

## Applying CYFERNet Resources to Evaluate Parent/Family Outcomes

### Empowerment Evaluation: Using Evaluation to Guide Policy and Practice

#### Introduction

Empowerment evaluation is defined as the use of evaluation concepts, techniques, and findings to foster improvement and self-determination (Fetterman, 2000). As Fetterman (2000) explains, “It is designed to help people help themselves and improve their programs using a form of self-evaluation and reflection. Program participants—including clients—conduct their own evaluations; an outside evaluator often serves as a coach or additional facilitator depending on internal program capabilities” (p. 1.)

This evaluation approach is consistent with programs that seek to foster self-sufficiency among at-risk audiences. Additionally, empowerment evaluation utilizes a strengths or assets-based approach which can guide policy and inform practice.

#### Why Empowerment Evaluation?

According to the organization *Save the Children* (Morrell & Terao, 2000), empowerment evaluation “promotes self-sufficiency within the organization and among associated community partners, allows for customized evaluation of a diverse selection of programs/activities, and supports efforts for continuous program improvement” (p. 7). Quite simply, using empowerment evaluation to guide Extension programs and practice makes sense. County-level staff need the practical kind of self-evaluation tools and substantiated findings that are developed while conducting an empowerment evaluation. The steps outlined in this bulletin provide an introduction to this useful evaluation approach.

#### Quote from the Family Friends Coordinator

Our program is all about empowerment so this approach was a perfect compliment to our program. Empowerment evaluation really allows our community partners and the parents in our program to have ownership and involvement in all phases of the evaluation process. In fact, we’ve gotten great ideas about how to improve program activities from these folks. In terms of being accountable to our funders for documenting program outcomes, empowerment evaluation has been a concrete, very down-to-earth process for defining positive changes—especially from the perspectives of the program participants. This evaluation approach is really valuable. This helps me, as a parent educator, do a better job of directing program activities that the parents have helped designed, ones that they say are helpful to them. In that respect, this evaluation has been empowering to both the parents and me!

## Steps of Empowerment Evaluation

There are essentially three steps in the empowerment evaluation process.

**Step 1:** Consistent with the [State Strengthening Evaluation Guide](#) (Callor, Betts, Carter, Marczak, 1997), the first step is to establish a mission or vision statement about the program. The idea is to collectively define—with the input of program participants—what everyone involved in the program (i.e., members of the evaluation team) would like to see from the program based on the intended outcomes of the program. The group then works backwards to specify the program activities required to achieve those outcomes.

**Step 2:** This step involves identifying and prioritizing program activities. Typically, program staff and program participants rate how well they feel the various activities that make up the program are being carried out. A simple rating scale, such as assigning a 1 for poor to a 10 for outstanding, can be used as the basis for a discussion about the activities. This discussion gives everyone involved an opportunity to assess where the program stands including its strengths and weaknesses.

**Step 3:** This step outlines a plan for future program implementation. Here the group conducts a brainstorming session to come up with goals and strategies to achieve their dreams (Fetterman, 2000). Typically, this is the step that needs to tap the expertise of an evaluator, who helps program staff members and program participants identify the type of evidence required to document progress toward their goals. This is a critical step both in terms of the soundness of the evaluation plan and the extent to which the local evaluation capacity is strengthened. When empowerment evaluation becomes a part of the normal cycle and process of planning and managing the program, it becomes internalized and institutionalized. And these are important milestones on the path to strengthening local evaluation capacity.

### A Description of the *Family Friends* Program

The *Family Friends* program's primary objective is to empower families. The program aims at encouraging families growth and development through individualized, goal-oriented learning plans. A trained Extension educator puts together individualized plans for each home-visited family. Topics or areas of interest covered by the *Family Friends* program typically include: home safety, parenting skills, nutrition, money management, family planning, household management, community resources, personal issues, job preparedness, and access to educational opportunities in the community.

Through regular home visits, the *Family Friends* Extension Educator becomes "part of the family." In fact, she is often seen as an indispensable family asset. After gaining confidence in achieving small, incremental goals, many of the *Family Friends* participants are ready to identify longer-range goals such as returning to school, getting a GED, finding employment, or even buying a new home.

## Evaluation Reporting

During the course of one year, the *Family Friends* educator maintained individual files on each family enrolled in the program. These files consisted of an initial interview form—a benchmark, or baseline identification of the family’s current living conditions; a monthly log detailing when home visits were made, what was done during the visit, any referrals made, circumstances warranting special consideration (e.g., a mother might be suffering post-partum depression), and a brief assessment of “goal status progress”; a “Checklist for Family Friends” used to guide the educator in evaluating environmental issues as well as parenting and nurturing skills; and the “Family Friends—My Personal Planner” which was filled out by the educator and the family to identify areas to be worked on *together* as a team.

To take advantage of this wealth of existing data, the *Family Friends* educator was asked to revisit the records she maintains and to complete the *Family Friends* Documentation Review Guide for each family (Also see [Peterson, 1998](#)). The guide, developed by the Evaluation Team in conjunction with the empowerment evaluation approach, asked the Extension educator to reflect critically on the extent to which early childhood risk and/or protective factors had been positively impacted through participation in the *Family Friends* program. After completing these assessments, the completed guides were sent to the evaluator for analysis. In addition to this comprehensive documentation review process, the evaluation consisted of group discussions with the program participants and in-depth interviews with the *Family Friends* educator.

One need only talk to the families participating in the *Family Friends* program for a short while to discover that there was something special about this program. Perhaps it was the one-on-one, individualized attention the *Family Friends* coordinator offered, the trust the educator established with each family, or the flexibility of the programming approach that won such unanimous support for the program. As one participant reported:

She [Extension educator] doesn’t nag at us, she just helps us with everything. She’s taught us everything from stuff about child development to cooking recipes. She’s just awesome in this community. She helped us get a smoke detector, shared ideas on saving money and using coupons to do our grocery shopping. She even helped us child-proof the home. One time she baby-sat so we could go out and just be together, alone for a little while. It’s tough being a young parent on a restricted budget and she knows what it’s like. We don’t know what we would do without her.

The table, on the next page, highlights some of the results of the document review. The figures represent the total percentage of *Family Friends* participants experiencing positive changes as a result of the program. They are based on a total of approximately 383 home visits to 17 families for an average of 23 home visits per family over a six- to eight-month period. It is important to note that percentages of less than 100% should not be interpreted negatively. The “Comments” column provides specific examples of the ways in which the targeted risk and/or protective factors were positively impacted.

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## Summary of Success Indicators for *Family Friends* (n = 17)

(Figures are based on a total of 383 home visits; average no. of home visits = 23)

Early childhood risk and/or protective factor	Percentage of FF participants experiencing positive change	Comments
Maternal health	53%	*Healthy delivery *Full term babies born
Socioeconomic status	88%	*Learning to be independent *Secured part time employment
Birth weight	65%	*Babies born within healthy weight range
Lead poisoning	18%	*Landlord agreed to re-paint bedrooms
Child abuse	53%	*Got order of protection from abusive spouse
Childhood illnesses	71%	*Keeps well child clinic appointments *Immunizations current
Nutritional status	82%	*Provides healthy snacks *Participating in EFNEP *Cans and freezes foods in season
Responsible parenting	100%	*Responsive to physical and emotional needs of the children *Demonstrates more affection *Provides praise
Parental discipline	88%	*Completed assertive discipline course *Demonstrates healthy parenting skills

### 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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