

Evaluation Primer

This material is excerpted from *Understanding Evaluation: The Way to Better Prevention Programs*, a publication written by Lana Muraskin, a consultant to Westat Inc. under contract to ED. This material is in the public domain and may be copied. Source attribution is requested but not required.

Understanding Evaluation: The Way to Better Prevention Programs

Why Evaluate Programs?

An evaluation can be an important tool in improving the quality of a program if it is integrated into the fabric of an educational program rather than added on after the fact. Program personnel are more likely to use the results of an evaluation when they play a role in deciding what to examine, conducting the evaluation, and interpreting the results. Many of the evaluation steps outlined in the handbook featured below can be carried out by program staff in schools and community agencies.

Thus, there are many reasons to conduct evaluations, including:

- To determine the effectiveness of programs for participants;
- To document that program objectives have been met;
- To provide information about service delivery that will be useful to program staff and other audiences; and
- To enable program staff to make changes that improve program effectiveness.

In other words, evaluations help to foster accountability, determine whether programs "make a difference," and give staff the information they need to improve service delivery.

What is Evaluation

Evaluation is the systematic collection and analysis of data needed to make decisions, a process in which most well-run programs engage from the outset. Here are just some of the evaluation activities that are already likely to be incorporated into many programs or that can be added easily:

- Pinpointing the services needed for example, finding out what knowledge, skills, attitudes, or behaviors a program should address;
- Establishing program objectives and deciding the particular evidence (such as the specific knowledge, attitudes, or behavior) that will demonstrate that the objectives have been met. A key to successful evaluation is a set of clear, measurable, and realistic program objectives. If objectives are unrealistically optimistic or are not measurable, the program may not be able to demonstrate that it has been successful even if it has done a good job;
- Developing or selecting from among alternative program approaches for example, trying different curricula or policies and determining which ones best achieve the goals;
- Tracking program objectives for example, setting up a system that shows who gets services, how much service is delivered, how participants rate the services they receive, and which approaches are most readily adopted by staff; or

- Trying out and assessing new program designs determining the extent to which a particular approach is being implemented faithfully by school or agency personnel or the extent to which it attracts or retains participants.

Through these types of activities, those who provide or administer services determine what to offer and how well they are offering those services. In addition, evaluation in education can identify program effects, helping staff and others to find out whether their programs have an impact on participants' knowledge or attitudes.

The different dimensions of evaluation have formal names: **process**, **outcome**, and **impact** evaluation.

Process Evaluations

Process Evaluations describe and assess program materials and activities. Examination of materials is likely to occur while programs are being developed, as a check on the appropriateness of the approach and procedures that will be used in the program. For example, program staff might systematically review the units in a curriculum to determine whether they adequately address all of the behaviors the program seeks to influence. A program administrator might observe teachers using the program and write a descriptive account of how students respond, then provide feedback to instructors. Examining the implementation of program activities is an important form of process evaluation. Implementation analysis documents what actually transpires in a program and how closely it resembles the program's goals. Establishing the extent and nature of program implementation is also an important first step in studying program outcomes; that is, it describes the interventions to which any findings about outcomes may be attributed. Outcome evaluation assesses program achievements and effects.

Outcome Evaluations

Outcome Evaluations study the immediate or direct effects of the program on participants. For example, when a 10-session program aimed at teaching refusal skills is completed, can the participants demonstrate the skills successfully? This type of evaluation is not unlike what happens when a teacher administers a test before and after a unit to make sure the students have learned the material. The scope of an outcome evaluation can extend beyond knowledge or attitudes, however, to examine the immediate behavioral effects of programs.

Impact Evaluations

Impact Evaluations look beyond the immediate results of policies, instruction, or services to identify longer-term as well as unintended program effects. It may also examine what happens when several programs operate in unison. For example, an impact evaluation might examine whether a program's immediate positive effects on behavior were sustained over time. Some school districts and community agencies may limit their inquiry to process evaluation. Others may have the interest and the resources to pursue an examination of whether their activities are affecting participants and others in a positive manner (outcome or impact evaluation). The choices should be made based upon local needs, resources, and requirements.

Regardless of the kind of evaluation, all evaluations use data collected in a systematic manner. These data may be quantitative such as counts of program participants, amounts of counseling or other services received, or incidence of a specific behavior. They also may be qualitative such as descriptions of what

transpired at a series of counseling sessions or an expert's best judgment of the age-appropriateness of a skills training curriculum. Successful evaluations often blend quantitative and qualitative data collection. The choice of which to use should be made with an understanding that there is usually more than one way to answer any given question.

Based on information from the U. S. Department of Education. To obtain more detailed information regarding Evaluation please visit: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/primer1.html>

You will find the following information:

Why Conduct Program Evaluations?

Steps in Planning Evaluations

Documenting and Analyzing Program Installation and Operations

Observing Behavioral Outcomes and Attributing Changes to the Program

Interpreting and Reporting Evaluation Findings