

Welcome to Evaluation

Evaluation is a field of applied science which seeks to understand how a successful social program may be designed, implemented, assessed, and sustained in a specific community (Ostrom, Lerner & Freel, 1995).

The information collected during an evaluation will allow you to make informed decisions concerning a program's worth and provide the opportunity to capitalize on program strengths. In addition, the ongoing feedback process that occurs during evaluation will allow you to fine-tune your program and make it more effective.

An evaluation will allow you to:

- **Document what happened in the program;**
- **Tell which strategies worked best in the program; and**
- **Assess the short-term outcomes and the long-term outcomes of the program.**

Evaluating and improving a program takes effort. It takes discipline, wisdom, persistence, and an eye for detail. At times, this process may seem slow and time consuming. Program improvements, and thus better services, are the result of the "thoughtful collaboration between funders and service providers on an appropriate strategy for evaluating accountability" and this can take time (National Collaboration for Youth, 1996). The end result of your hard work will be a stronger, more effective program.

Generally, an evaluation focuses on the process of program functioning, the short-term outcomes, and the long-term outcomes of the program. The reasons for doing each and the types of information you'll gather are discussed next.

Process Evaluation

The types of information collected in a process evaluation will tell:

- If the participants are those the program intended to serve;
- If program services/activities are provided in the manner proposed;
- How resources have been and are currently being used; and
- The “story” behind program delivery.

Short-Term Outcome and Long-Term Outcome Evaluations

Short-term outcome evaluations focus on short-term effects of the program, whereas long-term outcome evaluations focus on the long-term effects.

The types of information collected in outcome evaluations will:

- Tell if the program was effective in meeting its objectives; and
- Provide concrete evidence to stakeholders concerning program effects.

Short-term outcome and long-term outcome evaluations are not just at the end. Outcome evaluations should be continually performed.

How about an Example?

Below is an example that highlights the benefits of evaluation. This example will continue throughout the guide to demonstrate how the tasks associated with evaluation might be applied.

Concerns surrounding reading difficulties of children at Brown Road Elementary School were confirmed when the principal, teachers, and parents received results from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. A group of concerned individuals approached their county Extension agent for assistance in developing a reading program that could be supported by the resources of the larger community.

Because resources were limited, the Extension agent suggested they become a New Communities targeted community.

To decide the most appropriate strategy for tackling the problem of reading deficiencies, the group (Extension agent, parents, teachers, and the principal) turned to the research literature base available through the CYFERnet. They learned that teen tutored academic programs were often successful since younger children tended to look up to and listen to teenagers. In addition, the literature highlighted the positive benefits of teens taking positions of responsibility. Since the group was hopeful that this approach would work well in their school and promote positive outcomes in teens, they invited members from the adjacent high school to join them. This new team now consisted of the Extension agent, principals from both schools, several teachers, parents and teens, two local business owners, and a university evaluator.

Among the first questions the team had to consider included: What curriculum would be used? How would teens be recruited and trained? Which children would receive help? When would tutoring sessions meet?

To identify an appropriate curriculum, the Extension agent worked with an Extension specialist at the Land-grant university.

Several 4-H leaders offered to recruit and train teens interested in tutoring. The first round of tutors were accepted on a volunteer basis.

To pilot test the program, the team chose the classroom with the lowest grades in reading. Children from that classroom were enrolled in the program if their reading grades were below a "B-" on the last report card.

Finally, there was the decision as to when the program would meet. Teachers were concerned that participants would miss other classes if tutoring occurred during the day, while parents were concerned that some children would be unable to attend if tutoring took place after school. It was decided that tutoring would occur during the second part of lunch period three days per week.

During the early months of program implementation, short-term outcome evaluations revealed that the program was having the desired effect; reading grades were on the increase for target children. The team examined grades in other classes, as improved reading ability should apply to other subjects where reading was necessary. The results showed that math grades increased, but that history grades declined slightly.

The team also examined grades of teen tutors. The results were somewhat confusing here as well; some grades increased and some declined slightly.

Concerned about the findings and unsure whether program benefits outweighed the costs, the team examined the process of the program. The data from the process evaluation uncovered that:

- Math scores increased for target children because they could read the text better (incidentally, math met in the morning);

- History grades declined in target children, not because children couldn't read the text, but because history met later in the day. Children were not getting enough to eat at lunch on tutoring days, and consequently, were hungry and easily distracted during afternoon classes; and

- Teen tutors suffered in classes that met after lunch because their hunger distracted them, as well.

Feedback from the process evaluation resulted in program modifications that allowed participants and tutors to snack during the tutoring sessions. At the mid-term, grades in most academic areas increased slightly for target children and tutors. Parents, children, teachers, and the principals were pleased with the results.

During the rest of the school year, continuous feedback from the ongoing evaluation encouraged many other program improvements. At the end of the year, a short-term outcome evaluation examined the effects of the program. The team and many other stakeholders were pleased to see that the majority of improved academic grades were maintained for both target children and teen tutors. In addition, process evaluation revealed that target children enjoyed school more than they had before because of the added attention from older students. Teen tutors also expressed more enjoyment in school as they felt "important and useful." The promising results from this pilot program led to the development of a larger teen tutoring program that included children in other classrooms and teens at risk for school dropout.

Optimistic about the possible long-term benefits to children and teens in the program, the team designed a plan to assess long-term outcomes in the future.