



## Applying CYFERNet Resources to Evaluate Parent/Family Outcomes

### Assessing the Value of Family Support Programs

#### **Introduction**

Making a strong case for funding family support programs often requires convincing decision makers about the economic value of these programs. Hard-pressed county agencies, local funders, and other decision makers faced with a myriad of funding requests for much needed programs want to know, "What's the return on our investment going to be? What's the cost-benefit comparison look like?"

While it may be relatively easy to calculate the annual savings for farmers who use certain insecticides for high yield crop control, calculating the monetary value and estimating the cost-benefit of strengthened families can be daunting tasks.

This bulletin provides a "how-to" for assessing the value of family support programs, using the principles of cost-benefit analysis outlined by Levin (1983) in conjunction with the tenets of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 1996). This technique for assessing the value of family support programs acknowledges an individualized approach to programming for at-risk audiences, the value of a collaborative, participatory evaluation approach, and the importance of empowering families to set and achieve personal goals (Green et al., 1996).

#### **A "How-to"**

Conducting cost-benefit analyses of social programs can be both complex and controversial—complex because there are many different ways that cost-benefit comparisons can be calculated, and controversial because there will always be an element of ambiguity involved in determining the monetary value of various outcomes. ([Cost-Benefit Analysis: http://ag.arizona.edu/fcr/fs/cyfar/Costben2.htm](http://ag.arizona.edu/fcr/fs/cyfar/Costben2.htm)) The following outlines one approach that has been developed for parent/family programs targeting at-risk audiences. It is a practical approach that emphasizes the need to maintain program records to substantiate benefit claims and the importance of having a systematic process in place that aligns specific outcomes with set dollar values.

#### **Quote from the Family Support Program Staff**

"We are constantly being pressured to demonstrate the benefit of our programs in terms of dollars and cents that our county legislature can easily grasp. At the county level, we just don't have the resources or the evaluation expertise on hand to conduct a sophisticated cost-benefit analysis. This approach has helped us think logically through the multiple benefits of our family support programs and then to translate those outcomes into economic terms our legislators understand. We feel that this gives us a way to demonstrate and communicate the value of our family programming in important ways."



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## Step 1: Create the cost-benefit team

The first step is to form the “cost-benefit team.” The team will play a crucial role in defining the value of the program outcomes. Therefore, it is important to include educators, evaluators, program practitioners and parents on the team. Each brings certain insights that add to the validity of the cost-benefit assessment. Parents may be able to share personal stories about the value of the program from their perspective, while educators may be able to see the “big picture” and anticipate benefits down the road. (See [State Strengthening Evaluation Guide: http://ag.arizona.edu/fcr/fs/cyfar/evalgde.htm](http://ag.arizona.edu/fcr/fs/cyfar/evalgde.htm) for more information on forming a team.)

## Step 2: Define the elements to be evaluated

The next step is to define the broad outcome areas of the program. The “Assessing the Cost/Benefit of Multiple Parent/Family Outcomes” form shown here was developed by a family support program “cost-benefit” team comprised of an evaluator, home visitor, program supervisor and family support program assistant. In the example shown, the team defined anticipated outcomes in the following areas: income and/or financial assets; level of education or marketable skills; knowledge of good health and nutrition practices; safety of home environment; sense of community connectedness and knowledge of human service resources; parenting skills; knowledge of child development and care practices; family relationships, strengths, dynamics; personal goals or aspirations; and individual strengths or assets. This form could easily be adapted to similar family support programs. It is important to note that the form acknowledges both the individual strengths/assets as well as the risks families bring to a program. For example, a mother might be considered to be “at risk” because she is in an abusive marriage, but she might bring a strong personal commitment to seek counseling and get out of the relationship which could be considered an asset or strength.

Assessing the Cost/Benefit of Multiple Parent/Family Outcomes										
Date: _____		Completed by: _____				For Participant: _____				
*Pre-program*	Income/Assets	Education/Skills	Health/Nutrition	Housing/Environment	Community Connectedness	Parenting Skills	Child Development	Family Relationships	Personal Aspirations	Personal Strengths
Major life Issues										
or										
Goals Identified by Participant										
Assets										
Neutral										
Risk										
Indicate approximate amount of time involved in program: _____ (months)										
*Post-program*	Income/Assets	Education/Skills	Health/Nutrition	Housing/Environment	Community Connectedness	Parenting Skills	Child Development	Family Relationships	Personal Aspirations	Personal Strengths
Major life Issues										
or										
Goals Identified by Participant										
Assets										
Neutral										
Risk										

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## Step 3: Estimate the cost of the program

Convincing decision makers that family support programs make economic sense means following a process, being systematic and maintaining careful program records. Here it is important to be as thorough as possible. Of course the salary of program staff will need to be included, but what about the estimated value of volunteers' time? What about office space, supplies, refreshments, transportation vouchers, or babysitting provided during training sessions? All of these things may need to be considered in order to build a strong case to justify the cost of the program.

## Step 4: Conduct the program evaluation

The cost-benefit analysis process outlined in this bulletin is based on using the "Assessing the Cost/Benefit of Multiple Parent/Family Outcomes" form as the framework for the program evaluation. Essentially, this form is a pre-post instrument designed to be completed by the family support educator. The form lists both potential risk areas as well as asset areas and is consistent with the tenets of empowerment and participatory evaluation. At the beginning of the program, the educator makes a "pre-program" assessment of each program participant in each outcome area (as applicable), indicating major life issues and/or goals for the program participant. The educator then makes a determination of whether each area represents an asset, a risk or is somewhat neutral. Next, the educator makes a "post-program" assessment, indicating the amount of time the individual spent in the program, changes in major life issues and/or progress toward goals, and a second assessment of changes in asset/risk status. In other words, was a risk mitigated or lessened? Did the program participant develop a new asset or strengthen an existing asset? (See the example of completed form below.)

### Example of Completed Form

#### "Pre-program" Assessment

Major life issues or Goals Identified by Participant	Income/Assets	Education/Skills	Health/Nutrition	Housing/Environment	Community Connectedness	Parenting Skills	Child Development	Family Relationships	Personal Aspirations	Personal Strengths
Boyfriend has minimum wage job, no benefits Both parents are high school drop-outs Not eating well during pregnancy 1-bedroom in run-down public housing complex Isolated, few positive role models or friends; no support network Reports of child abuse; physical punishment is the norm 3-year old is not speaking Tensions with the mother's family; some evidence of domestic violence (although denied)									Both parents want to be good parents. Mother wants to learn to read and help children succeed	Mother is eager to learn; strong desire to have a "better life" than she says she had while growing up
<b>Asset</b>									X	X
<b>Neutral</b>										
<b>Risk</b>	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		

#### "Post-program" Assessment\*

Major life issues or Goals Identified by Participant	Income/Assets	Education/Skills	Health/Nutrition	Housing/Environment	Community Connectedness	Parenting Skills	Child Development	Family Relationships	Personal Aspirations	Personal Strengths
Parents have married. Husband has job with benefits Mother is learning to read Nutrition during pregnancy improved; baby born with healthy birth weight Purchased a house with retroactive SSI; keeps house clean; house has been baby-proofed Mother volunteers occasionally at the Extension office Using positive parenting more often; no abuse reports 3-year old is now in speech program Fighting somewhat less; tensions with mother's family continue	X			X					Same	Both parents express a strong desire for a better life
<b>Asset</b>	X			X					X	X
<b>Neutral</b>		X	X		X	X	X			
<b>Risk</b>								X		

\* Approximate amount of time involved in program: 24 months

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## **Step 5: Estimate the value of the program outcome**

This is clearly the most challenging—and potentially most controversial—step in the process. Here it is up to the team to decide which outcomes can be most closely aligned or attributed to the family support program and which outcomes can be quantified in dollar and sense terms. The Department of Social Services, Office of Family and Children, and the Department of Health are good resources in most counties and states to tap for information and assistance in estimating costs. Costs will vary from state to state. A number of resources are available through CYFERnet-Parent/Family (<http://www.cyfernet.org/parent.html>) which may be useful in calculating the costs associated with such things as:

- ◆ Estimated cost of foster care or out-of-home placement for abused or neglected children.
- ◆ Estimated savings to taxpayers for individuals transitioned from welfare to work (i.e., potential earnings and spending; benefits to local economy).
- ◆ Estimated earning potential of individuals completing GED, technical training programs, and/or college degrees.
- ◆ Estimated savings in Medicaid costs for individuals suffering from injuries, trauma or stress related to domestic abuse or violence.
- ◆ Estimated medical cost savings associated with low birth weight babies as compared with normal delivery (i.e., for programs targeting high risk pregnancy prevention).

The following example shows how cost savings were calculated for a family support program that targeted reuniting families and lessening foster care.

### **Cost savings calculation for a family support program targeting the parents of abused and neglected children**

Estimated cost of foster care for a neglected/abused child:

\$11.62 per day per child for regular foster care board, room and basic expenses

\$48.00 per day per child for therapeutic foster care expenses

Estimated savings for reuniting 15 families (with a total of 21 children):

15 children @\$11.62 per day for 6 months = \$31,374

6 children @ \$48.00 per day for 6 months = \$51,840

Total estimated cost savings = \$83,214 (minus program costs)

Source: Doctoral dissertation (Knapp-Inez, K., 1998) Louis de la Parte Institute (FMHI), University of South Florida

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## Evaluation Reporting

Based on an aggregated analysis of the “Assessing the Cost/Benefit of Multiple Parent/Family Outcomes” forms, the evaluation data indicate that parents (n=53) in the family support program realized positive gains along ten core dimensions central to programming for strong parents and healthy families: 52% of the parents increased their income/assets; 48% increased their education level/skills; 98% improved their health/nutrition; 53% improved their housing/environment; 89% improved their sense of community connectedness; 86% increased their parenting skills; 81% increased their knowledge of child development; 87% increased their family strengths characteristics; 57% increased their sense of hopefulness and aspirations; and 90% increased their personal strength assets. Of the 53 parents enrolled in the program, 12 completed GED programs, 4 entered college, 6 completed technical training programs, and 14 secured full-time employment. Fifteen families with children (n=19) who had been in foster care were reunited. Using an estimated foster care savings of \$112,550 (for one year), the estimated benefit of the family support program (minus program costs of \$62,342) was calculated to be \$50,213. In addition, the earning potential of the 36 parents who demonstrated education and/or income gains (less current and future welfare costs) was also expected to substantially increase the economic value of the family support program in subsequent years.

## 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 this 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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