

# Introduction

Community programs providing opportunities or delivering services for youth have been developed by a variety of organizations: schools, private associations, clubs, community groups, government and non-profit non-governmental agencies, tenants' associations, municipal departments and more. In 2003 and 2004, The Offord Centre for Child Studies was fortunate to work with staff from about 40 such agencies and community groups across Canada as a resource for their evaluation planning, in a funding initiative of Sun Life Financial. All programmers face the need to examine their operations and programming, to evaluate their accomplishments in relation to their objectives. The flood of information on the Internet and in libraries about how and why to 'evaluate' can be overwhelming.

This toolkit supports what is already being done in a number of excellent programs across the country to evaluate the impact of their activities on children and youth. It focuses on the needs of both fledgling and more established groups with limited resources. Building on a range of community experience, it

- incorporates basic yet comprehensive guidance in one place
- addresses common concerns, and
- provides examples of workable methods and tools

A key goal of the Offord Centre for Child Studies is to help promote practices that will improve our children's chances for success in life. It is an organization committed to research and to the dissemination of that research into the community. Wherever possible, research must be translated into actions that make a difference in society. The toolkit is an investment in community programming futures. Like any good investment, we hope it provides returns in the type of quality programming that can change lives. A growing bank of research in the United States, Canada and elsewhere shows that children can be helped to succeed even if they have less chance of success than other kids. One method is access to programs that help them connect with people, develop their skills and give them hope for a future which has a place for them in it. Good quality, effective programming can help children who face hurdles in life and lack those opportunities get back on track. Good quality, effective programming can provide positive learning experiences for all children.

## Who could benefit?

This basic toolkit offers some guidance about self-evaluation: a sequence of steps for planning and designing a program evaluation, developing useful data collection tools, analyzing and using data, and communicating results. It also provides examples of data collection tools currently in use in Canadian communities by a variety of programs both large and small. The ideas offered here would be relevant for groups offering programs intended to improve some aspect of community life. Groups starting out to offer programs could benefit as the toolkit offers guidance to help develop an organizational mindset about evaluation and build it into program planning. However, existing groups might also use the toolkit to compare its suggestions with their own activities or to gain practical advice for incorporating evaluation into a new session.

Programs that informed this toolkit, though considerably varied, concentrated on youth development strategies and included variations of elements to enhance skills, knowledge, attitudes and motivation.

- Homework, academic, computer skills
- Literacy
- Pro-social skills, e.g., co-operation, teamwork, peaceful conflict resolution, bullying awareness, empathy, cultural sensitivity
- Positive family interaction and support
- Athletic, active recreation
- Creative arts, e.g., art, music, drama, native drumming
- Life skills, e.g., cooking, gardening
- Enrichment experiences: outings, presentations, family activities
- Leadership training
- Mentoring, counseling, perception/awareness training
- Positive peer examples
- Employment-related skills
- Volunteer service

The appendix contains examples of data collection forms used in current programs that may spark ideas for simple methods of data collection. As field-tested tools, they are often compromises between theory and practicality and may be modified to better suit individual situations. Selected resources and references to explore topics in greater depth are provided in References and Resources.

## Evaluation as process

- Evaluation is best considered as an ongoing process:
  - a) to provide data that aids decision-making
  - b) allows for periodic adjustments during programming
  - c) encourages coordination and cooperation of all stakeholders
- The following steps concentrate on the development of criteria for examining the effectiveness of programming over time.
- In contrast to one-time evaluations at the close of a session, periodic, longer term or continuous evaluations, encourage programmers to:
  - a) take note of the process,
  - b) develop a broader perspective about the effects of a program—on participants, volunteers, families—and
  - c) consider explanations for its varying levels of effectiveness.