Planning a Meaningful Evaluation

STEP 2

In Step 1, relevant parties agreed on the motivation, scope and resources to carry out the evaluation, and considered ethical constraints, attitude and the need to manage expectations.

Step 2 begins the process of designing a particular evaluation tailored for your program, its objectives and strategies with the aid of a logic model.

Select and work through a program logic model

Think about theory of change and strategies

Consider a broad range of objectives to evaluate

Consider the best timing to find expected results

Involve relevant partners and stakeholders

Determine methods for monitoring program results

2.1 Select and work through a program logic model

The recommended model was adapted by the Offord Centre from a program logic model created by the Harvard Family Research Project. (See R1 in Appendix) Alternative models may not address ways of evaluating program impact.

A simple one page model that connects objectives to anticipated results is useful

- for volunteer training
- to ensure that staff and supporters fully understand the direction and thinking behind a program
- at presentations and community meetings to provide a framework for a common understanding, and
- allows program developers and other community residents to challenge their assumptions and reach a common understanding

Writing an evaluation plan forces programmers to clarify their thinking about a program and provides a way of expressing that thinking explicitly to staff and partners.

2.2 Think about theory of change and strategies

Strategies for bringing about change

Isolate the strategy or strategies that explain how various program elements are expected to bring about proposed changes.

Need an example?

For instance, in a program to increase positive self concept and self esteem in native foster children, one activity may be to bring in native guests as positive role models.

Two distinct strategies are involved:

1) to build a sense of belonging to First Nations' culture and to share its ethos by bringing admired elders to teach traditional wisdom.
2) to showcase guests who are successful in modern, mainstream activities to help youth realize future possibilities for themselves.

The theory of change—how and why a program is expected to work—prompts specific questions to test the theory.

Consider indicators of change, timing and contributing factors, e.g.,

- How is change expected to occur?
- When should/does change occur?
- Do changes occur in steps or stages?
- Is each stage recognizable?
- By what signs is each stage recognizable?
- What influences would have a bearing on the changes, either enhancing or limited them?

Your evaluation can provide information of importance to the larger field of youth development. Sometimes differing strategies reinforce one another and increase the effectiveness of programming, particularly when multiple aspects of children's lives are included, such as family and school.

2.3 Consider a broad range of objectives to evaluate

What is most meaningful to evaluate?

Sometimes outside agents such as funders or government agencies identify what they want you to evaluate. However, you may suspect or observe unanticipated effects. Broaden your thinking about might be expected to result and allow room for new discoveries.

Need an example?

The obvious evaluation question in a program putting volunteers into schools to tutor children with learning problems would be: "Did the tutored children improve their reading skills?" However, the programmers also decided to look for effects in tutors— students in teacher training—after working closely with children who struggled with reading difficulties. They found that student volunteers gained considerably in their appreciation of specific literacy problems and became more knowledgeable about terminology, conditions and strategies for helping children. Because the program had such a beneficial effect on the student teachers it was continued as an integral part of the teaching curriculum.

2.4 Consider the best timing to find expected results

Proximal effects

Immediate, direct effects generally of primary interest to community programmers. e.g.,

- for a basketball program, an increase in skills related to playing basketball, but also possible improvements in teamwork, discipline or feelings of competence

Distal effects

More indirect effects or ones that develop in the longer term e.g.,

- for the basketball program, distal effects could be health benefits if the person was motivated by the program to continue playing basketball regularly

Follow up evaluation sometimes shows an increase in effects for a time after the program ends. More typically, effects wash out or diminish over time after a program ends unless there is some reinforcement of what participants gained during the program.

Time the evaluation measurement at the most reasonable time period to expect benefits from your program. e.g.,

- effects of training in pro-social skills or anger-management may build from the end of the program as the family learns, practises and adjusts to new ways of interacting

2.5 Involve relevant partners and stakeholders

Programs with multiple sites and/or partnerships have stressed the importance of open, consistent communication strategies, especially when deciding what effects to investigate.

- maintain a regular flow of information
- assign specific roles and acknowledge expertise

Benefits from early involvement with community

- resources to provide expert advice, contextual information and historical knowledge of community activities
- stakeholders help establish what indicators and degree of change would establish convincing evidence of effectiveness
- challenges and any later necessary adaptations more easily understood, to avoid alienation or disillusionment

2.6 Determine methods for monitoring program results

A number of factors influence the choice of evaluation methodology. e.g.,

- evaluation purpose,
- time and resources available
- level of expertise

Evaluation approaches

Evaluation approaches include experimental, quasi-experimental or non-experimental, longitudinal or single-time, formative and/or summative, comparative or non-comparative (See Glossary.) They can use quantitative methods, qualitative methods or a combination of both. Some methods provide what is considered more reliable information in scientific terms, but even this depends on numbers and quality of evaluation.

There is a perception that some evaluation methods are intrusive and incompatible with program philosophy, e.g.,

- a program for disaffected teenagers fears that using questionnaires, typically associated with authority, could jeopardize their developing relationships with the program.

Test your assumptions. e.g.,

- involve participants in discussions about evaluation and how it can improve programming to gain their interest and cooperation

CAUTION: Detailed knowledge about what programmers are assessing and what results they hope to find could influence participants' responses and bias results.

Meet this challenge by using:

- a variety of evaluation techniques
- concrete indicators that measure behaviour and attitudes as well as qualitative assessments of attitude and satisfaction
- careful question design. (See Step 4.)