Research-to-Results
Brief
Child TRENDS

WHY CONDUCT A PROGRAM EVALUATION? FIVE REASONS WHY EVALUATION CAN HELP AN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM
Part 1 in a Series on Practical Evaluation Methods

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BACKGROUND

Program evaluation is a valuable tool for program managers who are seeking to strengthen the quality of their programs and improve outcomes for the children and youth they serve. Program evaluation answers basic questions about a program's effectiveness, and evaluation data can be used to improve program services. In this brief, we define program evaluation, address common concerns program managers and practitioners have regarding evaluation, and outline five major reasons why conducting a program evaluation can benefit an out-of-school time program.

WHAT IS AN EVALUATION?

Program evaluation is a *systematic method for collecting, analyzing, and using information to answer basic questions about a program.*[1] While there are many different types of program evaluations, and many terms are used to describe them, evaluations are typically divided into two major categories: process evaluations and outcome evaluations.

- **Process evaluations** assess whether an intervention or program model was implemented as planned, whether the intended target population was reached, and the major challenges and successful strategies associated with program implementation.
- **Outcome evaluations** determine whether, and to what extent, the expected changes in child or youth outcomes occur and whether these changes can be attributed to the program or program activities.[2]

COMMON CONCERNS ABOUT PROGRAM EVALUATION

Program managers often express legitimate concerns or fears when considering a program evaluation. While these concerns are valid, they can often be addressed fairly readily. Examples include:

- ***Evaluation will divert resources away from the program.*** While it is true that evaluation will take some upfront resources (typically about 10% to 20% of an overall program budget is needed to conduct a process *and* outcome evaluation),[3] what a program can learn from an evaluation can help streamline its resources to focus on "what works" for program participants and improve outcomes.
- ***Evaluation will be too complicated.*** While some evaluations are complex, evaluation designs can be simple and straightforward. An independent evaluator or consultant can help develop an evaluation design that is most appropriate for a program given the program's service model, the evaluation questions the program wishes to address, and the program's resources for conducting an evaluation.[4]

- **Evaluation will be an additional burden on staff.** In order to minimize the potential burden on program staff, evaluation activities can be incorporated into ongoing program management activities. Also, when feasible and appropriate, evaluation data can be collected by an outside evaluator.
- **Evaluation will produce negative results.** Finding out "what does not work" is as important as finding out "what does work."
- **Evaluation is just another form of program monitoring.** Program monitoring assesses whether a program is in compliance with specified performance standards (e.g., number of participants served), while an evaluation assesses *whether expected outcomes were achieved.*

FIVE MAJOR REASONS TO CONDUCT AN EVALUATION OF AN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM

As noted above, program managers often express valid concerns about conducting a program evaluation. While many of these concerns can be overcome or greatly minimized, it is also important to note that there are several benefits to conducting a program evaluation that outweigh the potential issues associated with these concerns. Below, we outline five major reasons why conducting a program evaluation will serve the best interests of a program, as well as the children and youth served.[5]

Reason #1: A program evaluation can find out "what works" and "what does not work." A process or outcome evaluation enables program managers to answer basic questions about a program's effectiveness, including:
- Are participants benefiting from program services?
- Are recruitment strategies working?
- Do staff have the necessary skills and training to deliver services?
- Are participants satisfied with the program?
- Are some sub-groups benefiting, but not others (for example, boys versus girls)?

Knowing "what works" helps program managers to focus resources on the essential components of the program model that benefit participants and volunteers; knowing "what does not work" allows program managers to improve and strengthen their service delivery models. Not knowing what is working may waste valuable time and resources.

Reason #2: A program evaluation can showcase the effectiveness of a program to the community and funders. Evaluation findings can demonstrate to a community and to funders that a program is worthwhile. Sharing findings within the community can serve as a good outreach tool for attracting collaborative partners, recruiting participants and volunteers, and building trust with families and community members. Also, funders often require that a program evaluation be conducted when they agree to fund a program, and some funders will not fund, or re-fund, a program until an evaluation has been conducted and outcomes have been demonstrated.

Reason #3: A program evaluation can improve staff's frontline practice with participants.
Improving how frontline staff members deliver services to children and youth will increase the likelihood that a program will achieve positive outcomes with program participants. Conducting an evaluation of a program can allow a program manager to systematically assess staff's performance, and figure out where staff members are succeeding and where they may need more support or training. An evaluation can also provide staff with opportunities to discuss the challenges they face and offer potential solutions.

Evaluation questions may include:
- Do staff have the necessary skills to work effectively with program participants?
- What types of additional training would benefit staff?
- Are staff receiving the ongoing coaching and mentoring necessary to do their work?

- Do staff have the necessary supports to function effectively?

Reason #4: A program evaluation can increase a program's capacity to conduct a critical self-assessment and plan for the future. Conducting an evaluation either internally or with an outside evaluator will build an organization's capacity to conduct critical self-assessments, including conducting staff and program needs assessments, measuring staff performance, and assessing whether program objectives have been met. This will strengthen program operations and, consequently, improve outcomes for those served. Knowing how and for whom the program is effective and ways services can be strengthened are essential building blocks for an organization's strategic plan. Having the goal and the capacity for self-assessment allows for ongoing reflection and planning and helps create a continuous learning organization.

Reason #5: A program evaluation can build knowledge for the out-of-school time field. Contributing to the evidence-base on what works in out-of-school time programming benefits everyone trying to make a difference in the lives of the children and youth who participate in these programs. Sharing knowledge with peers on what has been learned about programs can ensure that other program managers and staff avoid mistakes and that successful and effective strategies are replicated.

FINAL THOUGHTS
While conducting an evaluation may seem complicated, expensive, or even overwhelming, it is important to remember that program evaluations serve as tools to improve programs. Simply put, program evaluations are conducted to make programs better. Evaluations benefit programs at every stage of implementation. For start-up programs, evaluations can provide process data on the successes and challenges of early implementation; and, for more mature programs, evaluations can provide outcome data on program participants. While evaluation is not without challenges, the information obtained from a program evaluation can help to streamline and target program resources in the most cost-efficient way by focusing time and money on delivering services that benefit program participants and providing staff with the training they need to deliver these services effectively. Data on program outcomes can also help secure future funding. Finally, sharing findings and lessons learned will assist other out-of-school time programs in achieving their goals.

REMEMBER THE 5 REASONS EVALUATION CAN HELP A PROGRAM

Reason # 1: A program evaluation can find out "what works" and "what does not work."
Reason # 2: A program evaluation can showcase the effectiveness of a program to the community and to funders.
Reason # 3: A program evaluation can improve staff's frontline practice with participants.
Reason # 4: A program evaluation can increase a program's capacity to conduct a critical self assessment and plan for the future.
Reason # 5: A program evaluation can build knowledge for the out-of-school time field.

Source: Adapted from the Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families

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The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation. This guidebook, developed by the Administration for Children and Families, provides program managers with information and instruction on how to use evaluation to improve programs and benefit staff and families.
Available online at:
http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/other_resrch/pm_guide_eval/reports/pmguide/foreword_pm guide.html

W.K. Kellogg Foundation – Evaluation Toolkit. The W.K. Kellogg Foundation has developed an evaluation toolkit designed to give guidance to programs embarking on evaluation.
Available online at:
http://www.wkkf.org/Default.aspx?tabid=90&CID=281&ItemID=2810002&NID=2820002&Langua geID=0

United Way of America – Measuring Program Outcomes: A Practical Approach. United Way of America has developed a step-by-step evaluation manual for health, human service, and youth and family serving agencies.
Available online at: http://national.unitedway.org/outcomes/resources/mpo/

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[1] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (2003). *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation*. Washington, DC.
[2] Ibid.
[3] *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation* from the Administration for Children and Families recommends that 15% to 20% of total funds allocated for a program be used for conducting a process and outcome evaluation. However, if a program is conducting only a process evaluation or a single component of an evaluation, such as developing a logic model, or if the program has a small operating budget, then a smaller percentage of funds may be needed.
[4] See Bronte-Tinkew, J., Allan, T., Joyner, K. (2007). *How to Choose an Evaluator*. Research to Results Brief, Washington, DC: Child Trends.
[5] Adapted from *The Program Manager's Guide to Evaluation*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2003).