the evaluation exchange

from the director's desk

Heather Weiss

Nearly twenty years ago I launched the Harvard Family Research Project to provide a knowledge base for the emerging family support field. I presented my early research at a 1983 conference at Yale University, a memorable event because it brought together pioneering researchers, program developers, and policymakers to lay out the trajectory of modern-day family support. The fact that family support is now part of mainstream programs for children and families indicates how far the field has come.

This issue of *The Evaluation Exchange* provides an opportunity to take stock of family support evaluations and their role in moving the field forward. As the family support field matures, evaluation addresses more complex issues about the range of program effects, and the circumstances in which programs work best. We present two thought provoking pieces. Using meta-analysis, McCartney and Dearing challenge us to change the ways we examine the evaluation evidence, and to consider the evidence contextually. Dunst urges getting beyond the question of "what works" toward a more detailed scrutiny of the relationship among family support principles, program practice, and family outcomes.

The evolution of family support will depend in large part on how families shape and assess the activities that promote their well-being. We have compiled several articles that illustrate a broader notion of family support to include families gaining access to information and using it to leverage change. Families use data to advocate for better-performing schools for their children, build family-strengthening environments at the neighborhood level, and educate policymakers. In doing so, they begin to level the playing field between professional and layperson, and lend a new dimension to the empowerment principle in family support.

Having families at the center of getting and using data stimulates new directions in data collection methods and dissemination practices. Patton reminds us that partnerships with families enrich the variety of evaluation options, and also challenge evaluators to examine the assumptions of traditional evaluation methods. This issue reflects many exciting examples of community-based practices—study circles, storytelling, videography, and neighborhood asset mapping—to document what matters most to families.

Family support evaluation is no longer only about understanding program effectiveness; it is also about building capacity for evaluation at all levels. With the increasing use of evaluation as a tool for learning and continuous improvement, evaluators are designing research-program partnerships that both add value to the research and transfer evaluative skills to local programs and individual parents. Several articles in this issue describe how partnerships add value to evaluation design, indicator development, and formative evaluation approaches. They illustrate that it is possible to involve families and programs without making tradeoffs that compromise the research design and the credibility of the results.

Considerable discussions are taking place about creative approaches to evaluating family support initiatives. The HFRP research team and I invite you to share your ideas by emailing us at hfrp@gse.harvard.edu.

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> theory & practice

Learning from Families

M. Elena Lopez, from Harvard Family Research Project, discusses expanding the role of family support to include supporting families' using information to improve their communities.

"Families are empowered when they have access to information and resources and take action to improve the well-being of children, families, and communities."[1]

Over the last two decades, this fundamental family support premise has largely focused on *individual* family access to information and resources to attain *individual* goals. Less attention has been paid to the ways that families—as part of neighborhoods and communities—can *collectively* use information as a tool for creating *community-wide* family-strengthening activities. However, the growing momentum of "civic participation" in education, health, and welfare reform suggests the need to expand the notion of family support to include getting and using information for collective action. This signals changes in the way programs and professionals can support families, with strategies such as:

- Families working together toward collective rather than exclusively individual family-strengthening goals.
- Families building their capacity to get and use data, a service not traditionally offered by family support programs.
- Families deciding the means by which information about families is gathered, used, and disseminated—a task traditionally controlled by professionals.
- Families learning to connect information with opportunities for neighborhood-based action.

One attempt to invest in this broader notion of family support is Making Connections, a multi-city demonstration project of the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF). Lodged within a larger neighborhood transformation initiative, Making Connections is about engaging low-income families and communities in family-strengthening efforts. (For more information see www.aecf.org/initiatives/ntfd.)

A key component of Making Connections is to build capacity for generating information to support action. In each site "learning partners" perform roles such as coordinating study circles, conducting data-related training and technical assistance, and providing data analysis and synthesis. These partners vary across sites and include a mix of local foundations, research and policy centers, individual consultants, and advocacy organizations. Some partners that participated in AECF's National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership built on their existing data warehouses to provide neighborhood level socioeconomic and demographic information.

Early Lessons

The early lessons from the first phase of the project suggest new and different ways of supporting families.[2]

1. *Support and validate families' knowledge about family-strengthening goals.* Some Making Connections sites adapted a study circles model,[3] where small groups of residents gather weekly four to six times in a facilitated dialogue to explore specific concerns. Participants included community residents and, in some cases, service providers. The study circles focused on topics such as:

- Identifying family and neighborhood assets.
- Envisioning what strong families and desired neighborhoods look like.
- Voicing the needs of families and communities.
- Understanding the challenges to meet those needs.
- Applying data to meet residents' priorities for action.

[1] Family Resource Coalition. (1996). *Guidelines for Family Support Practice*. Chicago: Family Resource Coalition. Page 6.

[2] Information for this article was derived from interviews with learning partners in eight cities, site documentation, and Web resources.

[3] The sites used different terms for the study circles, such as "family circles" and "neighborhood circles." Information about study circles is available from the Study Circle Resource Center at www.studycircles.org.

As residents shared observations about families and neighborhoods, and their theories of what long- and short-term actions can effect change, they demonstrated the value of local knowledge in problem-solving. For example, the Seattle study circles revealed the gaps between the solutions generated by immigrant families and the programs offered by service agencies. Families educated the service providers and funders about the importance of life skills and cultural preservation to strengthen the bonds between parents and children.

In addition, the study circles validated the co-production of local learning by the residents and study circle sponsors. Learning partners synthesized the information and organized cross-neighborhood gatherings to verify residents' issues and solutions.

2. *Build families' capacity to get and use data*. Making Connections supported site efforts to determine the information they needed to address local issues. Residents identified research topics and shaped data collection and use. As residents collected data, they not only learned new skills, but also gained the opportunity to bond with neighbors and engage in civic activities. For example:

• A grassroots organization in Indianapolis conducted neighborhood asset surveys. The surveys showed a wide range of skills in neighborhoods that are often portrayed as poorly educated. They also indicated that residents longed for more activities for children, beautification of the area, and safer neighborhoods, all of which would enhance family life. Following door-to-door dissemination of the results, some residents have joined the organization's action committees. (For more information see www.indyfund.org/partners/Initiatives.cfm.)

• Four Denver neighborhoods formed a Neighborhood Learning Partnership to develop information-based solutions to the problems facing their neighborhoods. The learning partnership identifies what, how, and to whom the information is released, as well as how it is used. When one of the identified needs was the "digital divide," the learning partnership commissioned an assessment of local technology needs as a first step to make technology and the Internet more available for families and residents in the neighborhoods. (See www.makingconnections denver.org.)

3. *Support families' decision about new forms of documentation, use, and dissemination of data*. Making Connections supported new and existing avenues for residents to explain the meaning of family strengthening from their own perspectives. Using stories, residents interpreted data about families in ways that also serve to educate mainstream society about the strengths of poor families. For example:

• Low-income Milwaukee mothers videotaped their families and produced a documentary that shows how they have the same values and desires as more affluent families. The women participate in workshops, where the video is shown to service providers and policy advocates. (See www.wccf.org/publications.html.)

• MYTOWN in Boston offers walking tours of the South End, researched and conducted by youth. Youth interview residents who share life stories and identify important places in the neighborhood's past. Through their research and tours, the youth expand the history of the city by including ethnic groups that are often disregarded in mainstream texts. They begin to develop a sense of home as they learn about their own families and communities contributions to the city's history. (See www.mytowninc.com.)

• One neighborhood in San Antonio seeks to bridge the generation gap between youth and older family members and community residents through an oral history project. Residents videotape interviews with seniors to transmit Latino knowledge and traditions that are not given visibility in textbooks and the media. (See makingconnections. utsa.edu/mcsa/home.htm.)

4. *Connect information with resources and opportunities for action*. Unlike focus groups where participants share their opinions and then walk away, study circles focus on relationship building, networking, and action. Individually and collectively, as residents have gained deeper knowledge about family issues, they have directed their energy toward volunteer and other opportunities. For example:

• In Des Moines, study circles have enhanced residents' roles as consumers, advocates, and decision-makers. The circles have linked residents' identified needs with resources, such as Habitat for Humanity, and opportunities for parent and community involvement in school programs. Study circle participants formed a neighborhood advisory council to work on common issues across neighborhoods. Several community organizations have invited the council to promote mini-grants for resident-led activities to improve neighborhoods. (See www. wallace.org/connections.htm.)

• When New Orleans residents who had participated in study circles decided that families needed a clean neighborhood, the learning partner provided them with the training and tools to record the location of trash piles and abandoned cars. The learning partner geographically coded the information and residents used the resulting maps to identify priority areas for neighborhood clean-up drives.

Just as family support programs seek to empower individual families to make informed decisions about their goals in life, they also need to create opportunities for families to deliberate ways that communities can create family-strengthening activities. Charles Bruner made the observation that "professional expertise cannot create solutions nor be a substitute for the direct experience and insight of those they are designed to help."[4] Blending local and professional knowledge is both promising and challenging; and evaluators have the unique opportunity to lend their skills as new roles for families and professionals emerge.

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[4] Bruner, C. et. al. *Wise Counsel: Redefining the Role of Consumers, Professionals, and Community Workers in the Helping Process*. www.cfpciowa.org/npwrwcDOC.shtml

Related Resources

The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2001). *Using Strategic Communication to Support Families.* **Baltimore, MD: author.** Produced for the Casey Foundation's Making Connections Project, this is a how-to guide about strategic communication for the 22 cities striving to build strong families and neighborhoods through the initiative.

Bruner, C., & Kot, V. (1999). *Resident Experts: Supporting the Neighborhood Organization and Individuals in Collecting and Using Information.* **Des Moines, IA: Child and Family Policy Center.** This report focuses on the ways in which neighborhood residents can be involved in collecting data about their own communities for use in reform efforts.

Evaluating Effect Sizes in the Policy Arena

Kathleen McCartney and Eric Dearing from the Harvard Graduate School of Education provide an overview on effect size and what it reveals about the effectiveness of family support programs.

Long ago, in a political climate far, far away, statistically significant findings were enough to justify a program's effectiveness. This is no longer the case, and for good reason. Statistical significance tells you nothing about the size of the effect—that is, whether the program leads to meaningful differences in participants' lives. From significance test statistics, like t or F or r, researchers can compute effect size estimates in standard units, which tell more about the practical importance of interventions. The problem is that there is no agreement on how to interpret effect size estimates. As a result, many will read the results of the National Evaluation of Family Support Programs (Layzer, Goodson, Bernstein, & Price, 2001) and decide that the glass is half empty, while others will conclude that it is half full.

What Is Effect Size?

There are two kinds of effect size estimates: r, the Pearson product moment correlation, and d, which denotes the standardized difference between two means. Cohen (1977), a statistician, offered some conventions for effect sizes to help researchers conduct power analyses. With respect to d, he suggested that .20 was small, .50 was moderate, and .80 was large. However, social science research seldom yields effects as large as .80. If we apply Cohen's guidelines for power analyses blindly, we would end up dismissing most effects as small—even trivial. There is good reason to believe that this is not the case.

The average effect size for the effect of psychotherapy, measured across many studies, is .32. Some dismissed this effect as unimportant; after all, it represented a mere 1/3 standard deviation change in mental health. Rosenthal (1994) argued that this result should be examined in the context of other established health findings. To make his point, he asked readers to consider that the effect of aspirin in reducing heart attacks is .03! Many physicians prescribe this preventative treatment to their middle-aged patients, in part because the cost of the intervention is so small, while the benefit is potentially great.

Similarly, some scholars have dismissed the effect of child-care qual-

Clearly, family support produces a range of effects—with those for child cognitive and social development as well as parenting attitudes and behavior among the largest.

ity on children's development as small; however, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (1999) demonstrated that child-care effects were about half the size of family environment effects when similar quality measures were used. In this context, it would be difficult to argue that child-care effects are trivial.

The Effect Size of Family Support Programs

There is likely to be much argument concerning the meaning of the effect sizes from the National Evaluation of Family Support Programs (Layzer et al., 2001), a remarkable study in scope. Its authors identified 665 studies that represent 260 programs, and for each study they computed effect size estimates for nine possible outcomes. The short-term average effect sizes across studies, for these outcomes were as follows: .29 for child cognitive development, .22 for child social and emotional development, .12 for child physical health and growth, .21 for child safety, .23 for parenting attitudes and knowledge, .26 for parenting behavior, .19 for family functioning, .14 for parent mental health, and .10 for family economic self-sufficiency. The long-term average effect sizes decreased for some outcomes, but increased for others. Interestingly, the long-term effect size for family economic self-sufficiency was .39, an important finding given the significance of increases in economic resources for children in poverty (Dearing, McCartney & Taylor, 2001).

Clearly, family support produces a range of effects—with those for child cognitive and social development as well as parenting attitudes and behavior among the largest. Importantly, "almost every program or intervention asserted the twin goals of improved parenting (98%) and enhanced child development (91%)" (p. 2, Layzer et al., 2001). As such, one would expect greater effects in these two domains than in other domains, such as child health. And this is exactly what was found.

Average effect sizes inform the question of whether family support programs work in a very general sense. A more useful question is under what circumstances do programs work best? Because the evaluation research team coded program characteristics and related them to effect sizes, we can answer this question. The influence of program characteristics on effect sizes within randomized studies, which provide the best data, was considerable. With respect to children's cognitive development, programs were more effective when they included an early childhood education component (.48 vs. .25), when they were targeted to special needs children (.54 vs. .26), when there were peer support opportunities for parents (.40 vs. .25), and when there were parent groups rather than home visits (.49 vs. .26). For children's social and emotional development, programs were more effective when parent self development was a program goal (.56 vs. .25) and when professional staff were used rather than paraprofessionals (.43 vs. .27). Parenting effects were also moderated by program characteristics, such as peer support.

Measuring Up the Effect Size of Family Support

It is likely that data from this evaluation will be used to support a variety of policy agendas. In fact, McCartney and Rosenthal (2000) have

Related Resources

Layzer, J., & Goodson, B. (2001). *National Evaluation of Family Support Programs.* **Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, Inc.** Prepared for the Federal Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, this evaluation answers questions about the effectiveness of a variety of types of family support programs for different types of families. The evaluation is a meta-analysis of 665 studies, with experimental and quasi-experimental studies analyzed separately. **www.abtassoc.com**

How Can We Strengthen Family Support Research and Evaluation?

Carl J. Dunst, Ph.D., from Orelena Hawks Puckett Institute, is a developmental psychologist who has been engaged in family support program development and evaluation for 20 years.

I think of family support in terms of Family Support America's principles (see box). With that in mind, we need to strengthen research and evaluation in the following ways:

1. *Get beyond the question: Does family support work?* A more useful question is: What are the characteristics of family support programs that matter most for good practice and for good parent and child outcomes? We have no agreed on measure for identifying whether a program is or is not a family support program. I am currently designing an instrument to address this.

2. *Measure the variation in program adherence to family support principles.* Once we define what a family support program is, we need to measure the extent to which programs adhere to family support principles. Then we need to relate that adherence to parent and child outcomes. This allows us to establish: 1) what good program practices are, and 2) how different levels of adherence to family support principles relate to different outcomes. My colleagues and I have looked at adherence to family support principles in two ways:

- At the *program level*, we interview program personnel about their beliefs and attitudes toward families, and establish the extent to which their practices are consistent with family support principles. Independent raters analyze interview data to establish an adherence measure.

- At the *practitioner level,* we ask parents to assess the extent to which staff interacted with them in ways consistent with family support principles.

We use these data to develop a quantitative measure of adherence, and then look at the relationship between that measure and parent outcomes (Dunst & Trivette, 2001). If more resources were available for evaluation, we would add a third adherence measure and triangulate the measures. We would add independent observations of program practices as well as ratings of program materials and messages to get an even better index of adherence.

3. *Examine the variables that moderate program practice and parent outcomes*. In terms of the relationship between practice and parent outcomes, we have looked at *parent self-efficacy* as a moderating variable. For example, in one study (Dunst, 1999) we related adherence to principles with variations in self-efficacy and parents' self-report assessments of their parenting ability. We found self-efficacy moderated the relationship between adherence to principles and parenting ability.

4. *Invest in different kinds of evaluation.* Federal and state evaluation investments need to allow for or encourage different kinds of family support evaluation. It would be interesting to see how different methods can lead to different understandings of family support program practices. For example, using case studies we differentiated between families who could secure social supports themselves versus families who identified the supports they wanted and then practitioners secured the supports for them. Families who secured the supports on their own attributed the changes to their own behavior. Where practitioners secured the supports, families made gratification appraisals for the program, but didn't attribute changes to their own behavior (Dunst, Trivette, Gordon, & Starnes, 1993).

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Family Support Principles[1]

1. Staff and families work together in relationships based on equality and respect.
2. Staff enhance families' capacity to support the growth and development of all family members—adults, youth, and children.
3. Families are resources to their own members, to other families, to programs, and to communities.
4. Programs affirm and strengthen families' cultural, racial, and linguistic identities and enhance their ability to function in a multicultural society.
5. Programs are embedded in their communities and contribute to the community-building process.
6. Programs advocate with families for services and systems that are fair, responsive, and accountable to the families served.
7. Practitioners work with families to mobilize formal and informal resources to support family development.
8. Programs are flexible and continually responsive to emerging family and community issues.
9. Principles of family support are modeled in all program activities, including planning, governance, and administration.

[1] Taken from Family Support America's principles at www.familysupport america.org/content/learning_dir/principles.htm.

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Additional Reading (wbpress.com)

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Dunst, C. J., & Trivette, C. M. (2001). *Parenting supports and resources, helpgiving practices, and parenting competence*. Asheville, NC: Winterberry Press.

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Multi-Level Evaluation Design: California's Proposition 10

Pablo Stansbery, Senior Research Associate at Harder+Company Community Research, describes the process of developing an evaluation design that addresses the unique challenges created by California's Children and Families Act.

In November 1998, California voters approved the Children and Families Act, commonly known as Proposition 10, creating a new challenge for us as evaluators in California. The Act imposes a 50¢ surcharge tax on cigarettes and tobacco with the revenues earmarked for early childhood education programs. Proposition 10 funds are given to each of the 58 counties in California, based on the number of annual live births. Because funding is flexible, many new programs have emerged to meet the growing demand for early childhood services.

Proposition 10 requires each county, through a governing commission, to demonstrate results-based accountability. Counties must provide data indicating that the money spent to support programs has indeed had an impact on young children and their families. To document the change resulting from their funded programs, many county commissions have contracted with professional evaluation consultants for data collection and synthesis.

Designed in response to the growing literature documenting early brain development and the infant's capacity to interpret and categorize the earliest experiences, Proposition 10 has generated considerable excitement for new programs focusing on expectant mothers and children up to age 5. Funded programs work to: 1) improve children's health, 2) increase parent education and support services, 3) enhance child development and school readiness, and 4) improve systems that will support services for young children. Most counties have funded 10-30 diverse programs across these four program areas.

This diverse set of programs means that evaluation consultants confront the task of developing an evaluation plan that documents the impact of Proposition 10 funding at multiple levels:

- *Contractor level*. Each contracted agency (service provider) that receives county funds must document the impact of its unique service. Proposition 10 funds programs over a three-year period, and contractors must be able to demonstrate the value of their projects in order to secure continued or additional funding from other sources.
- *County level*. County commissions have a broader view of the programs they fund and seek an evaluation design that collapses the diverse programs into a common aggregate framework. The county must address long-range countywide objectives and answer aggregate questions concerning the development of children.
- *State level*. California has developed a statewide evaluation design to which counties must provide required information.

Evaluators are charged to develop an evaluation design that meets multiple evaluation protocols while being neither cumbersome nor duplicative. Our approach has been to build the evaluation design from the ground up as opposed to the top down. We work with each contracted agency to co-develop an evaluation design that responds to its unique program. This grassroots approach consists of the following components:

1. *Ensure contractors fully understand how their project is linked to a common set of goals and objectives*. Many agencies hire professional grant writers to develop a proposal and have limited understanding of how the program is connected to goals and objectives. We spend considerable time working with the staffs of contractors to increase their understanding of evaluation and to raise their capacity to conduct future evaluations.

2. *Provide contractors with an overview of plausible evaluation methods*. This information allows them to select the evaluation method they feel will most likely result in valid data.

3. *Assist contractors to select evaluation instruments and/or design an instrument*. We introduce agencies to standardized instruments and/or tools that are used in similar programs. In many other instances, we work with the contractors to develop an assessment instrument that they feel adequately measures the effectiveness of their program. In either case, contractors tend to assume ownership of their evaluation process, become proficient in evaluation implementation, and enhance data integrity.

4. *Build on contractor's knowledge of their targeted population*. Typically contractors have experience working with their cultural community. We co-construct the evaluation design with contractors, using their cultural competency and sensitivity. Many excellent programs have been developed to enhance the lives of young children, but have met limited success when replicated outside the original context. Much like strategic planning and program development, the evaluation component must also reflect the ecological reality of the target community.

Building an evaluation design from disparate programs also challenges the evaluator to develop a common framework for county commissions. One approach is to retrofit the multiple contractor evaluations to a common scale. We aim to reconfigure each contractors' evaluation tools into a 10-point scale. For example, a parent questionnaire with a value of 0-50 is weighted in a 10-point scale, as is a child

Table 1: An example of how different measurements can be rescaled and compared

	Common Scale Scoring System									
Contractor Assessment	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Child Assessment (Max Score 50)	0–4	5–9	10–14	15–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	40–44	45–50
Parent Assessment (Max score 100)	0–9	10–19	20–29	30–39	40–49	50–59	60–69	70–79	80–89	90–100

development assessment that is normally scored on a 0-100 scale. Table 1 exemplifies how we collapse the divergent assessments into a common scoring system for a countywide assessment. Although each program may employ different assessments with different scoring systems, this method enables us to look at the overall effect of all programs. It also allows us to collapse programs based on target population (e.g. Latino/Hispanic community, first time mothers), target geographic area (e.g. zip code), or target service delivery mechanism (e.g. home visitation programs).

The purpose of a grassroots evaluation design is to include service providers and community members in the evaluation process. By incorporating these key players in the evaluation design, we raise evaluation capacity at the local contractor level, cultivate a new interest in evaluation by local contractors, and redefine evaluation from an obligation to a valued method for improving service delivery. Although this approach can be labor-intensive and time-consuming, it responds to the multiple levels of evaluation required in Proposition 10, and builds local evaluation capacity, which remains long after we depart.

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Related Resources

Sutherland, C., McCroskey, J., & Halfon, N. (2001). The Challenges of Measuring the Impact of Proposition 10. In N. Halfon, E. Shulman, & M. Hochstein (Eds.), *Building Community Systems for Young Children*. UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities, 2001. This article outlines the results-based accountability approach used in the California Children and Families Act (Proposition 10) including practical recommendations for selecting indicators, data management, and building data systems.

Made to Measure? Evaluating Community Initiatives for Children. (2001). *Children and Society, 15*, 1. England: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. This issue of the British periodical, *Children and Society*, provides a good overview of the evaluation of programs for children from the perspectives of evaluators, policymakers, and service providers.

Evaluating Effect Sizes

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argued that data, like Rorschach inkblots, sometimes appear to serve as a projective test. Are these effects small? Evaluating effect sizes is not straightforward. As McCartney and Rosenthal (2000) write, "There are no easy conventions for determining practical importance. Just as children are best understood in context, so are effect sizes" (p. 175).

We suggest that you reflect on three points that help to provide context here. First, remember that the effect of psychotherapy is .32. Second, note that the families received support services for 15 months on average—a relatively short amount of time. Third, and perhaps most importantly, consider that effect sizes varied as a function of program characteristics, and that effects doubled with best practices. For us, both as researchers and as taxpayers, the glass is more than half full. Data from this evaluation will be of great use in guiding future family support program development.

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> new resource from HFRP

We have launched a searchable database of out-of-school time evaluation profiles on our website at:

www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/evaldatabase.html

Early Head Start Research-Program Partnerships

An in-depth look at the challenges presented by the evaluation of the Early Head Start program—an evaluation which required the cooperation of multiple layers of research and program partners.

Conducting research with program partners and multiple levels of research partners represents a relatively new paradigm in evaluative research. The impetus for such a paradigm arises from the need to provide more usable and timely information on complex, multidimensional, multigenerational, community-responsive programs. This new model strives to overcome the shortcomings of traditional evaluation approaches that require program interventions to be highly standardized across individuals and sites. It is difficult to apply traditional designs to evaluate national programs that are designed to be flexible enough to fit the needs of diverse families and a variety of communities. This article examines some of the benefits of research-program partnerships and creative responses to its challenges in the context of a large scale evaluation.

The Structure of the Partnerships

The Early Head Start program is an initiative to serve pregnant women and low-income families with infants and toddlers. After its establishment in 1994, the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF) embarked on the national Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project. ACYF designed this project to encompass five major research and evaluation components: 1) a rigorous, experimental cross-site impact study[1], 2) an assessment of the program implementation, 3) local research on the mediators[2] and moderators[3] of program impacts, 4) policy studies on child care, fathers, and children's health, and 5) strategies for continuous program improvement.

Partnership has been central to the design of this research and evaluation. The study was conducted by the Early Head Start Consortium, which consists of:

- A national contractor, Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR), and its subcontractor, Columbia University's Center for Children and Families at Teachers College

- 15 university-based teams of local researchers who both conduct local research and subcontract with MPR to collect national data
- The central funding agency, ACYF, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- The 17 participating local Early Head Start programs

The Benefits of the Partnerships

Each level of partnership had a special function and contributed to the synergy of the entire consortium.

The *national evaluation and national program partnership* ensured that the research informed the national training and technical assistance efforts. The close partnership also ensured that the evaluation met the needs of the national office. It ensured that: 1) the measurement of the implementation fit well with the intended program process, 2) the selected outcomes for measurement were those that the program intended to affect, and 3) the national program would obtain data on the program implementation early in the program's development.

The *national evaluation and local program partnerships* created trusting, committed, and open relationships that contributed to successfully implementing the random assignment of families to the study.

These relationships also helped maintain families' participation in the study, enabled the national team to collect good implementation study data, and facilitated increased research sophistication among program staff.

The *national evaluation and local research partnerships* enabled local research teams to collect unique local data that would complement and supplement the national contractor's cross-site data. These partnerships led to collaboration among local research teams and the addition of local perspectives on national questions. Local researchers provided substantive expertise that no single national evaluation contractor could provide, while the national contractor added dimensions of continuity and synthesis that a collection of local studies could not have achieved.

Local research and local program partnerships enabled local research teams to better address the local programs' unique interests. The local programs used the research data to help them meet their continuous improvement goals.

Meeting the Challenges of a New Partnership Paradigm

New evaluations pose a number of challenges, and having multiple levels of partnership adds to these challenges. Often we were able to address these challenges by resolving the tensions created by the partners' unique perspectives. We identified four key tensions that existed within our evaluation. Our resolutions for each of them brought benefits to the project as a whole.

1. *Balancing the rigor required by experimental design with issues raised when families did not participate in the program.* The commitment to an experimental design was made by ACYF. Programs and researchers agreed to participate in this design as a condition of funding. Implementing random assignment when families applied to the program posed surprisingly few difficulties. However, many discussions

> *New evaluations pose a number of challenges, and having multiple levels of partnership adds to these challenges … Our resolutions for each of them brought benefits to the project as a whole.*

[1] Experimental study designs all share one distinctive element: random assignment to treatment and control groups. Experimental design is the strongest design choice when you are interested in establishing a cause-effect relationship. Experimental designs for evaluation prioritize the impartiality, accuracy, objectivity, and validity of the information generated. These studies look to make causal and generalizable statements about a population or impact on a population by a program or initiative.

[2] Scientific research generally looks for causal relationships between two types of variables—independent and dependent. Independent variables are those we can manipulate and dependent variables represent the outcomes being examined. A mediating variable helps explain the relationship between the independent and dependent variables.

[3] A moderator variable refers to specific factors that can reduce or increase the influence of an independent variable on a dependent variable. In the social sciences, factors such as income, ethnicity, age, and gender, are common examples of moderator variables. While a mediating variable has an explanatory function, i.e., it explains how and why an outcome is manifested, a moderator variable describes the specific conditions under which a relationship between independent and dependent variables is found.

followed about the ethics of analyzing service use and outcomes from families who had left the program. Cutting-edge methodologies provided analyses of impacts that took account of program participation within the experimental design. Researchers in the partnership are continuing to analyze data to learn more about the role of service variation over time.

2. *Balancing the traditional question posed by evaluations about whether the "program worked" overall with questions focused on "what worked for whom and under what conditions."* Early Head Start programs are designed to respond to community needs and to allow families to select from program options, whether home-based, center-based, or a combination of both. Program families are diverse both across the country and within communities. The program is not restricted to a particular group, such as first-time mothers. The contractor and Consortium carefully designed a system of targeted analyses to address questions of what worked for whom within the framework of the experimental design.

3. *Recognizing the contributions and roles of a large number of partners while maintaining confidentiality, unity, and a shared vision.* Over 100 persons, representing ACYF, the national study contractors, the 15 local research teams, and the 17 research partners, comprised the partnership. Each type of partner brought its own pressures and perspectives. In 13 meetings over the six-year life of the project, Consortium members worked through details of the differences. Many off-shoot projects and lively discussions ensued as a result of the divergent interests of group members, yet policies were proposed and agreement was attained in regards to confidentiality, publications policies, local-national contributions to reports, representation on presentations, and timing of returning data to programs for their continuous improvement.

4. *Conducting an implementation study that informed program improvement along with an impact study that informs Congress about the value of the investment (ACYF 2001).* The program announcement specified the seemingly contradictory intention of conducting a traditional experimental design, while providing timely information feedback to the program at both national and local levels. The Consortium addressed this tension by establishing policies for timing the release of data so that implementation data were available early, while impact data were delayed until the 24-month data collection was complete in all sites.

The collaborating entities and individual participants in the Early Head Start Research Consortium have discovered how much effort multi-layered partnerships entail. As strong individual entities, we have had to commit time and energy to our mutual goals, acknowledge and respect the importance of our structure, and be open to change as we continued along the path to developing, disseminating, and using research-based knowledge about effective Early Head Start programs.

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Related Resources

Professor Edward Melhuish of the Institute for the Study of Children, Families, and Social Issues leads the six-year **National Evaluation of Sure Start,** England's early intervention initiative for children from birth to four years, their families, and communities. The evaluation consists of five modules: implementation, impact, local context analysis, cost-effectiveness evaluations, and support for local program evaluations. The website features information about each of the modules and presents frequent updates about the progress of the evaluation. **www.ness.bbk.ac.uk**

Knitzer, J., & Adely, F. (2001). *Learning from Starting Points: Findings from the Starting Points Assessment Project.* New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty. This evaluation of a Carnegie-funded systems change initiative to improve the well-being of young children examines the initiative's strategies, successes, and challenges in four cities and seven states.

Racine, D. (Ed.). (2001). *Identifying, Replicating and Improving Successful Early Childhood Programs: A Conference for Funders.* Philadelphia, PA: Replication and Program Strategies, Inc. This publication contains the papers and proceedings of a conference about advancing the early childhood field and the crucial role of evaluation in replication efforts. The report points to the need to strengthen the market for knowledge within the early childhood field.

A conversation with
Michael Quinn Patton

Michael Quinn Patton directs an organizational development consulting practice based in St. Paul, Minnesota. He is also a professor with the Union Institute & University Graduate School, a non-traditional university offering interdisciplinary doctoral degrees in applied fields. Patton is a widely known and prolific contributor in the evaluation community, and is the author of many books, including "Utilization-Focused Evaluation" and a new 3rd edition of "Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods" (2002). Prior to his current pursuits, Patton had an 18-year career on the faculty at the University of Minnesota. He is the recipient of numerous evaluation awards and served as president of the American Evaluation Association in 1988. Patton has a Ph.D. in Organizational Development and Sociology from the University of Wisconsin.

Taking advantage of Michael Quinn Patton's long-standing position in the evaluation community and interdisciplinary perspective, we asked him four questions about historical and emerging trends in evaluation practice.

Q What do you consider to be three or four "breakthrough ideas" over the last 10 to 15 years that have really helped define and influence modern evaluation practice?

A At the top of the list is **process use**. Historically, the discussion about evaluation utilization has focused on findings and what happens with an evaluation's findings or who uses them *after* the evaluation is over. Utilization-focused evaluation, in contrast, says that an evaluation's use should be considered *throughout* the evaluation process. Use is determined by how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and what they gain from being a part of the evaluation process.

In line with this idea, process use focuses on the ways in which being engaged in an evaluation can have an impact on those involved. It is about how people who participate in the evaluation learn to use and apply the logic, reasoning, and values that underlie the evaluation profession.[1] In this sense, we have seen more attention in our profession on process use. We now see evaluations being used for learning and capacity building, rather than just to generate findings.

A second important change in the evaluation field is that we have developed an extensive and diverse **menu of evaluation choices**. We have moved well beyond the idea that there are only formative and summative evaluations. In fact, in the last revision of my book, *Utilization-Focused Evaluation*[2], I identified over 100 possible evaluation approaches. This diversity means that both the evaluator and the user have the opportunity to figure out the kind of evaluation that is most appropriate for their particular situation and information needs.

> *Utilization-focused evaluation says that an evaluation's use should be considered throughout the evaluation process. Use is determined by how real people in the real world apply evaluation findings and what they gain from being a part of the evaluation process.*

A third breakthrough is the **end to the qualitative-quantitative debate**. Evaluators increasingly recognize that mixed methods have much to offer—and that the primary methodological issue is determining what methods are appropriate based on the particular evaluation situation and the needs of those who will use the findings. Quantitative and qualitative methods do different things. Each, however is valuable. And each set of methods continues to develop.

I just completed the third edition of *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*.[3] That gave me the opportunity to review the last decade of changes in qualitative methods. Following the end of the qualitative-quantitative debate we've seen the emergence of a rich variety of qualitative evaluation approaches, including some that are very creative, such as more artistic representations for both collecting and reporting data.

And finally, there is a recognition that we need to **adapt evaluations to cross-cultural environments**. With the globalization of evaluation and increasing attention to cross-cultural diversity, evaluators are being challenged to adapt their practices in ways that are culturally sensitive and that respect diversity. This is enriching the variety of evaluation options available and pushing us to examine the culture-based assumptions that undergird traditional evaluation methods and models.

For example, with groups whose cultures are highly oral and story-oriented, like Native American groups, native groups in Latin America, and indigenous groups in Africa, the language and approach evaluators use in logic modeling, which uses flowchart-like diagrams to show relationships between strategies and outcomes, can be very off-putting. Logic models typically are linear and formal and the language of theory is fairly intimidating. Instead, we can adapt logic modeling to culturally preferred modes of communication to capture the understandings and experiences of people in oral cultures. With these cultures we can use storyboarding, where you arrange stories into a sequence of images, rather than the arrows and boxes that people who draw flowcharts prefer.

[1] See also Chapter 5 in *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (1997) for a discussion of process use.

[2] Patton, M. Q. (1997). *Utilization-Focused Evaluation: The New Century Text,* 3rd. ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

[3] Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd. ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Q In family support, we have seen a trend toward programs that help families and communities access or collect data to secure the supports they need (e.g. jobs, child care, safety). How does the notion of assisting families and communities to get and use data in this way fit with the theory and approach of utilization-focused evaluation?

A The centerpiece of utilization-focused evaluation is that one must define the primary intended users of an evaluation and work with them to identify and achieve their intended uses. Identifying families and community members as primary intended users and working with them to articulate their needs and desired uses is completely compatible with utilization-focused evaluation. In addition to generating relevant findings for users, utilization-focused evaluations allow evaluators to facilitate the evaluation process in ways that strengthen the users' capacity to engage in evaluative thinking and undertake evaluations. This is an example of *process use* that I referred to in answering the first question. So, for example, family or community members who participate in an evaluation will not only help generate relevant findings about whatever is evaluated, but they will also learn to think evaluatively and may learn or deepen skills in interviewing or making sense of data.

Let me give you an example that I cite in the new edition of my qualitative book. Rainbow Research in Minneapolis studied the feasibility of developing a transitional housing program for prostituted women. To assist in data collection they recruited five women who had been prostituted, trained them in focus group facilitation, and had them interview women leaving prostitution. For them the experience was empowering and transformational. They were excited about learning a new skill, pleased to be paid for this work, and found it rewarding. In pilot testing they critiqued the interview guide, and as a result the evaluators edited the language, content, order, and length. During interviews, it was clear they had rapport with their peers based on shared discourse and experience. For example, during a group simulation, the interviewers loudly and provocatively bantered with one another as they might have on the street. They gathered information others would have been hard pressed to secure.

The interviewers were proud of their contribution. At project's end they requested certificates acknowledging the training they received and the interviews successfully performed. For all concerned it was a positive experience, with findings that most definitely shaped the final report recommendations.

Q There seems to be an emerging trend toward the use of "scientifically-based research" in defining acceptable policy and practice on issues that include family support, early childhood, and education. What do you think "scientifically-based research" means and what, if any, are the implications for evaluators?

A I think that this language is primarily political. It is a corollary to other terms that are a part of the trend you've observed like "evidence-based practice," "best practices," and "lessons learned." Most blatantly political is this phrase "scientifically-based research." It pretends that scientists agree about findings and what con-

Michael Quinn Patton

stitutes good research when, in fact, these are the very things scientists debate. Consider the current debate in the medical community about the effectiveness of mammograms. Within the social sciences there are very few findings of any kind that one could pound one's fist on the table and say, "This is scientifically true." The world is more complex than that.

Asserting that some preferred approach derives from "scientifically-based research" is usually an effort by people with political agendas to wrap their own preferred policies in the mantle of science. In this so-called "information age" we find that people use the jargon of knowledge and the trappings of science in order to give more credibility to what remain fundamentally value-based proposals. They attempt to give their value and ideological preferences the cachet of being scientific.

It's not that research doesn't offer direction. But findings have to be interpreted and adapted to the new cultural and societal contexts in which they are introduced. You can't just plop these ideas—no matter how "scientifically-based" they supposedly are—from one setting into another without adapting those ideas to the new setting.

I think one has to proceed quite cautiously and help people examine the actual claims on which a proposal is based. It means that evaluators and the people we work with have to critically and thoughtfully examine the evidence that is purported to be "scientific" and draw their own conclusions. Let me hasten to add that, as an evaluator, I support evidence-based practice and I support using scientific methods to examine effectiveness. But I've also seen these phrases politicized and abused. Consumers of evaluations need to attend to "truth in packaging." Look beyond the label or assertion that some proposal is "science-based" to examine where the evidence came from and what it really shows.
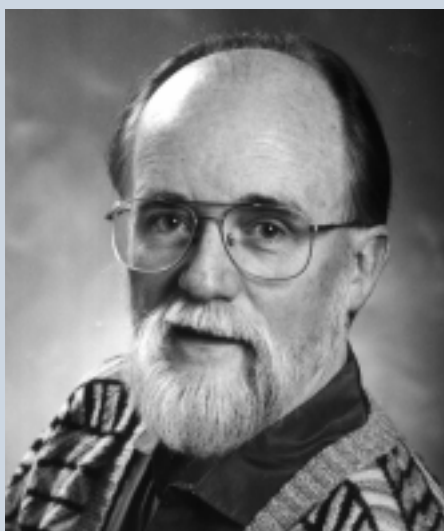
Q Thinking about your comments to the previous questions, what do you feel are the main skills or competencies that evaluators need to have or develop in order to keep pace with emerging trends?

A My colleague Jean King at the University of Minnesota and her students have developed a helpful taxonomy of essential evaluator competencies.[4] I would commend their work, which was published in the Spring/Summer 2001 issue of the *American Journal of Evaluation*.

But to answer your question, evaluators need to be not only methodologically competent, they also need to be skilled at situational analysis, bring cultural sensitivities to their work, be politically sophisticated about the ways in which data and methods are used in the knowledge age, and understand how evaluation intersects with politics at all levels. Also, evaluators need to be very good communicators and facilitators, at least if they are doing utilization-focused evaluation and aiming to work with families and community members in mutually respectful and helpful ways.

Julia Coffman, Consultant, HFRP

[4] King, J., Stevahn, L., Ghere, G., & Minnema, J. (2001). Toward a Taxonomy of Essential Evaluator Competences. *American Journal of Evaluation, 22* (2): 229-247.

Connecting Good Research and Ideas with Policymaking

Three experts in conducting Family Impact Seminars share their techniques for bringing research about families to legislators in a way that not only grabs their attention, but also supports policy change.

The need is clear. The leaders of state legislators report that they are unaware of how children and families are faring in their districts and are uninformed about the effectiveness of family policies and programs (State Legislative Leaders Foundation, 1995). As family researchers and practitioners, we have the research and practice-based information that policymakers need. The conundrum we face is this: How can we get the good information that we have at our fingertips into the hands of policymakers, where it becomes a powerful political tool for developing policies that strengthen and support families?

We have discovered four practical strategies for connecting good research and ideas with policymaking, based on nine years of experience conducting Family Impact Seminars for Wisconsin policymakers. These strategies have been fundamental to the success of the seminars and may have relevance for other efforts to link research with policymaking.

Family Impact Seminars are a series of seminars, briefing reports, newsletters, and discussion sessions for state policymakers, including legislators, legislative aides, Governor's office staff, legislative support bureau personnel, and state agency representatives. The seminars provide objective, solution-oriented information to policymakers on timely issues such as education, juvenile crime, parenting, and welfare reform.

Since 1993, 16 seminars have been held in Wisconsin, attracting 1,138 participants, including 66 different state legislators and 99 legislative offices. The seminars have proven successful in increasing

policymakers' knowledge of family issues in ways that are useful in their work. For example, using retrospective pretest methodology (Pratt, McGuigan & Katzev, 2000), participants reported knowing significantly more about prescription drugs after the seminars than before (see Figure 1). In phone interviews 6 to 8 weeks following each seminar, legislators consistently rate the seminars as the second most useful information source, less useful than constituents, but more useful than print materials or lobbyists (a trend analysis was significant at $p < .003$). Legislators reported they use the information in the following ways:

- 81% to evaluate pending legislation
- 66% to share with colleagues
- 52% to identify contacts for further information
- 48% to incorporate into speeches or presentations
- 22% to develop new legislation

A valuable service family professionals can provide is helping policymakers sort out the sound from the sensational, the accurate from the agenda-driven.

Based on this preliminary evidence of effectiveness, we have identified four pragmatic strategies for connecting research and ideas to policymaking. In Wisconsin, adhering to these strategies has carved out a niche that distinguishes us from the advocates, lobbyists, and special interest groups that regularly bombard legislators with their own legislative agendas.
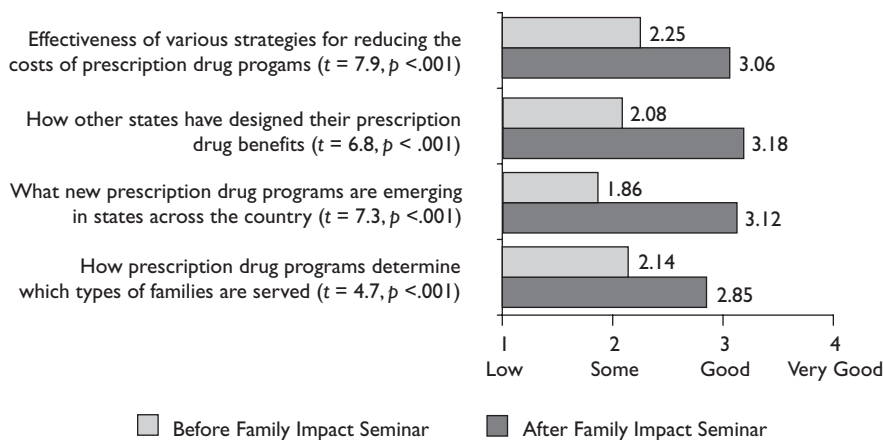
1. *Provide objective, high-quality, research- and practice-based information.* In interviews, legislators complain about the piles of reports on their desks. What policymakers need is not more information, but more objective and valid information (Strickland, 1996). So, a valuable service family professionals can provide is helping policymakers sort out the sound from the sensational, the accurate from the agenda-driven. In the words of a state legislator, "...the ability to present and prepare unbiased research based on objective analysis and without political taint is truly refreshing."

The seminars have established a reputation as an objective information source by providing policymakers with a range of policy options. For example, our briefing report on competent parenting reviewed family support programs in five states and 25 policy proposals from agencies and organizations that were notably diverse in their political orientations.

2. *Be reactive rather than proactive.* Most organizations that work with policymakers have an agenda, such as introducing legislation, passing a bill, or boosting their own budget. Instead of proactively promoting our own agenda, we deliberately respond to policymakers' needs. We conduct annual inter-

Figure 1: How Much Participants Learned from the Prescription Drug Seminar

Effectiveness of various strategies for reducing the costs of prescription drug progams ($t = 7.9, p <.001$) — 2.25 / 3.06

How other states have designed their prescription drug benefits ($t = 6.8, p < .001$) — 2.08 / 3.18

What new prescription drug programs are emerging in states across the country ($t = 7.3, p <.001$) — 1.86 / 3.12

How prescription drug programs determine which types of families are served ($t = 4.7, p <.001$) — 2.14 / 2.85

1 Low 2 Some 3 Good 4 Very Good

☐ Before Family Impact Seminar   ■ After Family Impact Seminar

Note: Based on the 16th Wisconsin Family Impact Seminar on prescription drugs attended by 55 participants (69% response rate).

views with 11 legislative and gubernatorial advisors so we can focus on issues policymakers are debating about or voting on.

This careful attention to timing increases legislative attendance. For example, the welfare reform seminar, held the day before the vote on Wisconsin's welfare legislation, attracted a record 28 state legislators. We also found that in policymaking circles the usefulness of information often depends on when it is provided. For example, we divided all the Wisconsin seminars into two categories: seminars in which legislation was pending (e.g., prescription drugs and welfare reform) and seminars which legislators had identified as important issues, but no legislation was pending (e.g., competent parenting and youth resilience). In t-tests, legislators rated the seminars with pending legislation significantly more useful than the others.

3. *Provide information in the format policymakers prefer.* The oral tradition in policymaking is long and strong. To build on policymakers' preference for the oral over the written word, we recommend conducting seminars, setting up personal appointments with policymakers, or organizing discussion sessions.

Surprisingly, we have learned through our work that legislators have few opportunities to become acquainted with each other, particularly with colleagues on the other side of the aisle. A valuable service professionals can provide to policymakers is to provide a neutral space for dialogue outside the contentious, interest-group-dominated environment in which policymaking takes place (Smith, 1991). One state legislator commented that "the information and ability for follow-up discussion at the round table portion of the seminar is not available to my knowledge in any other setting."

4. *Bring a family perspective to policymaking.* Most policymakers would not think of passing a bill without asking about its economic or environmental impacts. Family professionals can encourage policymakers to routinely ask about the impact of policies or programs on families. Policymakers should ask questions such as: In what ways do families contribute to social problems? How are families affected by problems? Would family-based solutions be more effective? We have available a list of 34 family impact questions on our website at www.uwex.edu/ces/familyimpact/ipfcheck.pdf.

For anyone interested in strengthening families, connecting with policymakers is important because policy shapes the context in which families operate. In the words of an anonymous state legislator, "Persist with well-researched and accredited information and keep at it. Politics belongs to the persistent" (State Legislative Leaders Foundation, 1995, p. 29).

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> evaluations to watch

The Boston Parent Organizing Network (BPON) mobilizes parents, local organizations, and communities to improve the quality of education in the Boston Public Schools. BPON provides a central connection for all of these groups; they believe that by working together, they can have a greater impact on the improvement of the quality of education in the Boston Public Schools than they can as individual organizations. The Intercultural Center for Research in Education (INCRE) is conducting an evaluation of BPON. The formative phase of the evaluation focused on three strategies: 1) minimizing the data collection burden on the organizations; 2) tailoring the data collection forms to help each grantee clarify objectives and better document parent outreach, organizing, training, and information dissemination activities; and 3) helping the organizations to use data to reflect on their progress and inform planning decisions for continued work with BPON. An outcome evaluation is underway that will address the "value-added" of the coalition structure to organize parents in school reform.

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Family Support America:
Supporting "Family Supportive" Evaluation

David Diehl of Family Support America outlines their top evaluation projects: compiling an online national database of family support programs and developing new ways to measure the effectiveness of family support programs.

Since 1981, Family Support America (formerly Family Resource Coalition of America) has worked to strengthen the family support field. Over the last several years, this work has addressed the issues of evaluation and measurement. Our work seeks to align evaluation practice with the philosophy and practice of family support—to explore the ways in which evaluation can be done in more "family supportive" ways. This article describes two of our more noteworthy efforts, both of which have been supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The National Family Support Mapping Project

The National Family Support Mapping Project is an effort to locate and collect information on every family support program in the country and create a comprehensive national database. This project arose in response to some simple, but important questions: How many family support programs are there? What families are they serving? What are the services and programs being offered? What are the funding sources for these programs?

To answer these and other questions, the Mapping Project was launched in the summer of 2000. Each participating program completes a questionnaire on its mission, the population it serves, the budget and size of the program, and details about the services and resources that it provides. We update this information and display it at the Family Support America website (www.familysupportamerica.org).

Interestingly, the Mapping Project surfaced key questions about what qualifies as "family support." Family Support America has devel-

Related Resources

Smith, T. W. (1999). *The Emerging 21st Century American Family*. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago. This paper provides an overview of the changes to the American family over the last 30 years, focusing on family composition, roles, and values.

Blank, S. (2000). *Good Works: Highlights of a Study on the Center for Family Life.* Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation. This report, about a family-service agency committed to improving the well-being of families, highlights the agency's success and suggests some of the reasons for it. www.aecf.org/publications/#reseval

Ahsan, N., & Cramer, L. (1998). *How Are We Doing? A Program Self Assessment Toolkit for the Family Support Field.* Chicago, IL: Family Support America. This toolkit gives family support programs specific benchmarks to help them enact the family support principles.

Table 1: Examples of Promotional Indicators

- Percent of children entering kindergarten demonstrating appropriate progress in several areas (physical-motor, cognitive, language, social and emotional development).
- Percent of parents actively engaged in their children's learning and education.
- Percent of adults who have someone to rely on (a support network).
- Percent of youth whose families set clear expectations, rules, and consequences.

oped a Family Support Typology that describes five basic models of how family support is delivered. We use the typology to organize the Mapping Project and create appropriate surveys for each of the five models. The five models are:

1. *Family Support Centers.* Free-standing, stand-alone centers, typically known as family support or family resource centers.
2. *Family Support Programs Nested within Larger Organizations.* Programs that are part of larger organizations (for example, schools, libraries, and programs located in Boys and Girls Clubs).
3. *Organizations that Adopt and Work from the Principles of Family Support.* Family support values and principles can be expressed in a whole range of settings, even if a concrete family support program or center is not present (for example, in the work of child welfare agencies and businesses).
4. *Community-Level Systems of Care.* Networks of multiple family support sites that represent a partnership between agencies and organizations to create a community-wide system of family support delivery.
5. *Comprehensive Community Collaborative Structures.* As part of the devolution of power to localities and communities, local "collaboratives" have arisen for the primary purpose of planning and organizing human services at the community level.

"Promotional Indicators" of Family Support

The other major way in which Family Support America has been pursuing "family supportive" evaluation is developing methodologies that measure the effectiveness of family support practice. We believe that if a primary goal of family support programs is to enhance the capacities of children and families, then we should measure family strengths and capacities.

Building on the work of Carl Dunst and Carol Trivette[1], Family Support America has been working with eight states to develop "promotional indicators" as measures of family support. We are interested in collecting information on promotional indicators, which measure

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[1] Dunst, C., Trivette, C., & Thompson, R. (1990). Supporting and strengthening family functioning: Toward a congruence between principles and practice. *Prevention in Human Services*, 9(1), 19-43.

the positive development of families, rather than deficit-based indicators, which measure the negative aspects of families. (See Table 1 for examples of promotional indicators.)

Family Support America has worked with several of its state partners to form the Cross-State Work Team on Promotional Indicators. This team has been the driving force in exploring promotional indicators in state and community well-being frameworks. This group has worked to infuse promotional indicators into their state and community reports and has identified a "Core List" of promotional indicators that they recommend for states and communities interested in measuring positive development.

The concept of promotional indicators also has applications at the level of program evaluation. For programs that build capacities and contribute to positive development, promotional indicators are appropriate for measuring this change. As the saying goes, "What gets measured, gets done."

The concept of promotional indicators has been useful in several ways:

- It has helped to shed light on the current imbalance between deficit-based indicators (where we have lots of information available) and promotional indicators (where we currently have very little information).

- Because many promotional indicators tend to be "steps-on-the-way" to achievement of longer term outcomes, they have helped to highlight the importance of measuring intermediate markers of development instead of focusing exclusively on the ultimate outcome.
- Promotional indicators encourage people to think about the linkages between program practice and evaluation practice. They also encourage program planners to consider the ways in which their activities lead to increased strengths or capacities.

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Strengthening Programs and Summative Evaluations through Formative Evaluations

Two evaluators from SRI describe the benefits realized by the Parent Institute for Quality Education when they prefaced their summative evaluation with a formative evaluation.

In 1999, SRI International (SRI) received support from the Stuart Foundation to conduct an in-depth formative and summative evaluation of the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE). PIQE is a not-for-profit community organization in California that aims to increase parents' knowledge and skills to support their children's academic achievement and ultimate enrollment in post-secondary education. In its 15-year history, PIQE has graduated more than 200,000 parents from its eight-week Parent Institute, many of whom were new immigrants to the United States.

PIQE, as a learning organization, values the opportunity to participate in both formative evaluations (which enable them to judge the worth of the program during the program activities) and summative evaluations (which enable them to judge the program at the end of the activities). The formative evaluation discussed below has allowed PIQE to assess and strengthen its current practices. Originally scheduled to last only one year, the formative evaluation was expanded to two and a half years to allow time for PIQE to implement program refinements based on the evaluation findings and to allow for a second round of observation and feedback on the new methods and materials.

This article describes how SRI and PIQE worked together on the formative evaluation and how it supported refinement of the program, identification of promising practices, and articulation of child, parent,

and teacher outcomes, which will be measured in the summative evaluation.

Developing a "Theory of Change"

As an initial step in the evaluation, SRI assisted PIQE in articulating a "theory of change" to describe how PIQE expects the program components (e.g., the eight-week class, the teacher workshop) to produce their desired short-term and long-term outcomes (e.g., improved parent and teacher attitudes and behaviors, child educational achievement). All observation and interview protocols used in the evaluation have been based on this theory of change and developed collaboratively with PIQE staff.

The first year of formative evaluation (the observations and interviews discussed below) raised several questions about the goals and strategies outlined in the first conceptualization of PIQE's theory of change. As a result, PIQE revised their theory of change and articulated new measurable outcomes for parents, teachers, and students. If we had not had the opportunity to refine the theory of change through a formative evaluation, the summative evaluation would not have included measurement of some activities and outcomes now considered essential for program success. In addition to supporting a stronger summative evaluation design, collaboration around developing and refining the theory of change helped PIQE to refine its program objectives and description and to identify implementation areas that are crucial for program success.

When Parents Assess Schools

M. Elena Lopez, from Harvard Family Research Project, discusses the role that data plays in helping parents assess, and then work to change, the performance of their children's schools.

What can parents[1] do when their child's school is at-risk? In a growing number of communities plagued with low-performing public schools, parents are taking action. Through institutional mechanisms like school-based management teams, or with the backing of outside and independent community organizations, parents are raising questions about the performance of their children's schools. These parents are constructing new roles as leaders and partners in school reform, and offering an alternative to traditional school-managed parent involvement activities. In this transformative process, school data can be used to deepen parents' understanding of issues and widen the scope of their engagement.

How do parents access, interpret, and use data?

Standards-based reform has over time made more data on student performance and school conditions available to the broader community. While the data are available, they are not always accessible to parents, or presented in a format and language that parents can understand. To fill this void, a number of intermediary organizations offer assistance with understanding school outcomes data, analyzing school performance issues, and developing solutions to schooling problems for community organizing groups and parent activists.

For example, the Institute of Education and Social Policy (IESP) at New York University helps community-based organizations tackle a range of school issues, including overcrowding, teacher quality, and closing the achievement gap. It helped Cypress Hills Advocates for Education, a group of 65 parents and community members, with data analysis and presentation on school overcrowding. The group then convened a meeting with public officials and used the data to buttress their reform proposals. Parents got a commitment from the superintendent to create a task force to develop short- and long-term plans. The district implemented a short-term plan of "rezoning," and now the group is pressuring the superintendent to move forward on the long-term plan, which includes securing funding for new buildings.

Empowering parents through data

1. *Data can enlighten parents about school-related issues.* Data can inform parents about standards-based reform and help them monitor school performance. Anne Henderson of IESP suggests that student work, as a form of data, is a very powerful tool. At the Commonwealth Institute for Parent Leadership in Kentucky, a training institute for parent leaders, parents compare students' work at different levels of proficiency, and discuss why and how the standards are being met or not met. Parents then use their understanding of standards to formulate what questions to ask of teachers and administrators.

2. *Data can equip parents to participate in decision making.* Parents recruited to serve on school management teams need to understand how data can help them determine priorities and increase school accountability. The wider school community also benefits from access to and understanding of the data, allowing them to share their concerns with parent representatives. The New York Urban League trains par-

ents who serve on state-mandated school leadership teams. These teams, composed of an equal number of parents and school staff, are charged to develop a comprehensive school plan and a budget to support it. Adrian Lewis from the New York Urban League notes, "It is a myth that parents are not interested in getting involved. If they are hesitant, it's because they have no information to be effective. With our training, a lightbulb goes on. We use school report cards to show the link between the data and the work that the school leadership teams have to do."

3. *Data can help change the relationship between parents and schools.* Many states require that districts make school performance

Related Resources

Institute for Education and Social Policy, New York University. (2001). *Mapping the Field of Organizing for School Improvement: A report on education organizing in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, the Mississippi Delta, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington D.C.* This report maps the field of community organizing for school reform in eight cities nationwide. It describes patterns of participation, strategies, and accomplishments, as well as recommendations for strengthening this movement.

Hirota, J., Jacobowitz, R., & Brown, P. (2000). *The Donors' Education Collaborative: Strategies for Systemic School Reform.* **Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall Center for Children.** This report evaluates an initiative to build broad-based constituencies to advocate for improvements in New York City public education. It includes the initiative's successes as well as lessons learned.

Brown, C., Gold, E., & Simon, E. (2001). *Looking for Indicators of the Impact of Community Organizing for School Reform.* **A Joint Working Paper of the Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform and Research for Action.** The "Indicators Project" is developing a series of indicators to gauge the success of community organizers in promoting successful student learning and strong communities. This working paper provides an overview of selected indicators, measures, and data sources. **www.crosscity.org/pdfs/LookingforIndicators.pdf**

The **Parent Press Fall 2001 newsletter** from Parents for Public Schools is a resource for parents who want to improve their children's schools by using data. In addition to providing a concise overview of the types of data relevant to school reform, the issue contains numerous practical suggestions for parents about using data to improve education. **www.parentspress.com/index.html**

The **School-Level Assessment Database CD-ROM**, available from the U.S. Department of Education's Planning and Evaluation Service, contains assessment scores for 80,000 public schools. To order, contact Meredith Miller at 202-401-8368 or meredithmiller@ed.gov.

[1] The term "parent" is used broadly to refer to biological parents, extended family members, and other adults with primary responsibility for the care of a child.

data public by posting it on their websites or publishing it in the local newspaper. Henderson says, "These requirements have changed parents' dependency on schools for access to information and to observe classes and meet teachers." Parents also collect their own data. In Kentucky, parents investigate how often teachers assign writing as part of a school-community effort to improve writing skills in the school.

4. *Data can help parents leverage change.* Rochelle Nichols Solomon of the Philadelphia Education Fund believes that data has to be presented in ways that will not overwhelm parents and community members, but will give them hope. She says, "The flip side of using data is that it can be devastating. For example, when you look at the percentage of students with minimum college preparation in our neighborhood schools, 45 percent have completed the minimum college sequence. That means that in college they will still have to take remedial classes. How do we change this? You have to give people examples of what is doable; otherwise, people think it is hopeless. You need to find where the data looks different and what are promising strategies. You can point to the need for extended learning and block scheduling. You can point to increased professional development for teachers. The data leads to big questions, but it can also help people figure out what they can do to address an issue."

Researchers and evaluators have a role in helping parents and communities understand personal education concerns from a systems perspective through the use of well-designed data presentations. Data alone, however, is not sufficient to effect change. It is a tool that uncov-

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Demystifying Data

Recognizing that many parents of children in low performing schools do not realize how poorly their school is doing, Institute of Education and Social Policy (IESP) provides them with disaggregated and comparative data. Kavitha Mediratta from IESP explains, "We try to use data to demystify what is going on. We help parents understand what the Board of Education's data says is happening in their child's school. How many students are meeting the reading standards? Are more students referred to special education in this school than in similar schools in the district and the whole city? Once the group develops its analysis, we develop data presentations that help them make their arguments more forcefully."

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ers urgent problems whose solutions defy quick fixes. For this reason, it is important that parents have a structure—whether through community-based organizing groups or formal school-community decision-making teams—that will sustain their long-term advocacy.

M. Elena Lopez, Senior Consultant, HFRP

Strengthening Programs

Comprehensive Observations and Interviews

SRI conducted observations of six complete eight-week sessions of the Parent Institute, as well as interviews of host school principals and teachers, parent participants, and program facilitators. SRI and PIQE staff met several times to discuss the findings and the ways SRI could provide further feedback or support.

SRI also developed a draft set of benchmarks (milestones that would indicate that the desired changes had occurred) to help support PIQE staff in tracking their progress. PIQE staff reviewed the draft benchmarks and helped refine them so they could be used to manage their change process. Program staff have used the formative evaluation findings and data collection tools in several ways. For example, they have clarified lesson objectives, developed sample lesson plans, revised program curriculum, created new facilitator training materials, and revised the program operations manual.

Real-Time Feedback

To examine the extent to which the program refinements were successfully being implemented, PIQE staff asked SRI to conduct additional "real-time" observations (provide feedback on each class observed within a day or two of the observation so that they could use the information to help other instructors who were about to teach the same lesson). SRI provided real-time feedback on 10 class sessions, each taught by a different instructor, during the 2000-2001 school year. After each observation, SRI researchers distributed detailed observation notes and held telephone debriefing meetings with PIQE staff to discuss the notes and give immediate verbal feedback. SRI produced a summary of the

real-time feedback with descriptions of what did and did not work in program implementation for PIQE to use as an instructor training tool.

Real-time feedback allowed SRI to look at parts of the program that PIQE wished to have examined in more detail and areas in which PIQE was specifically trying to apply changes based on earlier feedback. The real-time feedback was extremely useful, but it would not have been possible or as useful without the earlier comprehensive observations and interviews. The combination of these two approaches worked extremely well.

The Value of the Formative Evaluation Method

Formative evaluation is often overlooked when organizations believe that their programs are already running according to plan or when resources are limited. Our experience with the PIQE program, however, suggests that formative evaluation is valuable for mature as well as new programs. In addition, we found that our formative work has built a stronger foundation for the summative evaluation scheduled to begin in May 2002. We hope that our experience encourages others involved in program evaluations to include formative research methods in their evaluations whenever possible.

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Participatory Action Research: Building Community Capacity through Collaboration, Education, and Action

Priscilla Little, from Harvard Family Research Project, describes the implementation of the Milwaukee Participatory Action Research project and how it improved the evaluation and advocacy skills of all its participants.

The primary goal of the Milwaukee Participatory Action Research (PAR) project is to build a knowledge base about the impact of the devolution of social policy from the federal level to state and local levels, while promoting grassroots participation in policy implementation.[1] Specifically, the PAR project engages a team of individuals representing community-based agencies, advocates, legislators, and welfare recipients and local welfare implementing agencies (in Wisconsin these are referred to as W-2 agencies, W-2 being the name for the state's welfare-to-work program), in dialogue around issues of welfare reform in Milwaukee's Hmong and Hispanic communities.

The PAR Project

The PAR project works in partnership with community-based agencies, two local W-2 agencies, 30 Hmong and Hispanic welfare recipients, and the Hmong African American Friendship Association. It employed a three-phase implementation model:

Phase 1. Develop and implement a participatory framework for documenting personal, family, and community histories regarding W-2. Express concerns and identify barriers to W-2 participation.

Phase 2. Carry learning to a larger community through storytelling, community forums, and roundtable dialogue for the purposes of refining, broadening, and creating new strategies for addressing concerns and barriers.

Phase 3. Develop information sharing and collaborative networks to sustain learning and the growth process.

Seven monthly sessions were held with Hmong community members; each session lasted two and a half hours. After an initial introduction and overview in session one, subsequent sessions allowed participants to build trust, explore issues, and initiate productive conversation by using techniques such as incident analysis, active listening, and participation. Program planners noted that the use of drawing exercises provided an excellent way to stimulate discussions among participants with significant cultural and language barriers.

In addition to sessions with community members, four meetings were held with agency staff and caseworkers to discuss how the project could fit into the existing W-2 programs.

A significant outcome of the PAR project was the understanding among participants of the complexity and barriers to raising the skills and employment potential of Hmong families who are current and former welfare recipients. This understanding led PAR participants to work with a local community college to develop a proposal for one of the W-2 agencies to fund a comprehensive family literacy model that will significantly increase the educational options for Hmong families that participate in W-2.

As a follow-up to the PAR project, researchers are conducting group processes with Hmong family participants to determine the economic and family well-being outcomes that they are experiencing, now that they have left welfare.

Reflections on the PAR Process

The PAR process facilitated the development of transferable skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and group learning among the participants. Additionally, the PAR process enabled them to identify a set of four learning outcomes that could be applied to other projects utilizing a PAR approach:

1. Learning to develop overarching themes about the underlying values/assumptions of a program.
2. Learning the importance of political connections.
3. Learning about program processes and outcomes.
4. Learning to take action.

PAR implementers note that the single most important element for the success of this type of collaborative research project is the commitment to learning and improvement on the part of all participants.

Priscilla Little, Project Manager, HFRP

For more information about the PAR project, please contact: Dr. Kalyani Rai, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Center for Urban Community Development, Milwaukee, WS, 53201, 414-227-3271, kalyanir@uwm.edu.

For more information about the W.K. Kellogg Scholar Practitioner Program, please contact Dr. Ronald Walters, The Academy of Leadership, University of Maryland, 11-7 Taliaferro Hall, College Park, MD, 20742, 301-405-1787.

[1] The project was conducted as part of the Scholar Practitioner Program of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation Devolution Initiative, a five-year initiative that provides support to over 30 grantees, which include researchers, policy analysts, and state and national advocacy organizations, in order to support and promote public participation in informing policy agendas and decisions around welfare and health care issues. The Scholar Practitioner Program was created to provide relevant information, education, and research at the grassroots level to inform public policies and build the capacity of minority scholars to engage in community-based research. As such, it serves as a bridge between academia and grassroots communities in five states across the U.S.

Related Resources

Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. (2001). *How Can Faith-Based Service Providers Help Families Leaving Welfare?* **Washington, DC: author.** This research brief explores the opportunities and challenges raised by the charitable choice provision included in welfare reform legislation.

Naples, M. I. (2001). *Family Leave for Low-Income Working Women: Providing Paid Leave through Temporary Disability Insurance, The New Jersey Case.* **Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research.** This research brief makes the case for paid family leave for the care of newborns or ill dependant relatives, and outlines policy alternatives for financing and administering such a program.

Lessons from a Partnership Model Project

Kathe Johnson shares her experience from her work with the Women and Poverty Public Education Initiative, outlining four lessons she learned from this project, which connects professional academic and low-income women.

Our project, the Women and Poverty Public Education Initiative (WPPEI), links the expertise of professional academic women with the skill development of low-income women. We work to build the economic capacity of low-income women and to ensure that their voices are heard in the public policy decisions that affect them. We have learned through our work that this partnership model between academic and low-income women has the potential to shape policy change, but is not without its pitfalls.

Operating in four Wisconsin communities, WPPEI is staffed by a director, two regional coordinators, and two local coordinators at each site. The local coordinators form the heart of the partnership model, consisting of one academic professional and one low-income woman. They keep informed of welfare-related issues, which are shared with the larger membership. They also initiate projects to address these issues and serve on the boards of local agencies.

To meet our goals we engage in research, public education, public policy campaigns, and advocacy for low-income women. Our recent achievements include:

- Our local coordinators organized a county collaborative to assess the needs of low-income families in the county and to take steps to alleviate their problems.
- Our local coordinators started a Speakers Bureau in 1999 that offers low-income women training in communication and public policy skills. Women who take the training speak at conferences, college classrooms, and other forums to share their insights about public policy and how it affects them.
- We published the results of a four-year longitudinal study of women who either received, or were eligible to receive, public benefits.
- We published an educational video and booklet examining the impact of welfare reform, based on a survey of 100 women in poverty from each site location.

Although partnership model projects can shape policy change, my experience suggests that we need better preparation among both the professional and low-income women to take full advantage of this model. Our project has learned several important lessons along the way to improve the design of this partnership:

1. *Professional academic women need further training about ways to examine the obstacles to low-income partners' participation in project implementation.* Over time, the low-income membership of WPPEI declined to an almost negligible number. Most of the remaining members were women in academia. I believe this happened because the training for the women in academia regarding the real life difficulties of the women in poverty was inadequate. With better understanding, the professional academic members can design projects that offset the material and social divide between themselves and the low-income members.

2. *Professional academic women need to assess what tools low-income partners may need and budget accordingly for compensation, communication, and transportation costs.* Professionals usually have credit cards, cell phones, personal computers, Internet service, reliable vehicles, and access to other tools to facilitate their participation. The absence of these tools often limits participation of low-income members. This is especially the case when telephone conference calls and email are common means of communication. Even something as simple as distributing notebooks to record project-related activity begins to bridge the difference between partners.

3. *Partnership projects need to train low-income partners comprehensively.* Professionals often use words and acronyms that are unfamiliar to most people, especially to those who have a limited formal education. In meetings where such language is used, low-income women may feel uncomfortable and may not fully share their experiences. Low-income members need to be trained about project terminology and acronyms, public policy systems, and the names and goals of relevant organizations. They should also be exposed to role-playing sessions to prepare for situations in new social arenas that might cause embarrassment.

4. *A project that employs low-income women should ensure their access to events that expand their social networks.* Professionals usually have access to a network of individuals who can help move a project forward politically and financially. Low-income women usually have not moved far from their cultural and social milieu and have limited contacts with important people. To compensate for this, they need exposure to networking opportunities. For example, if a project goal is to reduce local crime, then the project's budget should include money for low-income women to attend a Crimestoppers dinner, where they can build relationships with law enforcement, school district, and service agency representatives.

I believe that the research, advocacy, and public education activities of a partnership model project can make an impact on the lives of low-income families. As such, adequate forethought and attention to the needs of *all* the members of the project are vital to its long-term success.

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Related Resources

De Vita, C. J., & Mosher-Williams, R. (Eds.). (2001). *Who Speaks for America's Children.* Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press. This book presents essays by child policy experts about advocacy strategies and their influence on policy. Case studies highlight the changing role of child advocacy organizations.

From Health Consumers to Health Consumer Researchers

A grassroots network of families of children with special health care needs shares the lessons they learned about conducting research to improve the health care for their children.

Families can take leading roles in sponsoring and conducting health consumer research, with the ultimate goal of improving the U.S. health care system. This is an important message of Family Voices, a grassroots network of 40,000 families and friends of children with special health care needs. In each state, two volunteer family coordinators serve as organizers, educators, and advocates for children with special health care needs.

Family Voices and the Heller School at Brandeis University surveyed 2,220 families to fill the knowledge gap about children with special needs. While data existed about narrow constituencies of children with special heath needs, e.g. children with cerebral palsy or those receiving early intervention services, there was none about the population as a whole. Gathering this information was the first step to providing effective and comprehensive health services to *all* families with special health needs.

Nora Wells, Director of Research Activities at Family Voices, offers these lessons for family and community groups that wish to become involved in research:

• *Recognize that data provides the key to informed action for systemic change.* In order to serve the complex and diverse needs of families of children with special health needs, Family Voices realized that it was vital to gather information systematically about how families are faring, what is working for them and what is not, and what can be improved.

• *Collaborate with an established research institution in a partnership based on mutual respect and equality.* Both the Heller School and Family Voices understood that the other was invaluable: the Heller School for its research expertise and Family Voices for its intimate knowledge of the issues relevant to families of children with special health needs. Family Voices' small national staff and the state-level family coordinators participated in research design, survey instrument construction, sampling, analysis, and report writing. This partnership greatly influenced the credibility of the research to policymaking audiences while remaining relevant and useful to families.

• *Support families by providing timely and useful information.* As a result of the survey, Family Voices published two booklets to meet families' expressed needs for information. One booklet makes the survey results available to families in simple and clear language, so that families can learn how others are coping with similar issues and what areas of health care delivery particularly need improvement. The second booklet helps families and health plans learn about programs and policies for children with special needs in managed care. This booklet is based on a series of interviews that Family Voices coordinators conducted with 17 managed care providers in 12 states in order to understand health plan programs and policies and how plans can better serve children with special needs.

Family Voices believes that every person has the ability, right, and responsibility to speak up about services he/she needs for his/her family and to provide feedback about the adequacy of those services. When families play an active role in developing and conducting research, they enhance their capacity to advocate effectively for an improved system of services.

Flora Traub, Research Analyst, HFRP
M. Elena Lopez, Senior Consultant, HFRP

Reference

Krauss, M. W., Gulley, S., Leiter, V., Minihan, P., Sciegaj, M., Wells, N., & Anderson, B. (2000). *The Family Partners Project: Report on a National Survey of the Health Care Experiences of Families of Children with Special Health Care Needs*. Boston, MA: Brandeis University and Family Voices.

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