Evaluating Social Validity: Practice Guide for Evaluating Social Validity for Response to Instruction and Intervention for Behavior (RTI²-B)

The leadership team from Northside Elementary School recently attended an RTI²-B Tier I training provided by their regional Tennessee Behavior Supports Project and has been working on developing a written action plan for implementing Tier I at their school. The team is now ready to share their Tier I action plan with the entire school staff and other important school stakeholders. During the training, the team was introduced to the term “social validity.” They want to know next steps for evaluating the social validity of their Tier I plan. Their goal is to develop a plan that is appropriate and acceptable for their school.

For schools implementing RTI²-B, the School Leadership Team should consist of school leaders (e.g., principal), teachers, staff, and can include members of the community, as well as students. The major functions of the RTI²-B School Leadership Team include: establishing agreements among stakeholders, creating a data-based action plan, implementing the plan, and evaluating fidelity of implementation and outcomes. The RTI²-B School Leadership Team is also responsible for evaluating data from social validity measures to establish and maintain continuous improvements in practices and interventions.

This guide illustrates how to evaluate social validity within the RTI²-B framework.

What is Social Validity?
“Social validity refers to the extent to which target behaviors are appropriate, intervention procedures are acceptable, and important and significant changes in target and collateral behaviors are produced” (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007, p. 704).

Social validity is often thought of as the acceptability or consumer satisfaction of practices or interventions and associated outcomes.

Alan Kazdin² and Montrose Wolf³ discussed the concept of social validity measurement for intervention research and Applied Behavior Analysis. Prior to the late 1970’s, very little attention was given to the consumer satisfaction of participants in behavioral interventions.

Wolf called for participant feedback regarding the goals, procedures, and general acceptability of behavioral interventions. He suggested obtaining
information about social validity by using surveys or questionnaires and recommended this be standard practice in the field of Applied Behavior Analysis.

According to Wolf, social validity should be assessed based upon the following factors:

- the **social significance of the intervention goals** (i.e., is the target behavior of social significance to the student, teachers, parents, caregivers, etc.),
- the **appropriateness of the procedures** (i.e., do the ends justify the means?),
- and the **social importance of the results** (i.e., are consumers/implen-
ters/providers satisfied with the results?)

### Purpose of Evaluating Social Validity

The information obtained from social validity evaluations should inform continuous improvement in implementing the practice or intervention. For example, if a particular intervention has led to a positive behavioral change for students, but the implementers of the intervention (e.g., teachers) report that the necessary resources are too expensive, time-consuming, and require several hours of additional training, then the intervention might be viewed as socially invalid. The information gained from social validity evaluation may lead to modifications of the intervention to make it less costly or more time-efficient. This information may also help identify additional training or supports needed for teachers to implement the intervention.

### How Do We Evaluate Social Validity within the RTI²-Behavior Framework?

Within the RTI²-B framework, the School Leadership Team should routinely solicit feedback from stakeholders (i.e., students, parents and family members, teachers, school staff, school administrators, community members) about their perceptions of school-wide preventative practices (Tier I) as well as specific behavioral interventions at Tiers II and III. Results from social validity evaluations should then inform continuous improvement (see Social Validity Flow Chart for RTI²-B).

In general, to evaluate social validity for any practice or intervention, we ask stakeholders to respond to Likert-type items or scales (e.g., response options ranging from **strongly disagree** to **strongly agree**) and open-ended questions related to perceptions of practices and interventions. There are several existing social validity tools that are available for evaluating preventative practices and behavioral interventions.

For example, the **Primary Intervention Rating Scale (PIRS)** is a survey tool that can be used to evaluate stakeholders’ perceptions of the social validity of the RTI²-B Tier I. The **PIRS** uses a 6–point Likert-type scale with four open-ended questions.

The RTI²-B School Leadership Team should use the PIRS to assess social validity of their RTI²-B Tier I plan prior to implementing their plan and routinely after implementing their plan to guide decision-making and future direction.

For more information on accessing and using the PIRS, contact the Tennessee...
Behavior Supports Project in your region.

The RTI²-B School Leadership Team may also wish to evaluate the social validity of Tier II and III behavioral interventions. To do this, they can use existing social validity tools, such as:

- Behavior Intervention Rating Scale CITE
- Intervention Rating Profile
- Intervention Rating Profile-15 (IRP-15)
- Treatment Acceptability Rating Form

Or, the team can develop their own social validity tools to gather information about stakeholder perceptions. For example, the team may simply ask the implementers (e.g., teachers) open-ended questions or develop Likert-type response options (i.e., ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree):

- Is this intervention effective?
- Do you think this intervention is easy/difficult to implement?
- What components are easy/difficult to implement?
- Are the components disruptive to others?
- Are there changes you would suggest?
- Do you plan to continue implementing this intervention? Why or why not?
- What training and support would help you implement this intervention?

For more information on social validity tools and procedures at Tiers II and III, contact the Tennessee Behavior Supports Project in your region.

Implementation Case Study

The Northside Elementary RTI²-B Leadership Team has developed a written action plan for implementing Tier I, and the team is ready to share its plan with the entire school staff and other stakeholders. They want to determine if there are any tweaks or minor changes that need to be made to their action plan before they begin implementing the plan for the upcoming school year.

Assessing Social Validity of Tier I Prior to Implementing their Plan

The team wanted to evaluate social validity of their Tier I plan by soliciting teachers’ feedback using the PIRS. A representative from the Tennessee Behavior Supports Project helped them gain a copy of the PIRS and determine the best way to have teachers complete the PIRS. They decided to have teachers complete the PIRS electronically (via a web-based survey) during a faculty meeting. The Tennessee Behavior Supports Project helped them set up the survey and access results after all teachers completed the PIRS.

The Northside Elementary RTI²-B Leadership Team looked at a summary of teachers’ responses to the survey. They noticed that the vast majority of teachers agreed or strongly agreed with most of the PIRS Likert-type items that asked questions about the appropriateness and acceptability of the Tier I plan. Results also indicated the vast majority of teachers agreed or strongly agreed about willingness to implement the plan, the reasonableness of the plan, and whether they liked the plan and its purposes, etc.

However, the team noticed that quite a few teachers disagreed with items about whether the procedures for monitoring the plan were manageable. When the team reviewed teachers’ responses to the open-ended questions on the PIRS, they noticed a similar concern: teachers were specifically concerned about the manageability of adding procedures for universal screening of behavior.
Using Social Validity Results for Continuous Improvement

The team discussed PIRS results together and considered options for using these social validity results to guide their next actions. They discussed the following options:

- How can we modify our Tier 1 plan to address teachers’ concerns?
- How can we provide more information and supports for helping our teachers understand procedures for conducting universal screening for behavioral difficulties?
- When would be the most appropriate time to ask teachers to conduct universal screening for behavior?
- What do we need to do to prepare for our first attempt at universal screening? What training should we provide? What materials do we need to ensure universal screening for behavior is a success?
- How can we ensure that our school can efficiently use results from universal screening?

The team also plans to ask teachers to complete the PIRS again at the end of the school year to drive continuous improvement for next year’s implementation plan.

For Further Reading (Resource List)


Endnotes
Tennessee Behavior Supports Project by Region: 2016-2017

The Tennessee Behavior Supports Project (TBSP) is funded by the Tennessee Department of Education and consists of three regional support contracts: Vanderbilt University, University of Memphis - Lambuth, and University of Tennessee, Knoxville. UT Knoxville is the regional support contract responsible for supporting RTI²-B in EastTennessee schools.

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