Brief
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…information for program providers who seek to evaluate their programs.

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PROCESS EVALUATIONS: A GUIDE FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PRACTITIONERS

Part 3 in a Series on Practical Evaluation Methods

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Background

This brief provides a basic review of process evaluations, also known as formative or implementation evaluations. It describes what a process evaluation is, why process evaluations are important, when they should be used, and how they can be a useful tool for out-of-school time program practitioners. The brief also focuses on guidelines, strategies, and techniques for implementing process evaluations and provides some concrete examples that illustrate their utility. It concludes with a list of helpful resources for out-of-school time program practitioners.

What is a Process Evaluation?

A process evaluation examines the extent to which a program is operating as intended by assessing ongoing program operations and determining whether the target population is being served.[1] Such an evaluation helps program staff members identify needed interventions and change program components to improve service delivery. A process evaluation often collects information, such as:[2]

- Details of program operation;
- Intensity and quality of services provided;
- Context and community in which a program is delivered;
- Demographic characteristics of program participants;
- Collaborative partnerships; and
- Staffing and training.

A process evaluation is distinct from an outcomes evaluation. Process evaluations focus on whether programs and activities are operating as planned. Outcome evaluations, by contrast, investigate whether programs and activities affect outcomes for program and activity participants.[3]

Why Should Programs Consider Conducting Process Evaluations?

Program practitioners or participants may believe that a program is effective, but without an ongoing evaluation plan, it is difficult to assess this objectively.[4] Developing a process evaluation plan can provide the framework and serve as an important first step in an evaluation effort. Process evaluations provide an opportunity to explore all aspects of the program and enable practitioners to:[5]

- Investigate how the program is delivered, including alternative ways of providing program services;[6]

- Examine the theory underlying the program, specifically, how the program is administered and – ultimately – whether the program is unfolding "on the ground" as intended;[7]
- Determine whether the program is reaching targeted populations and whether both the number and frequency of program activities are adequate;[8] and
- Assess the reasons for successful or unsuccessful performance and provide information for potential replication of successful initiatives.[9]

When Should Programs Conduct Process Evaluations?

One challenge facing many programs is finding the resources – both financial and professional – to conduct evaluations, whether they are conducted by an internal or external evaluator. Fortunately, process evaluations can be conducted either on an ongoing basis or at a specific point in time.[10] The advantage of ongoing process evaluation is that the program will always have current information readily available and this information can inform continuous program improvements. A disadvantage is that an ongoing process evaluation involves more time and more financial resources than does a one-time process evaluation.[11]

Process evaluations can be conducted:[12]

- During the early or "pilot testing" stage of a program. As a new program moves from the planning to the operational phase, the people responsible for delivering services often discover that obstacles exist to program delivery. A process evaluation helps the program adapt the planned intervention to reflect the program reality.[13]
- On an ongoing basis. After the major implementation "bugs" have been worked out, a process evaluation may be conducted to maintain or improve the quality of the delivery process, to ensure that the program continues to be targeted at appropriate participants, or to demonstrate accountability to key stakeholders (e.g., funding agencies).[14]
- When an established program is undergoing major restructuring. The emphasis in this case is often on identifying "non-value added" activities or "benchmarking" program operations against those of other programs regarded as better on the basis of solid evaluation findings of effectiveness or "best practice."[15]
- In conjunction with an outcome evaluation. If a program fails, decision makers usually want to know whether faulty implementation was responsible. If a program works, decision makers often want to understand why it works – particularly if there is interest in expanding the program or attempting to implement a similar program in other locations.[16] A process evaluation may be conducted at the same time as an outcome evaluation.

How Should Programs Conduct Process Evaluations?

Some programs are simple and straightforward, while others are complex and require a combination of evaluation strategies to assess their implementation. Six steps may be followed in conducting a process evaluation.

Step 1: Form a working group.

The first order of business when considering conducting a process evaluation is to form a working group that includes key program stakeholders. One of this group's first tasks will be to determine whether to bring in an outside evaluator or have staff conduct the evaluation.[17, 18]

Step 2: Develop or revisit the logic model.

Revisiting the program's logic model is a good way to identify each major component of the program.[19] A logic model is a visual representation of how a program is expected to work, relating resources, activities, and the intended changes or impacts that the program is expected to create.[20] Process evaluations traditionally examine how well the services being delivered match those that were proposed in the program's logic model.[21] During the process evaluation, the program logic model is an essential tool to refer to because it helps program staff:[22]

- Determine whether the program is being implemented with fidelity, meaning whether current implementation reflects or departs from that in the intended model;
- Identify what the planned resources and inputs were and whether they have actually come into being; and,
- Where relevant, assess whether desired outcomes are not being achieved because of lack of resources or because of discrepancies between services that were planned and those that are actually being implemented.[23]

Step 3: Determine the evaluation audience.

A major factor to consider in conducting a process evaluation is the audience. External audiences for process evaluation findings include funders, clients, potential volunteers, and community advocates. Internal audiences include program staff members, managers, and boards of directors.[24] An important question to answer is, "Who will use the results?" This answer will provide direction for the type of evaluation methods that should be used.[25]

Step 4: Identify the research questions.

Before selecting tools for the process evaluation and collecting data, programs should identify the question or questions that they hope to answer by completing a process evaluation. Evaluation questions should be as specific as possible, as these questions will determine the overall approach, or evaluation model, as well as the specific data that will be collected. In order to identify the questions for the evaluation, it is important to consider the following:[26]

- What is the purpose of the evaluation? Is the evaluation intended to determine whether or not a particular program is cost effective? Is its aim to identify areas in which the program could be improved? Is it an attempt to identify strengths? The reasons for conducting the evaluation will determine what type of data needs to be gathered and what methods can best be used to gather it.
- What concrete questions does the program want answered? Programs often begin the evaluation process with a very general topic in mind, such as "quality of service." These programs will need to determine more specific questions that will help them gather information on that topic, such as "How satisfied are younger versus older clients with the current level of service?"

Step 5: Choose the evaluation method.

Depending on the resources available to the program, there are many evaluation methods that can be used, including direct observations, in-depth interviews, surveys, focus groups, reviews of documents, and dialogues with participants. Answering questions about program implementation may involve the use of both quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods.[27]

- Quantitative methods refer to research in which information is collected in numerical form, such as percents, ratios, or numbers. Methods can include surveys, reviews of program data to determine quantity and duration of services, and a synthesis and review of data sources.[28]
- Qualitative methods refer to research in which information generally is collected in non-numerical form. Such information may provide deeper understanding about how participants feel about a program and its activities and generally focus more on "what happened" than on whether particular goals were achieved.[29] Evaluation techniques

may include detailed verbal discussions, focus groups, observations, interviews, and document review.[30]

Qualitative and quantitative data techniques should not be seen as two conflicting methods; in fact, they are complementary and can be used simultaneously. For instance, if quantitative data (e.g., survey results) reveal that a program had no significant effect on its target population, a qualitative method (e.g., focus group or face-to-face interviews) could help reveal the reason that the activities described by the available statistics either failed to take place or were implemented in a different form. Qualitative data can be very useful for interpreting the results of a quantitative inquiry.[31]

Step 6: Collect and analyze the data and report evaluation findings.
Having determined appropriate evaluation methods, a program can begin the data collection process. To ensure that data are collected consistently and completely, it is important for the evaluation team to pilot test data collection methods and then develop a data collection timeline and systematic data collection procedures.[32] The team should monitor adherence to this timeline and these procedures throughout the data collection process. The team should also seek to obtain a high response rate as they collect data, so that evaluation findings will be representative.

A good evaluation team will also consider where, when, and by whom the data will be collected. These concerns are especially relevant if a program plans on collecting data from individual program participants, staff members, or other interested parties. Study participants may be more likely to provide accurate data if they are made comfortable, if the data collector is someone unaffiliated with the program in question, and if they are assured that any information they provide will be kept confidential. In line with preserving participant confidentiality, the evaluation team should take steps to ensure the secure storage of study data.

Once data are collected, the evaluators can analyze the information obtained and report the findings. The analyses to be performed and the presentation of those analyses will vary depending on the evaluation audience. Often, however, the findings from a process evaluation will be of interest to groups besides the original evaluation audience. A program should consider sharing its findings at conferences, on its Web site, or in academic journals if lessons learned from its process evaluation can benefit other members of the out-of-school time community.[33]

REMEMBER THESE 6 STEPS WHEN CONDUCTING A PROCESS EVALUATION

Step 1: Form a working group.
Step 2: Develop or revisit your program's logic model.
Step 3: Determine your evaluation audience.
Step 4: Identify your research questions.
Step 5: Choose your evaluation methods.
Step 6: Collect and analyze the data and report evaluation findings.

PUTTING THE SIX STEPS INTO PRACTICE

Many programs have implemented or considered process evaluations. Covenant House Washington's (CHW) Prevention Services Program is committed to evaluative research and used a process evaluation to gain a tremendous amount of insight about its services and staff. The goals of the program are to help teenagers delay having sex and to increase their knowledge of the causes and consequences of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV.

Below is a chart reviewing the process evaluation goals, evaluation questions, and research methods considered in conducting the process evaluation for CHW.

Goals for Covenant House Washington	Process Evaluation Questions for CHW	Possible Data Collection Strategies for CHW
RECRUITMENT: ☐ Recruit 100 elementary, middle, and high school students in Wards 7 and 8 of the District of Columbia. ☐ Recruit an equal number of boys and girls.	☐ Who participates in the program? ☐ Are these the intended participants?	Document Review: Examine registration forms to determine program demographics and attendance records to determine whether any patterns exist among specific populations.
STAFF TRAINING: ☐ Train staff on the Positive Choices and Positive Choices Plus curricula.	☐ Were staff members trained? ☐ Does the staff feel as if the training was effective?	Staff Focus Group: Gauge the perspectives of program stakeholders, and use the resulting information to improve program operations.
SERVICE DELIVERY: ☐ Offer three sessions a week. ☐ Hold each session for three hours. ☐ Include role-playing and team-building activities, as well as group sessions on the following topics: improving communication skills, working with communities, sexuality, sexual responsibility, teen pregnancy, STDs, relationship and conflict management.	☐ Were the sessions held three times a week? ☐ Were the sessions three hours in length? ☐ What program activities were strong? ☐ What program activities were weak? ☐ Is there a gap between the expectation and the reality of service delivery?	Participant Focus Groups: Gauge the perspectives of program participants and inform program staff whether the participants believe the program has influenced them to reduce and/or change their sexual behavior. Document Review: Examine the original program proposal and implementation plans. Review of Database: Assess type and intensity of services delivered to program participants.
BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION: ☐ Ensure that the program is offered during hours that are convenient for program participants. ☐ Ensure that the program is offered in a location/setting that is non-threatening to program participants and easily accessible. ☐ Offer young people incentives to participate in and attend the program.	☐ Are program sessions offered in non-threatening environments? ☐ Are program sessions easily accessible? ☐ Are program participants committed to the program? ☐ Are program participants attending the program sessions on a regular basis?	Focus Groups With Program Participants: Provide an opportunity for participants to share their experiences in the program and to explain whether attending the program sessions was easy or hard for them.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT
Covenant House Washington's (CHW) Prevention Services Programs
Washington, D.C.
www.covenanthousedc.org

The following is an interview with Shanita Burney, the Director of Prevention Services at Covenant House Washington, who describes her experiences with conducting process evaluations.

Q. Can you provide an overview of the history and background of Covenant House Washington's prevention services?

A. Covenant House Washington opened its doors in 1995 and continues to reach out to the youth and families in the District of Columbia, with a specific focus on those living east of the Anacostia River. CHW annually serves more than 800 highly at-risk homeless and runaway youth (ages 16-21), as well as their children (infants and toddlers). CHW has a Prevention Services unit, which began in 1999, and targets youth between the ages of 11-17. The Prevention Services unit sponsors two effective teen pregnancy prevention programs and a substance abuse prevention program.

Q. Why did CHW get involved with evaluating its program?

A. From the program's inception, we recognized the importance of the evaluation process in relation to developing a pilot teen pregnancy prevention program. Therefore, we thought it would be extremely useful to receive feedback from youth in the community who represented the target audience for this program through conducting an initial focus group. A concern with long-term sustainability was another incentive for getting involved in conducting a process evaluation.

Q. Who funded the process evaluation?

A. The Freddie Mac Foundation supported us in hiring Child Trends to conduct the process evaluation.

Q. What staff resources were necessary to complete the evaluation?

A. The staff resources involved included staff time and commitment for planning meetings with the outside evaluator, staff willingness to incorporate and make changes as deemed necessary for program improvement as identified through the process evaluation, and staff time to participate in training.

Q. What methods have been used in the evaluations?

A. The process evaluation has involved site visits, interviews with program staff and youth participants, document reviews, and technical assistance. Most of the activities were conducted by the external evaluator; others were completed internally by program staff.

Q. How has this type of evaluation been useful to CHW?

A. The process evaluation has added integrity and value to the work that is being accomplished. In addition, the evaluation allows a framework for enhancing program strengths and addressing program weaknesses, which makes us more attractive to funders.

Q. What challenges have you faced during the process evaluation?

A. The number of youth involved in the beginning of the program often limits the sample available for the process evaluation because youth typically end up joining the program throughout the year.

Q. What have been the major findings from the process evaluation?

A. The process evaluation has revealed that youth developed meaningful relationships with adult program staff. Areas identified for improvement have involved evaluating curricula for cultural competency and devising additional program components that allow youth to explore and handle problems associated with peer pressure.

Q. How have these findings been incorporated to improve the program?

A. As a result of findings from the process evaluation, we have expanded the hours of program operation, which allows for additional time to conduct program activities and offer homework assistance. In addition, we have revised the primary curriculum and the delivery of curricula to include more repetition. Finally, the evaluation has encouraged staff to become more process oriented, allowing us to take the lead on observing our own successes and challenges.

Next Steps: Additional Resources For Programs

Child Trends – Glossary of Research Terms for Out-of-School Time Program Practitioners. This Research-to-Results fact sheet provides additional information on research terminology and research methods, as well as real life examples of research in action.
Available online at:
http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2007_06_15_FS_Glossary.pdf

Child Trends – Logic Models in Out-of-School Time Programs. This Research-to-Results brief describes the key components of a logic model, identifies why logic models are useful, discusses different types of logic models, the formats they take, and resources available to programs for creating logic models.
Available online at:
http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2007_01_05_RB_LogicModels.pdf

Administration on Children, Youth and Families – Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation. This publication was produced by the federal agency to inform programs about what program evaluation entails, how it can be conducted, and how it can benefit the staff and families involved.
Available online at: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/other_resrch/pm_guide_eval/reports/pmguide/pmguide_toc.html

W.K. Kellogg Foundation – Evaluation Handbook. This handbook provides information for people with a range of evaluation experience who are seeking to conduct evaluations without external support.
Available online at: http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/Tools/Evaluation/Pub770.pdf

Free Management Library. This Web site provides access to resources about the leadership, management, and evaluation of organizations.
Available online at: http://www.managementhelp.org

United Way of America. The Web site of this national charitable organization provides outcome measurement tools and useful links to other sites with similar tools.
Available online at: http://national.unitedway.org/outcomes/library

Annie E. Casey Foundation. The foundation's Web site provides up-to-date information on the foundation's KIDS COUNT initiative and other helpful materials for people working with families and children.
Available online at: http://www.aecf.org/kidscount

James Irvine Foundation. This foundation seeks to promote the effective use of evaluative techniques by nonprofits and other foundations by increasing access to evaluation tools and other resources.
Available online at: http://www.irvine.org/evaluation/resources.shtml

Innovation Network. This group provides program planning and evaluation consulting, workshop-based training, and online tools to nonprofits and funders.
Available online at: http://www.innonet.org/

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