

Preparing the Groundwork for Evaluation

STEP 1

Start to Plan Early
Define the Evaluation Purpose and Scope
Develop Realistic Expectations
Promote a Pro-Evaluation Attitude
Include Ethics and Respect for Individuals
Anticipate Evaluation Results
Identify How to Use the Evaluation

1.1 Start to plan early

It is ideal to develop evaluation plans while designing a new program and working through objectives, activities and related factors. However, managers may also need to develop or modify an evaluation process for an existing program.

Plan the evaluation as part of program development

New programs

- include evaluation as an integral part of the program during program planning
- discuss the role of evaluation in initial community discussions, needs assessment and planning meetings
- consider what evaluation implies – i.e.,
 - how to monitor and evaluate what happens in the program,
 - determine if the program is worthwhile for the time, effort, energy and money involved;
 - learn about the program's strengths and weaknesses
- thinking about what and how to evaluate will help
 - clarify objectives and program activities and
 - prevent misunderstanding among partners and stakeholders

- use planning tools, e.g.,
 - program logic model
 - theory of change model (See Step 2 for more details.)
- include evaluation costs in program budgets, grant proposals and other funding requests.

Existing programs

- develop evaluation plans for the next session along with budgets, funding proposals or new operation plans
 - factor in sufficient time and resources before next session
- include partners and stakeholders in the evaluation planning where feasible
- developing or modifying evaluation plans during a program session is difficult but possible:
 - new/revised evaluation methods can be tested
 - preliminary results can inform ongoing practice

1.2 Define the evaluation purpose and scope

Communities are coming to understand that steps taken to help children’s development can have long lasting consequences for their health, happiness and success as adults. Evaluations that look at the effects of programs launched to help youth can provide data to validate programming efforts and directions and guide programming change. Some types of evaluation do not consider program effects.

What is the evaluation purpose? What is to be evaluated?

At the outset of planning, understand the different types of evaluations, what you and others expect to achieve and set parameters accordingly to avoid later confusion and encourage a shared purpose among stakeholders.

Types of evaluations include: service evaluation, process evaluation, organizational review, outcome evaluation.

This toolkit provides guidance for extending evaluation to include outcomes.

- **service evaluation** (also called **program evaluation**) looks at service delivery,
 - *what is delivered to participants*
 - how it compares with what the organizers promised would be done
 - customer service –quality of participants’ experience and satisfaction

- **process evaluation** looks at *how/how well* the program is delivered
 - what relationships are involved
 - how well they operate
 - addresses weaknesses, e.g., what is not being done and why

- an **organizational review** looks at organizational set-up for service delivery
 - roles and responsibilities of staff
 - resources
 - performance
 - training needs

- **outcome evaluation** looks beyond service delivery
 - to assess a program’s value to participants, in terms of
 - *what benefits participants and others gained from program,*
 - *what changes may have occurred in them (knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviour)*
 - *possible ripple effect in the family, classroom and/or community*
 - basic questions include:
 - 1) *Is the program meeting the needs of participants?*
 - 2) *Why might it not be?*
 - 3) *Is the strategy working as planned?*
 - 4) *Is the program reaching the target audience?*

For whom and why is the evaluation being done?

Motivating Factors

Motivations may include:

- funders' requirements
- public relations
- to fulfill partnership demands or
- for a research agenda.

Evaluations of existing programs may also be called for

- to encourage sustainability

OR

In response to

- specific questions raised in the community
- observations raised by staff, both positive and negative

Intended Benefits

- trustworthy information that will be meaningful to staff, volunteers and families
- a transparent process
- greater feeling of input from community stakeholders
- community support
- data may allow stakeholders to consider how programming benefits can repay present, or offset future, costs

What should be included?

Whatever initiated the evaluation will dictate to some extent the questions asked.

“Be sure that whatever you do is useful to the project itself, not just an add-on to keep funders happy. Think: what do we who are delivering the program want to know to help us get smarter faster? Build on that.”

– Dr. Fay Martin, Executive Director,
Family Services of Haliburton County.

Building-block data for evaluation

- description of program activities, times, duration, venues
- participant data: registration, full name, contact information
- volunteer data: application data, training material
- program materials
- costs (actual and donated)
- outcomes data (See Step 2)

Record what and how programming was delivered in order to learn more about what types of activities and strategies can be most effective.

Monitoring program costs

Monitoring and regulating costs are aspects of accountability: determining how much a program costs to deliver benefits to the community.

Consider the total cost of remounting a program.

- Track actual spending and the value of donated goods and services, e.g.,
- resources
- facilities
- volunteer time
- discounts and subsidized costs

Programs will not be copied and operated in other areas, despite evidence of effectiveness, if they are too expensive for most communities to run.

Donated contributions reflect the value of staff and community support to your program:

- useful knowledge to aid fundraising
- show areas of vulnerability and strengths that could have a bearing on sustainability

1.3 Develop realistic expectations

Be realistic about the time and help you will need, the available resources, costs and limitations of the evaluation process. Plan carefully to make the evaluation as efficient and meaningful as possible.

Constraints on Evaluation

- levels of knowledge and expertise available
- priorities for resources for program delivery
- program size and numbers
- sources and types of data
- time and funding available
- attitudes and perceptions within and outside the program

Time Demands

Program managers sometimes underestimate the time required for evaluation—and to decide how to explain, report and use findings for program improvement. The analytical stage may also require more time than allotted.

Need an example?

Sorting and analysis of data:

- Quantitative data (coded or numerical) may need to be analyzed by subgroups to answer questions, for example, about whether girls and boys fared differently or whether the program was finding and keeping the target group.
- Qualitative data, e.g., from interviews, focus groups
 - may actually take longer to work through than quantitative results
 - need repeated review by independent readers to discern patterns and intensity of comments

How to reduce limitations?

Weigh the pros and cons of having an external evaluation or outside help to conduct the evaluation, particularly if objectivity is an important consideration. A transparent process and well-designed data collection methods can increase objectivity.

- involvement of partners, external evaluators or outside assistance to increase expertise and resources
- restricting the evaluation to key questions
- planning evaluation in stages over time
- sampling multi-site programs
- use of existing or readily available data
- use of ready-made data collection tools and instruments
- adequate preparation and careful timing to collect sufficient data with minimal call backs (See Step 5)

Remember that evaluation is likely to be an ongoing or at least repeated process in your program, a series of steps toward continued program improvement.

Start with key issues and feasible questions. It is possible to adapt to changing circumstances, learn from experience and amend your evaluation methods as needed over time.

1.4 Promote a pro-evaluation attitude

Stakeholders may agree on the type and purpose of an evaluation and still do so without any measure of enthusiasm or commitment.

Understand the role of volunteers and staff in evaluation

“Do an attitude check - look at evaluation not as a chore or burden or something to be afraid of, but as a learning opportunity and a chance to analyze your program and its effectiveness and make changes to improve it.”

– Doris Martin, Family Services Program Director
House of Friendship, Kitchener, Ontario.

Potential volunteer and staff concerns

- evaluation may be potentially threatening to volunteers and staff
- time and paper work for little value
- irrelevant to daily needs and routines
- imposed from above or outside
- not responsive to staff/volunteer concerns or input

Potential remedies

Start with an inclusive evaluation planning process

- staff and volunteers are more likely to understand the value of evaluation, treat it seriously and feel more comfortable

Consider an outcomes evaluation as a mutual search for knowledge and understanding about how best to help participants.

Value the role of volunteers and staff in conducting the evaluation

- as a continuation of volunteers’ and staff desires to help youth through their involvement
- volunteers are vital to evaluation as a program’s eyes and ears

Include evaluation as a priority in training, manuals and briefings

- encourage volunteers to think about what they see and do in the program and communicate their thoughts
- stress the need for reliable observations, interviews and records as the foundation of evaluation

Listen to staff concerns

- be aware of staff and volunteer needs
- build in sufficient time for consistent, specific record-keeping and feedback sessions into schedules
- monitor and attend to problems
- create regular opportunities for communication so volunteers know their observations are expected and valued

1.5 Include ethics and respect for individuals

Ethical Concerns

Informed consent

The principle of informed consent implies that parents understand their or their children's role in an evaluation:

- that activities will be observed or
- that they will be asked to complete questionnaires on certain topics

Similarly, other informants should be informed on the general nature of the evaluation, asked for cooperation and treated respectfully. Participants or other informants may be reluctant to provide personal information (or have you ask children for it.) Staff may feel discomfort at having to collect some types of personal information. (See Step 5)

Unbiased data

Informed consent may seem at odds with unbiased data.

Informants may be reluctant to voice any criticism of programs if they think:

- negative information will be linked to their children, with negative repercussions
- don't have confidence in personnel
- don't understand how data will be used
- valued programs may be jeopardized

Raised expectations

Be aware of what an evaluation can change. Volunteers, participants and families may respond enthusiastically toward an evaluation, particularly if there is a therapeutic or service element to the program, but have unrealistically high expectations of results. They may expect some follow up to improve their lives or situation or program expansion, which leads to disappointment in the program when it does not materialize.

Ethical policies

- Plan data collection carefully to obtain meaningful data and avoid potential problems (see Step 4)
- Plan clear, open communication and develop relationships of trust with staff and sources of data
- Obtain informed consent from families to obtain necessary data
- Plan safeguards to assure privacy and confidentiality of information (See Step 5)
- Ensure staff is aware how releasing information, personal stories, pictures, data for publicity might affect participants' lives. Parents may not be aware of potential risks.

Need an Example?

After a club identified and publicly praised a youth member as a former gang member who had turned his life around with the help of their youth program, former gang associates attacked both him and family members. The club then revised its policy about identifying individuals, even with permission.

1.6 Anticipate evaluation results

Who will need to see the results?

Consider when planning the evaluation what stakeholders need to know, what various responses could indicate and their importance to particular groups. A well designed, well prepared evaluation will be useful to programmers and meaningful to all who contribute towards it

Can results be explained?

Evaluation may not show what you anticipated. Results may be negligible or negative.

Plan for success but be ready to explain weaknesses and what they may say about assumptions, strategies, activities and procedures.

Some motivations for evaluation, like raising community support and fundraising, assume favourable results. But negative results can also motivate staff and guide program improvement

A positive attitude to evaluation includes, paradoxically, being prepared for negative results.

1.7 Identify how to use the evaluation

Identified uses

- defined by factors that initiated the evaluation: e.g.,
 - program improvement
 - giving direction to community development
 - publicity, community awareness
 - raising community support
 - fundraising
 - staff development
 - volunteer education
 - reports to funders
 - relationship-building with participants/stakeholders

Be open to unanticipated uses for data

Need an Example?

Data collection by a social services agency for a recreation program, documenting levels of activity of youth in local areas was used to inform local government and communities about inequalities and helped spur initiatives by groups as varied as local art galleries and the public health unit.

There will usually be multiple audiences for evaluation results:

- staff and volunteers,
- funders, partners and other supporters,
- participants and families
- the local community and
- perhaps a larger community with specialized interests.

Directed messages

Direct summarized or excerpted results to specific partners or segments of the community using usual channels of communication and readily available media to address specific needs or in response to their participation. (See Step 7).

Sharing results with the research community

Programmers may share researchers' interests to some extent in the mechanisms of a program strategy—why it worked as it did to affect participants. Their focus is on knowledge to improve programming and increase its benefits.

An ever-growing body of data is being amassed to help us all learn what can help children and youth. Much of that data is from programs in the United States, which may or may not be equally representative of Canadian findings. Developing partnerships for evaluation purposes with academic centres and researchers will help promote Canadian knowledge

An underlying message of this toolkit is that the broader community, including academic researchers and community programmers can benefit from knowledge gained through individual outcome-based program evaluations when well designed and well executed.

