

Applying CYFERNet Resources to Evaluate Parent/Family Outcomes

A Focus on Implementation Evaluation of Parent/Family Programs

Programs that seek to increase family strengths are based on an underlying assumption that a cascading chain of positive effects will flow out of these programs and result in improved outcomes for children and youth. Program designers reason that as parents learn new skills, families are strengthened and negative outcomes such as child abuse and neglect are diminished. Family programs typically rely on 20 to 40 hours of direct service contact to encourage the acquisition of these new parenting attitudes and skills, as well as the promotion of behavioral changes. Often these programs struggle with implementation problems throughout the program, and especially early on.

Evaluating the kinds of behavioral changes family programs target often requires long-term follow-up of families. Long-term outcomes for at-risk parents—such as fewer subsequent pregnancies among young mothers, fewer months spent on welfare or receiving food stamps, fewer problems associated with substance abuse and fewer arrests related to domestic violence—simply take a long time to achieve and measure. Recently, researchers (Gomby, Culross & Behrman, 1999) have suggested that family programs should focus their evaluation efforts on enhancing implementation and service delivery. The length of time required to demonstrate behavioral changes has thus made conducting effective implementation evaluations a logically sound strategy in terms of improving family programs and promoting positive outcomes for both parents and children.

Case Example: Evaluating the “Families Grow Together” Program

All too often, conventional approaches to evaluation focus on examining only the outcomes of a program without examining the environment in which the programs operate or the processes involved. However, research (Scheirer, 1987) has clearly demonstrated that implementation evaluations are necessary in order to understand what balance between program activities and service delivery is needed to promote the desired outcomes and achieve program success.

When faced with evaluating “Families Grow Together,” the program staff and evaluator recognized two goals: first, a responsibility to report to funders about progress toward achieving program outcomes; and second, a need to overcome a number of barriers or obstacles to improve the program. In addition, while the staff believed that the core program logic was sound, they wondered if they were really satisfying the parents’ needs. Working together, the staff and the evaluator decided to conduct an implementation evaluation.

Quote from “Families Grow Together” Program Staff

“Building trust with many of our families takes a long time. These families lead chaotic lives. Opening them up to trying new things, new ways of interacting with their children is a slow, very slow process. What we’ve liked about this evaluation approach is that the focus isn’t on the families, it isn’t on us—the staff, it really is on the process of conducting the program. And because the evaluation is also assets-focused rather than using the deficit model, it’s been much better received by everyone. The last thing our families need is to feel like they are being examined under some microscope.”



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Program Goals and Objectives

The goal of "Families Grow Together" is to provide at-risk parents with a foundation for enhancing parent-child relationships, reducing child abuse and neglect, and strengthening families. The program is based on an assumption that changing parents' knowledge of child development, their attitudes toward parenting, and their view of themselves as parents will enhance the home environment overall. The program logic reasons that parents who understand child development will become more nurturing. Parents who feel confident in their parenting skills will be warmer and more responsive to their children and thus less inclined to become violent or discipline inappropriately. Once parents begin to respond with warmth and nurturing, children respond differently, become closer to their parents, and thereby feel more attached and bonded. Likewise, as parents spend more time nurturing their children, these interactions between parents and children become self-sustaining and rewarding, and thereby strengthen the entire family well-being.

Description of the "Families Grow Together" Program

"Families Grow Together" is a center-based program that offers workshops and activities to support both parent-parent and parent-child activities. The program lasts 12 weeks and is conducted by trained family educators. Families who have been identified as being at-risk for divorce, child abuse or neglect as well as foster home placement are referred to the program by Child Protective Services and the Department of Social Services. Program topics include parenting skills, child development, communication, and nurturing as well as community and family ties (see Parent/Family NOWG web site).

The "Families Grow Together" program is based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model. The ecology of human development focuses on the environment in which families live, and acknowledges both the direct and indirect influences of extended families, schools, community, culture, economy and nature that either act as barriers or facilitators to a parent's sense of self-efficacy and a family's self-sufficiency, growth and happiness.



Evaluation Plan

After establishing an Evaluation Team (see State Strengthening Evaluation Guide), the first step was to decide on what type of evaluation to conduct. The State Strengthening Evaluation Guide outlines an approach for evaluating a program across the life of the program, through five levels or tiers. After consulting the Guide, the Team decided to focus on Tier 3, "Understanding and Refining" and to conduct an implementation evaluation. Next, the Team decided that the key aspects of implementing the program concerned family engagement, delivery of the program, and the skills and abilities of the family educator in forging rela-

tionships with the families. The objectives of the implementation evaluation were to assess parents' satisfaction with the program, determine if the program was consistent with its original intent, identify program strengths and weaknesses, and identify what could be done to improve the program.

Questions in the evaluation included: What are the critical components and activities of the program? How do these components connect to the goals and intended outcomes for the program? What aspects of the implementation process are facilitating success or acting as barriers?

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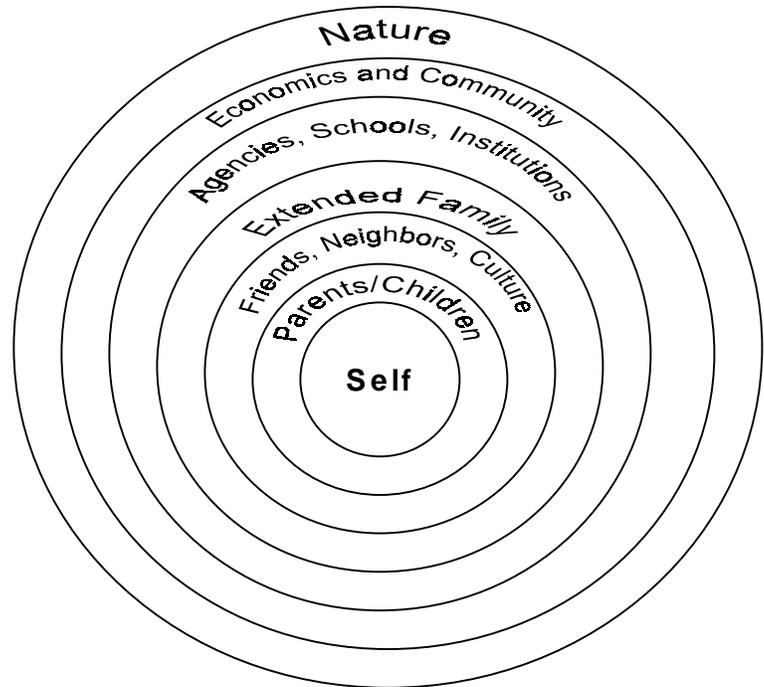
Evaluation Plan continued

To get started, the Team elected to use a modified version of the Family Circles form to identify various facilitators and barriers in the “Families Grow Together” program that seemed to be influencing the implementation of the program. The Family Circles Assessment Form below was adapted from Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model:

Family Circles Assessment Form

Instructions:

1. Think how each of these “circles” influences the program’s ability to reach its goals.
2. Note program implementation barriers and facilitators inside each of the circles.
3. Mark barriers with X’s. Mark facilitators with O’s.
4. Use the identified barriers and facilitators as the basis for developing program improvement recommendations.



Next, the Team used information from the Parent/Family NOWG resources to inform the construction of various implementation evaluation instruments, especially in terms of Nurturing, Communication and Community and Family Ties. Data collection methods consisted of self-report questionnaires, focus groups with the parents, in-depth interviews with program staff, and participant observations of parent-child interactions at selected program events.

Key Evaluation Results

Self-report questionnaires were used to assess changes in parents’ attitudes and skills in three domains: nurturing, communication, and community and family ties. Parents reported feeling closer to their children, more interaction with their children, greater awareness of community resources, as well as social supports. Some parents also reported experiencing less stress, more frequent use of non-violent forms of child discipline, and a greater sense of self-efficacy. Participant observations were conducted to assess progress in encouraging healthy forms of parent-child interactions. Observations noted differences in the ways in which parents nurtured their children. Changes were also noted in the home environments (e.g., the availability of more age-appropriate toys and more books in the homes, and the use of child safety locks). Overall, the evaluation results suggested that the program had influenced parents’ attitudes associated with increasing the attributes of strengthened families and decreasing risk factors.

The implementation evaluation noted that the lack of consistent participation in program seemed to be a reflection of the chaotic nature of some of the families’ lives, the parents’ inability to juggle time commitments, or a general lack of interest apparently associated with an overwhelming sense of hopelessness about the future. The inconsistency with which parents attended and completed the program led staff to focus on what could be done programmatically to encourage parents to complete the program. For example, evening classes were scheduled as “pot-luck” dinners and baby-sitting was provided in order to address some of the barriers to success identified on the Family Circles Assessment Forms. Identification of barriers, such as the lack of support from grandparents and other extended family members led to the creation of family support groups where parents in the program could find mutual support.

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Reporting Evaluation Results

[The following excerpt was taken from a report prepared by the evaluator. The purpose of the report was to summarize the implementation evaluation and provide useful recommendations for improving program implementation and thereby strengthening the probability of long-term program success.]

The implementation evaluation of the "Families Grow Together" program addressed identifying and maximizing strengths in program delivery; identifying and minimizing barriers to implementation; determining if program goals matched the families' needs; measuring the perceptions of the staff; measuring parents' perceptions of the program; assessing the nature of interactions between parents and children participating in the program; assessing the quality of services provided; and monitoring changes in parents' attitudes and skills; and other stakeholders' satisfaction with and utilization of program services.

Specific questions addressed characteristics of program implementation that either facilitated or hindered program goals. It examined how those strategies or activities that were not successfully implemented could be modified or adapted to the realities of the program. The evaluation examined the extent to which the program was reaching the audience, as well as what changes could be made to reach the intended audience more effectively. The evaluation also detailed lessons learned about the program-as intended versus the program-as delivered. Program recommendations focused on ways to address program barriers as well as ways to utilize program facilitators identified in the Family Circles Assessments. Barriers such as "lack of trust" and "sense of isolation" were addressed. When possible, facilitators, such as "friends who have had positive experience with Extension programs," were used to address associated barriers, thereby improving program implementation.

About the Parent/Family NOWG Web Site & Other Resources

The evaluation tools, instruments and resources available through the Parent/Family National Outcome Work Group (NOWG) web site are based on two models, one focused on parenting and the other on family strengths. The parent model was developed by a team of Cooperative Extension parent education experts. It is called the "National Extension Parent Education Model" or NEPEM (Smith et al., 1994). There are six parenting indicators under NEPEM:

- Care for self
- Understand
- Guide
- Nurture
- Motivate
- Advocate

The family model was developed by a number of family researchers, and is known collectively as the "Characteristics of Strong, Healthy Families" model (Krysan et al., 1990). There are nine family strengths indicators in the "Characteristics of Strong, Healthy Families" model:

- Caring and Appreciation
- Communication
- Encouragement
- Time Together
- Clear Roles
- Community & Family Ties
- Adaptability
- Spirituality
- Commitment

The State Strengthening Evaluation Guide should be used in conjunction with the resources presented through the Parent/Family NOWG web site. The Guide offers numerous helpful suggestions for establishing an Evaluation Team, developing an evaluation plan and conducting an evaluation.

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