local and national CPS bodies.

Procedure

The present study received approval from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences at the University of Porto (Ref. 2021/10-07). This study extended the data collection procedures from two prior research projects (REUNIRmais, PTDC/SOC-ASO/31727/2017 and RealFamilies, 2022.04975.PTDC) aimed at evaluating the implementation, effects, and cost-effectiveness of the Standard Triple P parenting program when delivered in real-world settings to families involved with the Portuguese CPS.

In 2019, in the scope of the REUNIRmais project, 16 professionals from local CPS bodies in the district of Porto (Portugal) completed four and a half days of the Standard Triple P's in-person training and accreditation process, which officially recognized them as practitioners of this EBPP. The aim was for these practitioners to deliver Standard Triple P to parents served in their work settings with a child between 6 and 12 years old and referred to these services to receive parenting support (Canário et al., 2021, 2023). The research team facilitated Peer Assisted Supervision and Support sessions with the practitioners to support implementation over time. The current study was conducted five years after the practitioners became accredited providers of the Standard Triple P to evaluate the extent to which practitioners sustained program implementation as part of their routine care practice.

Data Collection

We conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the 16 practitioners, the three organizational managers, and the three system-level representatives. The interviews were carried out between March and November 2024. The duration of the interviews ranged between 30 and 60 min. All interviews were carried out through videoconference. Following the participant's informed consent, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The questions of the interviews script are provided in Supplemental Material 1.

Interviews With the Practitioners

Regarding practitioners, each interview was divided into two parts. The first part aimed to assess the extent to which practitioners sustained or did not sustain Standard Triple P use over time and to examine the factors that influenced it. Taking the same initial question as a starting point, the interview with each practitioner was conducted according to their answer to this question (i.e., “Do you currently use Standard Triple P in your Organization?”). In the case of practitioners that sustain the use of Standard Triple P, given the importance of assessing more than whether the program was in use but also the intensity of use, the interview script included a question about the level of the program institutionalization (i.e., “Is Standard Triple P fully routinized and embedded into your organization’s service delivery?”).

The second part of the interviews with the practitioners aimed to explore their perspectives on the characteristics of the CPS that may be either promoting or limiting the sustained use of EBPP in this system in Portugal. The questions were based on the SWOT format, i.e., we inquired them about (1) Strengths (“What are the characteristics of the CPS that facilitate the sustained use of EBPP in services provided to families?”), (2) Weaknesses (“What are the characteristics of the CPS that make it difficult to sustain EBPP in services provided to families?”), (3) Opportunities (“What factors external to the CPS can it leverage to improve the sustained use of EBPP?”), and (4) Threats (“What external factors to the CPS pose potential problems/risks to the sustained use of EBPP?”). While the SWOT format provides an organizing structure, it is open and flexible enough to support free discussion and the generation of ideas (Vonk et al., 2007).

Interviews With the Organizational Managers and System-Level Representatives

Regarding interviews with the organizational managers and the system-level representatives, they were asked the same four questions based on the SWOT format described before. By addressing the same questions to the participants at the practice, organizational, and system levels, we can compare and contrast the perspectives of workers from different levels of the social ecology of the child protection system, obtaining a more comprehensive picture of the topic.

Data Analysis

To characterize the professionals participating in this study and obtain the frequencies of the sustained use influencing factors, we conducted descriptive statistics using the software IBM SPSS Statistics.

We used thematic analysis to analyze the qualitative data obtained from interviews with the practitioners, the organizational managers, and the system-level representatives (Braun & Clarke, 2012). First, the transcripts were reread several times to gain familiarity with the data. Once the overall impression had been obtained, the transcripts were coded line-by-line and analyzed using an Excel file to generate descriptive themes. The first author served as the primary analyst for each data source, and then the work was discussed with the second and fourth co-authors. Discussing the themes attributed to the different excerpts revealed high agreement among the authors. In the current study, themes were identified deductively from existing frameworks in the literature, as described above.

To analyze practitioners’ perceived factors that influenced them to sustain or not sustain the use of Standard Triple P over time, we used the Integrated Sustainability Framework (Shelton et al., 2018). In line with this framework, the reported factors were grouped in themes according to whether they were associated with (1) outer contextual factors, (2) inner contextual or organizational factors, (3) processes (i.e., process factors of intervention delivery), (4) intervention characteristics, and (5) practitioner and population characteristics. Each theme corresponds to a domain in the framework.

Regarding the study aim focused on the perspectives of Standard Triple P practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives on the characteristics of the CPS that may be either promoting or limiting the sustainability of EBPP in this system in Portugal, the data obtained were categorized under four main themes: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT format). Within each theme, the respondents’ statements were examined and sorted into categories (sub-themes) according to their similarities and differences.

Results

Practitioner Characteristics

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the 16 Standard Triple P trained practitioners, presented according to three groups: current users (CU), stopped users (SU), and practitioners who have never implemented the program (NI). Of the five CU, four (80%) work in Centers for Family Support and Parental Counselling. Of the 11 practitioners not currently using Standard Triple P in their practice, five (45%) are working in the Local Commissions for the Protection of Children and Young People.

From the 16 trained practitioners, we found that five CU (31.3%) sustained the use of the program five years after

completing training and accreditation (i.e., they had at least one ongoing intervention delivery by the time of data collection), and 11 (68.8%) did not sustain the program's use over this period. From these 11 trained practitioners but who were not currently using the program, we can distinguish two groups: (1) stopped users (SU), i.e., trained practitioners who had initiated the use of Standard Triple P and completed this intervention with several families, but discontinued the program's use after some time ($n=3$); and (2) trained practitioners who did not implement Standard Triple P or only performed the two initial assessment sessions (NI) (i.e., they had never implemented the full program) ($n=8$).

Regarding the program's institutionalization level, of the five practitioners currently using Standard Triple P in their practice, four considered that this intervention is fully routinized and embedded into their organization's service delivery. They stated that this program is a priority in their organization and is always used when appropriate. For example, one reported: "It completely replaced the other program we implemented. Regardless of the nature of the process, be it reunification, preservation, or family meeting point, parents will participate in Standard Triple P. It is implicit in the intervention plan" (CU4). Similarly, another practitioner reported, "Yes. I use it whenever I feel it is important to the family and the eligibility criteria are met. Sometimes, it does not fit due to the children's age. However, whenever it fits, Standard Triple P is always delivered" (CU2). One practitioner considers that Standard Triple P is not institutionalized into her organization's service delivery and justifies this by the fact that it is mainly used in families referred by other services and is not part of the range of services available to families served in her organization.

Among the practitioners who were trained but did not implement Standard Triple P or only performed the two initial assessment sessions ($n=8$), three reported not delivering Standard Triple P as they had been trained but selecting specific content of the program to work with the families according to their needs and characteristics, thus using some of the strategies of the program to customize the care provided to the family. For instance, one reported, "Although I do not use the entire program, I use some strategies that I learned when I completed the training (...) I think the program materials allow us to approach parenting strategies in a completely different way." (NI4).

Practitioners did not perceive any specific criteria for being selected to receive training to implement the Standard Triple P program in their organization. Instead, practitioners and their organization decided it for the convenience of both the functions already performed within the organization and the availability of time to carry out the training when it occurred. Two practitioners also reported personal/professional interest. For instance, "I expressed interest in

attending the training because I thought, and continue to think, that it would be an added value for me in acquiring knowledge for my professional practice" (NI2).

Factors that Influenced Practitioners To Sustain or not Sustain Standard Triple P

Analyzing the interviews with the current users, the stopped users, and the practitioners who never implemented Standard Triple P about the reasons that influenced them to sustain or not the use of the program, we found factors covered by the five domains outlined in the Integrated Sustainability Framework (Shelton et al., 2018). Fig. 1 depicts the number of current users, stopped users, and practitioners who never implemented Standard Triple P, who reported factors within each of the domains of this framework.

Table 2 presents the specific influencing factors that emerged within each domain from the interviews with the current users, stopped users, and practitioners who never implemented Standard Triple P. A more detailed description of the factors perceived by the three groups of practitioners, illustrated with excerpts, is presented in Supplemental Material 2 (See Table S2.1 for current users, Table S2.2 for stopped users, and Table S2.3 for practitioners who have never implemented Standard Triple P).

The current users most frequently identified *inner contextual factors* and *intervention characteristics* as influencing them to sustain Standard Triple P over time (all five practitioners reported factors covered by these domains). Within the inner contextual factors, the current users reported that organizational leadership support (e.g., providing autonomy and trust) and adequate resources for the ongoing delivery of Standard Triple P (e.g., adequate space and time) facilitated its sustained use. Regarding the intervention characteristics, the current users mentioned the fit of Standard Triple P with the organization's mission, the perceived impact and benefits of the program to address the families' needs, and Standard Triple P adaptability as determinant factors to sustain the use of this program.

The *outer contextual factors* (e.g., partnerships with academia and parents' referral from other community services) and *provider and target population characteristics* (e.g., commitment and positive attitude toward Standard Triple P and parents' engagement with the intervention) were mentioned by three practitioners. *Process factors* of intervention delivery were less reported, with one practitioner pointing out the Peer Assisted Supervision and Support sessions as facilitating the program's sustained use.

Concerning the stopped users, all three practitioners reported factors covered by the inner and outer context domains. Within the inner contextual factors, the stopped users reported that during the period they implemented

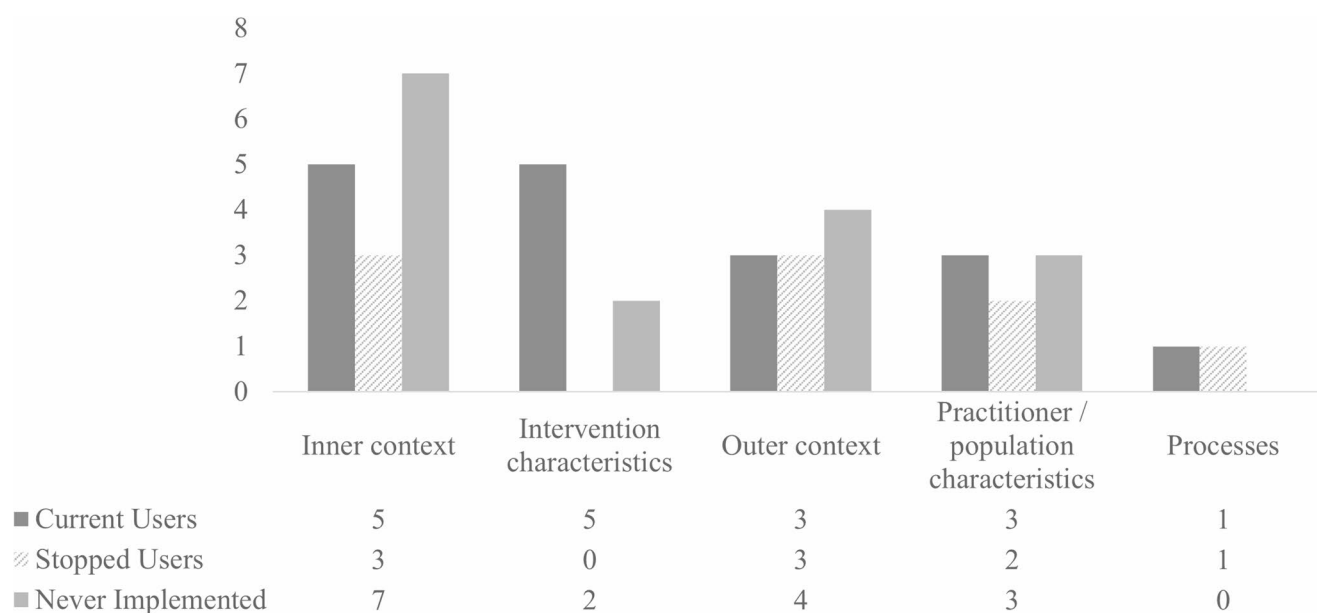


Fig. 1 Frequency of the domains of factors reported by practitioners

Table 2 Factors influencing use of standard triple P

| Domains from the ISF | Factors emerged from the interviews | Practitioners | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|---------------|----------|----------|
| | | CU | SU | NI |
| Inner context | Leadership support | reported | reported | |
| | Organization's capacity | reported | | reported |
| | Organization stability | | reported | |
| Intervention characteristics | Perceived fit | reported | | reported |
| | Perceived benefits | reported | | |
| | Perceived need | | | reported |
| Outer context | Adaptability | reported | | |
| | External partnerships | reported | reported | |
| | Pandemic | | reported | reported |
| Practitioner/ population characteristics | Attitudes of the practitioner | reported | | |
| | Practitioner personal circumstances | | | reported |
| | Parents' engagement | reported | reported | reported |
| | Families' eligibility criteria | | | reported |
| Processes | Supervision | reported | reported | |

Note: ISF = integrated sustainability framework (Shelton et al., 2018); CU = current users; SU = stopped users; NI = practitioners who never implemented standard triple P; reported = the factor was reported by this group of practitioners.

Standard Triple P, their leadership allowed a flexible working schedule, provided the facilities, and allocated time blocks specifically for them to deliver the program, as well as their team members supported the logistics (e.g., families' transportation and childcare). However, at some point, two practitioners started working in a different organization, and the leadership of the other practitioner's organization changed. These practitioners stated that their new leadership prioritized other projects over the use of Standard Triple P, which led them to discontinue Standard Triple P implementation. Regarding the outer context factors, like current users, the stopped users also emphasized that partnerships established with other community services to refer families to attend Standard Triple P facilitated the use of the program.

Two stopped users reported *characteristics of the target population* as hindering them from sustaining Standard Triple P (e.g., lack of parents' engagement). The *processes* domain was reported less by stopped users (only one practitioner mentioned the supervision sessions as promoting the program's use).

In relation to the never implementers of Standard Triple P, seven of the eight trained practitioners attributed it to impediments within the *inner context*, specifically a lack of the organization's capacity. Staff shortages and time constraints to face high caseloads turned the use of the EBPP into a burden, and these professionals prioritized other tasks.

In terms of the *outer context* domain, four practitioners mentioned the pandemic as having influenced them not to initiate the use of Standard Triple P. Factors within the domain of *practitioner and population characteristics* (e.g., practitioners' personal circumstances and parents'

Table 3 Interview sub-themes

| SWOT format | Sub-themes |
|---------------|--|
| Strengths | Specialized support services for families Increased awareness of EBPP Intervention frame and guiding principles |
| Weaknesses | Lack of organizational capacity and workforce stability Overfocus on remediation Lack of organizational culture and readiness for EBP |
| Opportunities | Setting and target population characteristics A prevention approach to child protection A participatory approach Partnerships with academia |
| Threats | Lack of inter-agency collaboration Trends in family support policy and provision Lack of funding |

Note. EBPP=evidence-based parenting programs; EBP=evidence-based practice

engagement and eligibility criteria) were reported by three practitioners. Only two practitioners described *intervention characteristics* as influencing them not to initiate the EBPP use. Specifically, one practitioner perceived a lack of need for Standard Triple P in the organization, and another stated that this program did not fit the organization's priorities.

Perspectives of Different Levels of the System on EBPP Sustained Use

Analyzing the interviews with the practitioners, the organizational managers, and the system-level representatives, we realized that the three levels of the system share perspectives about the characteristics of the CPS that may be promoting or limiting the sustained use of EBPP. Table 3 presents the sub-themes that emerged from analyzing the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities perceived by these participants. A more detailed description, illustrated with excerpts, is presented in Supplemental Material 3 (See Table S3.1 for strengths, Table S3.2 for weaknesses, Table S3.3 for opportunities, and Table S3.4 for threats).

All three levels of the system agreed that the main strength of the CPS that facilitates the sustained use of EBPP is the existence of specialized support services for families. Specifically, these three stakeholder groups echoed the importance of the Centers for Family Support and Parental Counseling, which assists parents in developing parenting skills. Specifically, practitioners and organizational managers reflected on the role of leadership support in these organizations, which should encourage and provide the conditions for the sustained use of the programs being delivered. Along with this, all three stakeholder groups noted the increased awareness of organizations and professionals about the importance of using EBPP in their practice.

There was a sense that professionals and organizations were favoring the adoption of programs that were shown to be effective instead of developing new ones that facilitate the implementation and sustained use of EBPP.

Practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives agreed that the Portuguese CPS's intervention frame and guiding principles promote the sustained use of EBPP as it is focused on family preservation. Specifically, they highlighted the principles of parental responsibility and subsidiarity. With this frame, the intervention is carried out so that the parents undertake their duties in relation to the child, and, in the first place, the situation is solved by the family's closest institutions, and the child's out-of-home placement is the last resort.

All three levels of the system reported the lack of organizational capacity and workforce stability as the main weaknesses of the CPS that may be limiting the sustained use of EBPP. Practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives all agreed that scarce human and material resources, combined with the high case workload, make it challenging to integrate manualized and structured parenting programs into services provided to families. Additionally, they noted that precarious and scarce employment contracts and staffing and leadership turnover exacerbate workplace tiredness and hinder the sustained use of EBPP.

The practitioners and the system-level representatives also highlighted the overfocus on remediation as a weakness of the CPS. These participants perceived a crisis-oriented work in child protection practice in Portugal, which hinders the sustained use of EBPP because families, in these late interventions, are more likely to face several adversities, decreasing their availability for attending and the availability of professionals for delivering an EBPP. Along with this, practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives reported that the setting and the target population characteristics of the CPS are, in themselves, factors that weaken the sustained use of EBPP. They argued that the involuntary nature of child protection services leads to parents' resistance to EBPP as they consider their participation in these programs mandatory. Additionally, the three levels of the system perceived a lack of organizational culture and readiness for evidence-based practice in the CPS at the national level. They highlighted the insufficient number of professionals qualified to deliver EBPP considering the workload and demand of this system.

Practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives agreed that a prevention approach to child protection is the most significant opportunity the CPS can harness to strengthen its capacity to sustain EBPP use. Within this sub-theme, the three levels of the system highlighted the importance of early intervention and the implementation of these programs at the population level.

Practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives share the perception that public and private agencies with competence in matters of childhood and youth, such as schools, health centers, and NGOs should become more involved. There was a common vision that these agencies, by virtue of their functions, are privileged to refer parents to EBPP at an early stage when problems arise.

The organizational managers and the system-level representatives highlighted that an opportunity to promote the sustained use of EBPP in the CPS is through a participatory approach, through the involvement of professionals and families since the design of the EBPP and through participatory policy making, in which professionals and agency directors are involved in planning and policy development. Additionally, these participants highlighted that partnerships with academia are an opportunity that organizations can exploit to their advantage in improving the uptake and sustained use of EBPP, particularly through program evaluation and knowledge dissemination to encourage a culture of evidence-based practice.

Finally, the practitioners and the system-level representatives perceived a lack of inter-agency collaboration as threatening the sustained use of EBPP, mainly due to insufficient and untimely communication and articulation between professionals from different service sectors and levels (e.g., regarding family referrals). Only system-level representatives pointed out some trends in family support policy and provision in Portugal that threaten the integration and sustained use of EBPP, such as fragmented and reactive measures to address child protection and with particular emphasis on approaches to poverty and providing monetary support for families. A system-level representative also perceived the lack of funding to train professionals and invest in disseminating EBPP as a threat to the sustained use of such programs.

Discussion

While there is increasing attention placed on initial implementation efforts, little empirical work has examined factors that facilitate or limit the sustained use of such programs within real-world service systems (Pinto et al., 2024). The present study sought to fill this gap by examining to what extent practitioners sustained or did not sustain Standard Triple P use over time in CPS in Portugal and the factors that influenced it. We also collected their perspectives and the perspectives of other representatives of the CPS at the organizational and system levels on the factors that promote or limit the sustained use of EBPP in this system.

Over the five-year time frame included in this study, our results indicated that, of the 16 trained practitioners,

approximately one-third sustained Standard Triple P use over time within their organization. This is somewhat different from the usage rate found in a population trial of the Triple P system (including practitioners trained in Standard Triple P), which reported a higher rate of the program's sustained use (Sanders et al., 2009; Shapiro et al., 2015). This supports previous literature highlighting that implementation and context are inextricably linked (May et al., 2016) and attests to the persistent challenge of sustaining EBPP as part of routine care practice in social services (Byrne et al., 2023; Hodge et al., 2017). This is consistent with previous studies reporting that most child protection services do not incorporate empirically supported interventions (Agner et al., 2020; Cruz et al., 2024; Weeks, 2021). Specifically, Cruz et al. (2024) characterized the panorama of parenting support interventions delivered by community services in Portugal, including child protection. They found that more than half of the practitioners reported using programs designed by them or their teams and that structured manualized parenting programs were the type of parenting support intervention least frequently indicated. Therefore, we consider that the five practitioners who sustained the use of Standard Triple P can be a step further towards improving this reality.

Our results also indicated that of the eight practitioners who started implementation after training (i.e., current users and stopped users), the majority maintained the usage over time. In addition, we found a high level of concordance between sustained use and institutionalization in that of the five practitioners who are currently using Standard Triple P, four perceived it as institutionalized within their organization. These findings are supported by previous studies (e.g., Reardon et al., 2023; Sanders et al., 2009). As such, further research is needed on the practices of organizations with high degrees of institutionalization, which could improve our understanding of the organizational attributes impacting the institutionalization of programs and the fundamentals for achieving long-term EBPP sustained use.

Our study also found that half of the 16 professionals trained in Standard Triple P had never used the program (or at least did not deliver all the sessions). The high non-usage rate found in our study suggests the potential importance of the immediate post-training time period. Previous studies argued that the balance of barriers and facilitators in the post-training environment may be one of the most critical aspects that influence the success of implementation efforts (Kerns et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 2012). Future studies should evaluate how strengthening implementation support and supervision during this period may facilitate the use of EBPP, especially to promote the use of the program by trained professionals as soon as possible after training. We also suggest that to become an accredited practitioner, professionals should not only complete the training but

also complete, under supervision, the delivery of one program with a family, which could help to anticipate barriers. Further research is also needed to examine to what extent methods to promote the adoption and effective use of EBPP immediately after training may differ from strategies needed to promote sustained use over time, as well as the potential impact of early success on program use and of early failures as a barrier to ongoing implementation (Shapiro et al., 2015).

Interestingly, most of the trained practitioners perceived no specific criteria for them to receive training to implement the Standard Triple P program in their organization. Additionally, practitioners perceived a lack of organizational capacity and leadership support hindering them from sustaining the use of Standard Triple P. These findings suggest that a more thoughtful analysis should be conducted in order to determine criteria for selecting the best practitioners to receive the training and the best leaders in organizations, which should include knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and other characteristics necessary for effective learning, delivery, and overseeing of EBPP (Aarons et al., 2016; Bührmann et al., 2022; Charest & Gagné, 2019).

Non-usage by trained professionals has many consequences in terms of program impact and costs. First, discontinuation of EBPP means that the potential benefits cannot be optimally achieved or will not be maximized to their fullest potential and may not reach the families that would benefit from them the most (Shapiro et al., 2012). Second, failing to sustain EBPP squanders the investment of time and resources made by funders, delivery organizations, and staff, which may contribute to making them wary of future implementation efforts (Shelton et al., 2018; Shelton & Nathan, 2023; Walugembe et al., 2019). Additionally, the lack of EBPP's sustained use may exacerbate social inequalities, particularly if the programs' discontinuation occurs more often in organizations and settings that serve populations that experience vulnerability, such as children receiving child protection services, as those in the current study. Training a workforce in the use of EBPP is a necessary but not sufficient condition to guarantee sustained implementation. It is, therefore, valuable to understand factors associated with the successes and failures of EBPP utilization and find ways to increase usage rates (Dakof et al., 2022).

Our analysis, underpinned by the Integrated Sustainability Framework of Shelton et al. (2018), found that the most frequently identified influences among both practitioners sustaining implementation and those who were non-sustainers were within the domain of the inner context. This finding is consistent with previous studies conducted in different settings, which found that although individual factors were also important, organizational factors had a stronger influence on the sustained implementation of evidence-based

practices (e.g., Beidas et al., 2015; Ma et al., 2023; Moller et al., 2024; Shoesmith et al., 2021). Given this consistency in findings, we suggest that barriers and facilitators addressing inner contextual factors should be of specific focus when developing sustainability strategies. Specifically, the development of leaders advocating EBPP implementation and facilitating the provision of adequate resources and infrastructure where such programs can thrive may be transversal strategies in supporting EBPP sustained delivery across contexts. For instance, previous studies identified several strategies through which leaders can support the use of evidence-based programs, such as proactive planning, budgeting and resource allocation, design of physical space, rewards in organization, and transformational leadership that values evidence and prioritizes program delivery (Aarons et al., 2016; Hodge et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2023; McCarthy & Griffiths, 2021; Powell et al., 2017). Using these types of strategies can promote organizational values and actions that support the continued use of EBPP.

Outer contextual factors (e.g., external partnerships) were more prevalent influences on Standard Triple P discontinuation, whereas intervention characteristics were mostly described by practitioners who are still currently using the program. Regarding the latter, practitioners highlighted the program's adaptability, adjusting the delivery strategy without removing content. This finding is consistent with literature highlighting that flexibility is necessary for programs to be successfully sustained by maximizing the fit between interventions, individuals, and settings (Shelton et al., 2018; Weegar et al., 2018). Future studies should determine what types of adaptations may enhance sustained use while maintaining the program's fidelity. As some non-users described a nonsystematic and nonstructured application of the EBPP contents, which was also found in previous studies, it shows that organizations with professionals trained in EBPP should have requirements and mechanisms for ongoing implementation monitoring to maintain the program's integrity and effectiveness (Shapiro et al., 2015). When an EBPP is put into practice, it should be delivered with high fidelity to replicate the desired outcomes (Carroll et al., 2007; Durlak et al., 2011; Zetterlund et al., 2022). Despite decades of a strict-fidelity perspective being the dominant assumption on how practitioners should use EBPP (Elliott & Mihalic, 2004), nowadays the importance of adaptation is acknowledged to fit the needs and circumstances of their participants and the service environment (Anyon et al., 2019). Future studies should distinguish between acceptable changes that make the program more contextually relevant and modifications that challenge implementation fidelity (Pinto et al., 2025; Stirman et al., 2015).

Our study also elucidates the shared perspectives of professionals from different levels of the system regarding what

is promoting or limiting the sustained use of EBPP in CPS. We found an aligned perception across stakeholder groups, which is consistent with previous literature (e.g., Asgary-Eden & Lee, 2012; Beidas et al., 2016). We suggest that practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives have similar perspectives on the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats of the CPS because each of them reflected not only on their specific level of action but adopted a more systemic view.

Examining the interrelationships between the perspectives of professionals from different levels of the system, we can suggest that the converging message is that Portuguese policies in matters of child protection and family support align with international recommendations and support the sustained use of EBPP. However, there are several gaps in how this is transferred and applied in practice. Specifically, the State's provision of specialized support services to families, particularly those considered to be at psychosocial risk, helps to prevent unnecessary child out-of-home placement and strengthens the sustained use of EBPP. It also illustrates the increased awareness of the evidence base as an underlying principle of interventions delivered in services providing family and parenting support (e.g., Council of Europe, 2006; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). However, the lack of workforce resources and stability within organizations and intervention overfocused on remediation is a significant weakness of the CPS in Portugal that hinders the sustained use of EBPP. This perspective aligns with previous research highlighting that, although children's rights are recognized in law, in practice, social policies often do not reflect a commitment to these rights (Collins & Wright, 2022; Frazer & Marlier, 2014). Commitments to children's rights should not only be stated in legislation or policy plans, but they also need to be materialized in the actual provision of resources. The proportion of budgets that are destined to achieve these rights shows whether they are considered a priority in fact (Carter et al., 2018).

There was a great deal of agreement between practitioners, organizational managers, and system-level representatives that moving from a remediation to a prevention approach in Portugal's CPS is key to promoting the sustained use of EBPP. This is consistent with authors emphasizing that EBPP have a preventive nature, which can be used both universally (primary prevention) and with families in which some risk or difficult situation has been detected (secondary prevention), but they are not designed to treat families in situations of severe crisis or with very crystallized problems (Hidalgo & Jiménez, 2019). Linking the opportunities and weaknesses reported by this study's participants, we suggest that the greater involvement of agencies with competence in matters of childhood and youth (e.g., schools) highlighted by all three levels of the system may be a key opportunity

in helping to address the weakness of over remediation and move towards a prevention approach in family and parenting support (Hidalgo & Jiménez, 2019).

In addition, partnerships with academia were identified by this study's participants as a key opportunity for the sustained use of EBPP, which is in line with previous studies highlighting that community-academic partnerships can be critical in the successful translation of research findings into clinical practice (Isokuortti et al., 2024; Pellecchia et al., 2018). Such partnerships can improve the chances of the program's sustained use, for instance, by providing a mechanism for the continued involvement of multiple stakeholders, problem-solving, procurement of funds, and ongoing technical support (Jiménez et al., 2019). Further evaluation of the key characteristics and effectiveness of community-academic partnerships would be of value to understand how it can improve organizational decision-making and service provision and how it influences public debate or political agenda with the ultimate goal of promoting the successful implementation and sustained use of EBPP.

Perhaps the most interesting point not shared by the three levels of the system was the fact that a lack of inter-agency collaboration was endorsed by the practitioners and the system-level representatives as threatening the sustained use of EBPP but not identified from the perspective of organizational managers. Future research that provides a better understanding of how to build cross-organizational teams within a system is needed. For instance, future studies could use the Interagency Collaborative Team model, a strategy to support implementation through increasing coordination between organizations (Hurlburt et al., 2014). This could be achieved through the development of a seed team, which consists of employees from multiple local organizations that form a core unit of expertise in the selected program to increase effective team functioning through building greater systemic and cross-agency trust (Hurlburt et al., 2014).

The main recommendation that derives from the current empirical study is that it is critical to plan for sustainability as it would allow facilitators and barriers to be identified earlier, which involves more than predicting the likelihood of sustainability. For future studies, we suggest developing a comprehensive plan informed by multiple stakeholders that identifies the changes needed and the priority strategies to support and sustain the EBPP, with specific details of who is doing what, when, and how. Then, organizations can systematically work through this plan for continuous monitoring and quality improvement to sustain EBPP (Shelton et al., 2018; Walugembe et al., 2019). Developing a plan for sustainability and identifying sustainability strategies is still an emerging area within the field and a key topic for future empirical studies. Service delivery systems, such as CPS, should also adopt a specific policy of supporting EBPP, not

only at the legislative and system levels but also at the organizational level, that specifies actions to be internally undertaken to promote the use of EBPP.

Strengths and Limitations

This study brings attention to the sustained use of an EBPP, a topic sparsely addressed by previous research, particularly with families involved in CPS. This work is unique in that it incorporates the perspectives of multi-informants of CPS, not only the views of those most proximal to program delivery, such as practitioners and organizational managers, but also CPS professionals at the system level. Furthermore, we used established definitions and well-supported frameworks in the field of sustainability of EBPP. This makes our data more rigorously, systematically organized, and reported, contributing to a common language in the field.

Some limitations of this study must be considered. First, this study is about the implementation experience of only one EBPP with a limited number of participants, so we cannot claim that their perspectives represent the broader system. Despite this, the perspectives provided came from key actors of the Portuguese CPS, with extensive experience and knowledge about how the system works, which allowed us to develop a rich and contextualized understanding of the sustained use of EBPP in this context. Additionally, perspectives were largely concordant across the different stakeholder groups, and within each group, participants' views were consistent with one another. This convergence lends credibility to the insights generated and suggests that the themes identified reflect meaningful patterns in how EBPP sustained use in CPS is understood. To address this limitation, future studies should gather efforts to collect data from larger samples, including the views of more CPS professionals at the national level, such as government bodies and other professionals from local family support services, as well as those frontline professionals without training in EBPP. By having future research employing quantitative data analyses, using larger sample sizes with random sampling methods employed in clear target populations, the results' generalizability will be enhanced. In addition, future studies should assess different levels of intensity of EBPP use (e.g., frequency of intervention delivery) and its impact on individual, family, and service provision levels.

A second limitation is that this study relied on CPS professionals' self-reports. Future studies should ideally move beyond the perspectives of professionals and include those from parents' and children's perspectives within a participatory research approach, as they are social actors in their own rights and active recipients of support.

Conclusion

This study contributes with insights into the practice of implementation and provides an initial step further in understanding the multi-level factors that impact the long-term sustained use of an EBPP in real-world settings. Elucidating key factors associated with sustained use has strong implications for channeling resources and tailoring training programs accordingly (Dakof et al., 2022).

Making EBPP delivery sustainable in the real world, particularly in CPS, is complex and full of challenges, but this study showed that this is possible with the appropriate ongoing support. Our findings underline the importance of planning for sustainability at the practice, organizational, and system levels to support program delivery over time, which is key to making the best use of public funds and resources and for EBPP to promote children's and their families' wellbeing.

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Data Availability Data is provided within the manuscript or supplementary information files.

Declarations

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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