

## Chapter 8: Planning an Evaluation

Conducting an evaluation is an enormously complex and challenging task. Chapters 4–6 discussed evaluation design; this chapter focuses on the evaluation’s goals and considers the design options discussed in previous chapters. Planning is one of the most critical aspects of conducting an evaluation.

Once the evaluation’s purpose and goals have been identified, the next step is to develop an evaluation plan. The evaluation plan should be developed at least 2 to 3 months before the evaluation begins. When the plan is complete and the instruments and protocols have been pilot tested (i.e., a small sample of individuals has completed the evaluation protocol; see chapter 9), data collection can begin. This preliminary work will provide some quality assurance for the evaluation. Quality assurance is important because low-quality data yield low-quality results, which can support disastrous decisions (Yates 1996). Therefore, developing the evaluation plan should not be rushed. The evaluation planning form in exhibit 8.1 can simplify the planning and organization of the evaluation. As a first step in planning and organizing the evaluation, each team member should read this resource book so everyone has the same information before making decisions about the evaluation.

The best way to ensure that planning activities are accomplished is to hold regular evaluation team meetings (Gunn 1987). If an external evaluator is involved, that person’s first tasks will be to identify the

key program personnel and primary users of the evaluation report and to begin developing good working relationships with these people. However, some team members may not regard the external evaluator as part of the team. Therefore, to facilitate the evaluator’s acceptance as part of the evaluation team, the evaluator should participate in program events and staff meetings.

During the planning stages, the team will need to:

- Discuss why the evaluation is important.
- Identify goals for the evaluation.
- Decide which program or programs to evaluate first.
- Decide which values are absolute.<sup>1</sup>
- Identify relevant State legal standards.
- Establish ethical standards (e.g., confidentiality).
- Establish fiscal standards (e.g., fiscal availability).
- Establish ecological standards (e.g., which contexts will be considered in the evaluation).
- Determine what types of information are particularly important to collect.
- Determine what kind of information will be produced.

- Identify indicators and measures.
- Develop a timeline for the entire evaluation.
- Identify who will use the data collected and the evaluation results.
- Determine how the information will be used.
- Ensure that data collection instruments are prepared, data collection plans are developed, and all instruments and plans are pilot tested.
- Plan and monitor a pilot process for the evaluation.
- Determine how to use the results of the pilot to make necessary changes.
- Determine methods for monitoring data analysis and writing the evaluation report.
- Schedule regular meetings (weekly or biweekly) to assess problems and progress.

The options for each of these evaluation activities need to be objectively presented to the team. Involving all team members in this critical planning process requires open discussion; agreement at the early stages will facilitate cooperation throughout the evaluation.

### Evaluation planning form

An evaluation planning form will facilitate planning and organizing the evaluation. (See exhibit 8.1 in appendix F.) This form lays out all the issues to address, and the cells can be filled in as decisions are made. Meetings may be scheduled to address some of the topics. To maintain focus, only one or two substantive topics should be discussed per meeting. The team members should come prepared to discuss the issues and options.

### When to start the evaluation

Some evaluation issues are relevant regardless of the type of evaluation being conducted. For example, when should the evaluation begin? Child Advocacy Center (CAC) directors disagree about when it is optimal to start an evaluation. There are three possible options:

- Before the center opens (to obtain baseline data).
- At the time the center opens.
- At some point after the center has opened.

**“It’s not fair to evaluate the program in the first 6 to 9 months. If evaluation is part of the training, they’ll forget it. It’s better to start the evaluation the next year, when you can do evaluation training.”**

The best evaluation integrates the evaluation into ongoing program activities. Therefore, planning the evaluation would ideally begin at the same time as planning the CAC, so that evaluation feedback can be used to shape program operations. However, many CAC directors begin an evaluation after the CAC is operating. Advantages and disadvantages to each of the three options are delineated in exhibit 8.2.

### The need for baseline information

Ideally, an evaluation design consists of comparing one thing with another. One common approach compares what happened before a program was implemented with what happened after it was implemented (referred to as a “pre-post design,” see chapter 6). Another method compares what happened after the

program was implemented with what happened in the absence of a program (comparison or control study, see chapter 6). Information collected before the program begins is referred to as baseline data. Baseline data include information collected on participants before (or just as) they enter the program.

*“We need baseline data. We are inadequate at this. We have nothing against which to compare our results.”*

Baseline information is essential for demonstrating that change has occurred, and it provides strong evidence of the program’s functioning and improvement. Several measures can be taken when clients first enter the CAC to allow comparison with subsequent data collection points. This will not be necessary or practical for each type of evaluation, but it is worth considering during the planning stages. Whether participants complete forms as they enter the door or at some later time during their first visit is not of monumental consequence, as long as the forms are completed before they leave the center. This is partially a practical concern because families may be difficult to locate once they leave the center.

### Evaluation timeline

Another issue common to all types of evaluation is the duration of the evaluation. How long will the entire evaluation last? How long will each component of the evaluation last? The following factors affect an evaluation timeline:

- Existing organizational deadlines or events that may affect scheduling of key steps and milestones (e.g., agency funding cycle, annual board meeting, conferences).

- Typical length of service to a client (e.g., one-time, weekly).
- How long after completion of services initial results would be expected.
- External restraints (e.g., university students cannot collect data during final exams).

### Evaluation timeline planning form

Once the evaluation plans have been outlined, the timeline planning form can organize the specific timeline. A sample timeline planning form is shown in exhibit 8.3. All evaluation team members should have an opportunity to review the form and provide feedback.

### Contexts

Regardless of the type of evaluation being conducted, one must also consider the various contexts that might affect the evaluation. In the midst of conducting an evaluation, it is easy to become focused on the evaluation and lose sight of factors that might be influencing it. The prevailing social conditions are crucial when it comes to explaining the successes and failures of social programs (Pawson and Tilley 1997).

Indeed, many contextual factors might influence an evaluation’s results. Among the factors that can be identified, the ones that are likely to affect the evaluation must be measured. Some factors cannot be measured; these must be recorded on tracking sheets, with a description of how they might affect the evaluation. This information will be particularly important when interpreting the results. In addition, detailed notes will strengthen the evaluation’s credibility.

The following contexts should be considered, and there may be others as well. These conditions will vary from CAC to CAC; therefore, an evaluator should focus on the ones that are most relevant to their specific CAC.

### Evaluation context

What is the evaluation context? What evaluation-related resources are available? What is the agency's history of conducting evaluations? How is the evaluation related to other agency activities?

### Staff context

What is the involvement of staff in the evaluation? What experience do staff members have with evaluations (positive or negative)? What are the staff's attitudes toward evaluations? What do the staff know about evaluations?

### Participant context

Are participants culturally diverse? Will they need translated instruments or similar tools? Are family and community supports available to families?

### Social context

What is the social context in which the evaluation takes place? Social context includes unemployment, local economy, crime rates, health care funding, and government regulations.

### Administrative context

What is the administrative context of the evaluation? Have there been changes in administration?

### Cultural issues

Several CAC directors have commented that external evaluators have not been sensitive to the cultural aspects of their clients' needs. Be sure the evaluator is

aware of these issues. The evaluation should reflect the community's norms, which may vary by ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status. The evaluation protocol may need to set different goals for different cultural groups.

**"You must integrate the cultural issues relevant to your population into the evaluation. For example, an evaluation of a reservation CAC must integrate the spiritual aspects of Indian tribes."**

Many people today are aware of cultural issues. However, it is important not only to be aware of cultural issues, but also to think about how cultural issues might affect the evaluation. The following cultural factors may impact an evaluation.

**Evaluation methods and instruments should be culturally sensitive.** Evaluation methods and instruments must be culturally appropriate for the participants. Many instruments are tested (i.e., standardized on middle-class white groups before they are released for use by the larger community). If the CAC's clientele consists largely of a minority population, the measures used should have been tested on the ethnicity of the client population. If not, determine whether the author of the instrument has developed a culturally relevant instrument. A representative of the ethnic community who will not be participating in the evaluation should review both the instrument and the data collection procedures.

**Culture is not race.** Race should not be confused with culture. Culture is an interplay of common attitudes, values, goals, and practices that one generation hands down to the next. Race, on the other hand, is a segment of the human population that is more or less distinguished by genetic physical characteristics.

“We had to copy the treatment surveys into Spanish because at our CAC a minority population is the majority population.”

### Concepts vary within and among groups.

Some behaviors vary tremendously within and among ethnic groups. Physical discipline, for example, may be a normative response to child misbehavior among some ethnic groups, but considered deviant among other ethnic groups. Variations in parental discipline within an ethnic group may be even greater than variations among ethnic groups.

**Cultural response sets differ.** Philosophies that differ by cultural affiliation may affect how a person completes a questionnaire. For example, European descendants may endorse individuality, but members of some other ethnic groups may endorse collective norms.

**Pre-post results can be affected by culture.** Some variations in pre-post tests may be due to cultural differences. Members of some cultures consider it prying to ask them questions before they know you well; they may therefore provide minimal information when they enter a program. However, after they have completed the program (and presumably feel more comfortable with the staff), they may be more open to questions and those reports may be more reliable than their previous responses. A difference in pre-post responses may reflect greater comfort rather than the intervention.

**Cultures vary.** There are variations within a culture. For example, every language has different dialects. Therefore, a translated instrument should be written in the dialect of the participants who will be using it.

## Troubleshooting

Planning an evaluation should include identifying potential problems and exploring how others have solved those problems. Below are a number of evaluation problems encountered by CAC directors and how they have solved those problems.

- **The team cannot agree on the goals and outcomes of the center.** Team members will need to put the CAC first and make some compromises. Team-building exercises (chapter 3) can facilitate reaching a consensus.
- **It is difficult for direct service providers to find valid instruments.** This is often an issue for anyone conducting research. However, several resources are available, such as university faculty, the American Evaluation Association (<http://www.eval.org>), or the Mental Measurements Yearbook Database. If these sources do not have an appropriate instrument, a new one may need to be created.
- **Agency turnover interrupts the evaluation.** Turnover can be a serious detriment to an evaluation and may indicate more systemic problems than this manual is intended to address. However, retreats, training seminars, and co-locating the multidisciplinary team (MDT) can strengthen team cohesion.
- **The response rate for returning surveys is low.** One solution to this problem is to have families complete the survey before leaving the center. Mailed surveys should include a self-addressed, stamped envelope in which to return the survey.
- **Staff cannot contact clients once they leave the center.** Chapter 7 discusses several steps that can be taken to maintain contact with families once they leave the center.

- **Parents are dissatisfied with the CAC because they are in crisis.** Some responses on client satisfaction questionnaires will be negative. However, grouping the surveys together will give a result that says, “On average, this is how satisfied the clients are.” A few seriously negative reports will not be detrimental to the overall findings.

Some families at the center report high satisfaction with the program, but later become disillusioned with the system and blame the CAC. This is an important scenario to understand, possibly suggesting that families need continued contact with CAC resources throughout the investigative process and into the court process.

- **Some parents confuse the CAC with Child Protective Services (CPS) or some other system agency.** Client satisfaction questionnaires should address only CAC activities. Questionnaires’ administrators should clarify and reiterate for participants that they are interested only in the clients’ perceptions of their visit to the CAC. Participants may be less confused if they complete the survey while at the CAC.

“Complaints by families are due to misunderstanding. Families confuse the CAC with CPS.”

- **Families know nothing about MDTs and yet are asked about MDT members.** Again, the questionnaire should elicit knowledge that the clients have. Prompts may help. For example, a question about police officers could ask parents, “Who was the police officer who came to your home? Tell me about that person.”

## Note

1. For example, the fact that a school receives new computers that benefit students is good, but it cannot be overridden by the importance of preventing electrical shock to students. The “cannot” is an absolute value that must be considered (Scriven 1993).