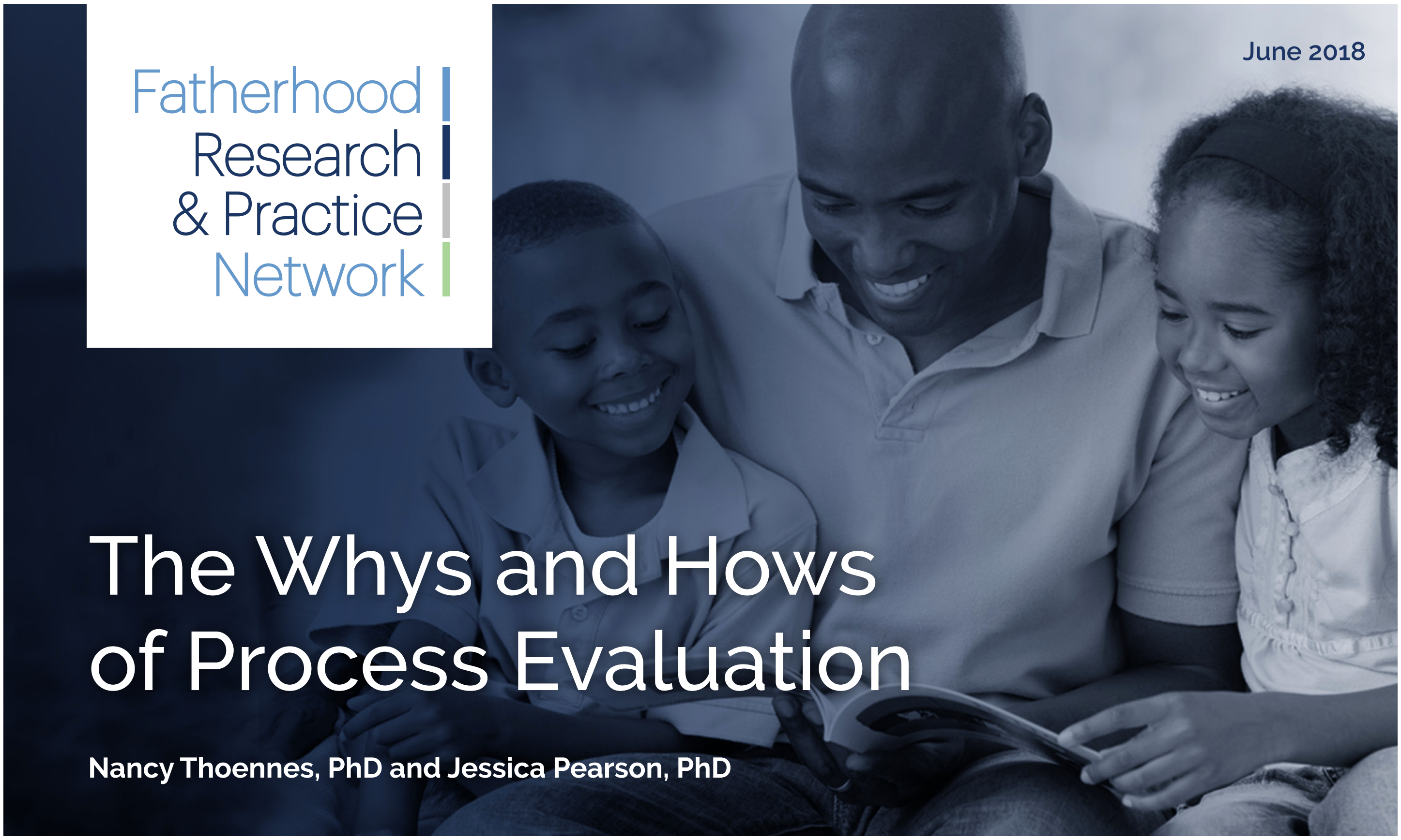

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The Whys and Hows of Process Evaluation

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Why Conduct a Process Evaluation?

The purpose of an outcome evaluation is fairly straightforward. Conducting a rigorous outcome evaluation is not easy. Understanding the need for it is: Your funders, colleagues, and staff want to know if your program produced the intended results. For example, questions may include:

- Do fathers report better relationships with their children's mothers following participation in your program?
- Do fathers who take part in your employment services show greater earnings post program, and perhaps better compliance with child support?
- Do fathers served by your program spend more time with their children post program or are they more satisfied with the time they spend?

It can be less obvious what a process evaluation will tell you or why it will be useful, but in fact only by conducting a rigorous process study can you confidently answer the outcome questions posed above. A thorough process evaluation will look at the following types of factors:

- How were program participants to be recruited and how were they actually recruited?
- How many participants were to be served and how many were actually served?
- What types of participants were to be enrolled and what types of participants were actually enrolled?
- What services were participants to receive? Were these, in fact, the services provided?

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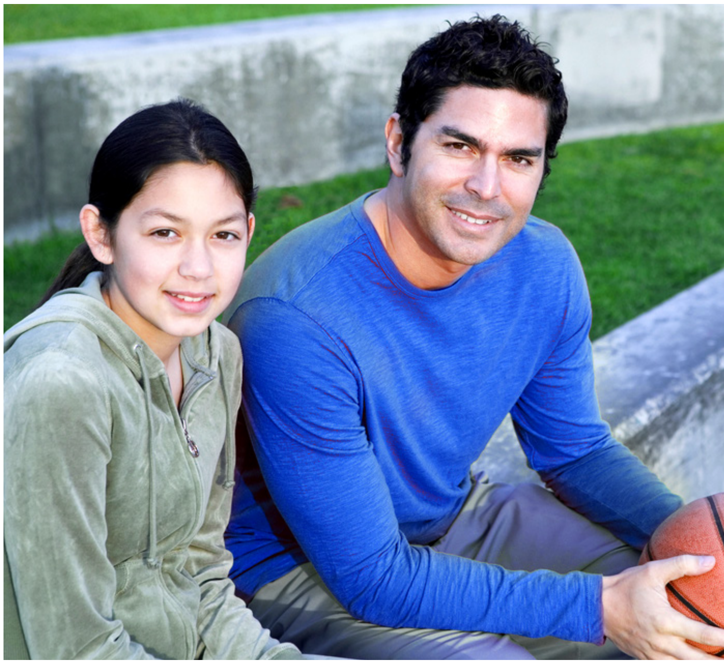
- Were the services provided of the same duration and format as determined during the planning stage?
- In what ways, if any, did actual service delivery differ from the proposed service delivery?
- Did participants receive services from community agencies that operate independently of your program?
- What type of staff training and oversight was planned and what was put into place?
- What obstacles to recruitment were encountered?
- What barriers to service delivery were encountered?
- Did partnerships with other agencies work as planned?

The answers to these questions can help you determine whether there were ways in which actual program operations differed significantly from what was planned. Since most programs will deviate to some extent from what is initially drawn up on paper, understanding the differences can help you to think about how changes in the program might have impacted the outcomes.

The Risks of an Outcome Evaluation without a Process Evaluation



Conducting an outcome evaluation without a process evaluation is sometimes called a "black box" evaluation because what constitutes the intervention is never really considered. This means the researcher or program administrator is at risk of either taking credit for benefits the intervention did not produce, or writing-off the intervention as ineffective without realizing what it might actually achieve.

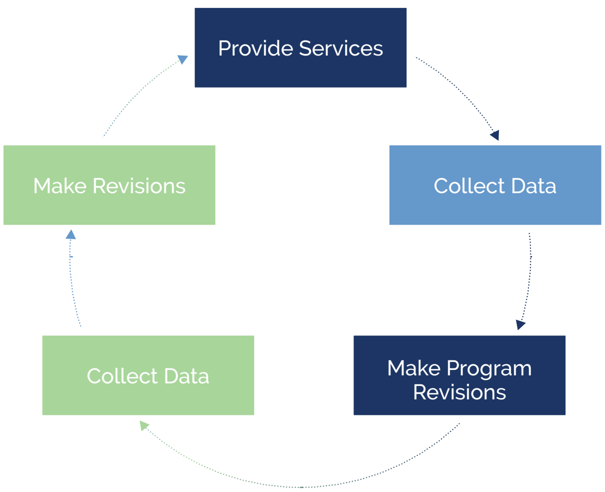
In the first instance, a program claims success by noting improved relationships between the parents or improvements in employment and child support payments post program. However, if many of the fathers enrolled in the program were also participating in other services in the community designed to achieve the same goals, it is unclear what impact the program may have had.

On the other hand, if the program was designed to present six sessions on parental relationships, but enrollees only attended an average of two sessions, the outcomes might well be disappointing. However, concluding that the program could not produce the outcomes predicted in the logic model would be incorrect since the model was not faithfully followed.

In these examples, the key is for program staff to determine if the program operated as planned. Determining how closely the program followed the model may help to explain unexpected findings. The next step will be to determine why the program did not operate as planned and if there are steps that can be taken to correct the problems. This might mean paying closer attention to recruiting and enrolling only those fathers the program is designed to serve. It might require finding ways to more deeply engage fathers so that they fully participate in the program. If program administrators cannot identify ways to reach the right fathers, or to engage them, the program may need to be redesigned.

Types of Process Evaluations

Formative Process Evaluation



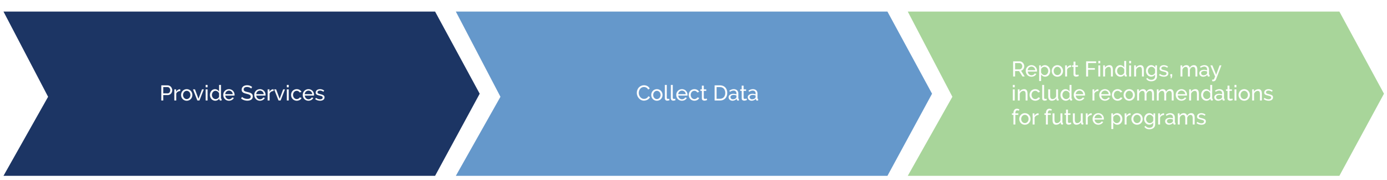
Process evaluations can be conducted on an ongoing basis throughout the course of the intervention, at specific timepoints (such as when the project moves from planning to service delivery, or when the first cohorts complete the program), or at the conclusion of the project. Process evaluations that begin early in the intervention are often called **formative evaluations** since they can provide program practitioners with information about how the intervention is straying from the planned intervention.

Those that occur late-stage, often after the services are completed, are sometimes called **summative** because they provide insights into how the program worked as a whole. The information that is produced may help other programs but will not change the program being studied.

An ongoing (formative) process evaluation may require more time and resources than a summative evaluation. However, it may also provide program administrators with critical information that may improve the way the program operates. This can allow a program to be salvaged that might otherwise produce little useful information.

A summative evaluation can help to identify the ways in which the program deviated from the model. This may help explain disappointing or unexpected results, even if it is too late to correct these problems during the study. A summative evaluation may also prove useful to other programs by highlighting where problems may occur.

Summative Process Evaluation



Steps in Conducting a Process Evaluation

Often a first step in planning a process evaluation involves revisiting the project logic model. Although logic models take many forms, they typically explain what resources/inputs are to be available, what actions are to take place, and then the short-, mid- and longer-term results that are anticipated. By ensuring that the process evaluation collects data on the inputs, activities, and outputs that are anticipated for the project, the evaluator can help the program staff understand how well the program was implemented.

Looking at each step of the logic model can also help to develop the research questions that will guide the process evaluation. The hypothetical logic model presented here shows the inputs, activities, outputs, and context that might govern a fatherhood program. Sample research questions that might guide a process evaluation are also shown below. Actions to correct any problems that are detected can help the program revise operations (in the case of a formative evaluation) or avoid problems in planning future programs (in the case of a summative evaluation).

Hypothetical Logic Model: Inputs, Activities and Outputs

Inputs	Activities	Outputs
Training All staff who conduct sessions are trained in the curriculum	**Referrals** Referrals are made by partner agencies only for appropriate fathers Follow-up with non-referring agencies to troubleshoot	**Participation** 300 fathers complete the course 280 fathers complete all baseline and follow-up data collection forms
Staff Sufficient staffing to conduct outreach/ recruitment, intake and service delivery	**Collection of Data from Enrollees** Intake and assessments are completed with all	**Additional Services** 200 fathers receive referrals for additional community services 180 fathers follow-up on these service referrals
Resources Resources for staff, space to offer the program, funds for course materials, funds for incidentals to help with engagement (food, help with transportation, etc.)	**Provision of Services** Cohort groups of 5-10 fathers are formed every 4 weeks Sessions last 90 minutes a week for 4 weeks	
	Monitoring of Engagement Documentation of frequency of attendance Monitoring and outreach to no-shows	

Outcomes

External Factors
(Factors Beyond the Control of the Program)

Examples: Employment rates, availability of appropriate agencies in the community to provide additional services, or the degree to which father has an active support group to encourage his participation

Inputs	Research Questions	Actions to Correct
Training	Have all staff who conduct workshops been trained in the curriculum? Are there procedures in place to train new staff?	Institute additional training for program staff.
Staffing	Are there sufficient staff to run the program? Are there divisions of labor among staff, with some running sessions, others working on recruitment or working to get fathers additional needed services?	Work with staff to ensure that outreach, intake and service delivery can be conducted as planned.
Resources	Are funds in place to allow the program to operate as planned? Do all cohorts have the needed materials for the course? Can staff offer to assist with transition or food at the sessions?	Monitor funds to ensure the program can operate as planned or make program adjustments as needed.
Activities	**Research Questions**	**Actions to Correct**
Referrals	What are the sources of most referrals? Are these the expected sources? Are the referrals producing fathers who are appropriate for the program? Why do non-referring agencies say they have not sent fathers to the program? What do these agencies feel would increase referrals?	Explore additional referral sources that might supplement those that have not produced a sufficient volume.
Collection of Data	Are all data collection instruments being completed in a timely manner? Are they checked to ensure that they are complete and useable?	Assign a staff person to monitor data collection and ensure that data collections instruments are completed on time.
Provision of Services	Are groups being formed in a timely manner? If new cohorts cannot start on time, what are the obstacles? A lack of referrals? A lack of appropriate referrals? Fathers deciding not to participate? Lack of staff to run groups?	Identify additional referral sources. Work with referring agencies to clarify what types of fathers are appropriate. Interview fathers who decide not to participate to identify (and remedy) barriers. Increase staffing to run groups or modify the number of cohorts to be served.
Monitoring Engagement	Are participants attending regularly? If not, what type of outreach is done? What do these fathers say about why they are not attending?	Document attendance. Conduct outreach to fathers who miss sessions and identify (and resolve) barriers to participation.
Outputs	**Research Questions**	**Actions to Correct**
Participants	Are the goals for participation being met? Are fathers completing all of the sessions?	Work on referral sources (see above). Work on retention (see above).
Additional Services	Are additional services being provided as needed?	Document referrals made to other services. In follow-up data collection clarify whether the father accessed these services.

The Types of Data that may be Useful in a Process Evaluation

A variety of data sources may prove useful in conducting a process evaluation. Some of these are qualitative in nature. Rubin and Babbie (1993) describe qualitative research this way:

> *Research methods that emphasize depth of understanding, that attempt to tap the deeper meaning of human experience, and that intend to generate theoretically richer observations which are not easily reduced to numbers are generally termed qualitative methods.*

Examples of these qualitative methods might include focus groups, one-on-one interviews in a semi-structured format, or participant observation.

However, process evaluations can also benefit from quantitative data collection. Surveys with staff, with partner agencies, with referral sources, and with participants, allow data to be generated from a greater number of individuals. Often a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches is employed.

Implications for Programs

Program administrators and service providers should recognize that a process evaluation can be a useful tool for program improvement. A process evaluation can help to identify what is happening as planned and what is not. This will often allow for mid-course corrections. In addition, a process evaluation can help to explain unanticipated outcomes by noting how the program has deviated from its original conception. When possible, programs should work with researchers who are familiar with this type of evaluation. This can help to ensure that the methodology is sound, and the findings are objective.

Implications for Researchers

Researchers should routinely conduct process evaluations of programs that may also be the subject of outcome evaluations. This will help to provide a context for findings which may otherwise simply appear to be anomalous results. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection can be employed and the specific type of data to be collected should, as always, be dictated by the nature of the research question and the available resources.

References

Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. (1993). *Research methods for social work, 2nd edition.* Pacific Grove: Books/Cole Publishing Company.

Resources

Conducting a Process Evaluation: https://www.jbassoc.com/resource/conducting-process-evaluation/

Evaluation: A Systematic Approach: https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/evaluation/book224290

Evaluation Resource Guide for Responsible Fatherhood Programs: https://www.jbassoc.com/resource/evaluation-resource-guide-responsible-fatherhood-programs/