

Evaluating Family Life Education Programs

Robert Hughes, Jr., Ph.D., The Ohio State University

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You're likely to skip this section, aren't you? I start with that thought because I know--I've been there, too. All of us have learned the importance of evaluation when working with children and families, yet, somewhere along the way we start to feel guilty about our slack evaluative habits.

Let's start with a basic premise about evaluation--we benefit by knowing how our programs work and what we could do to make them better. From this perspective, evaluation is merely a tool for learning more about programs. However, we also benefit by tying evaluation to what we need to know at each stage in a project. The most frustrating experience as a program designer is to have to provide data to funders or others about a program that makes little developmental sense. I continue to find an article by Francine Jacobs in 1988 to be one of the most helpful for understanding what questions I need to consider as I approach evaluation issues.

Five-tiered Model of Family Program Evaluation

In this article Jacobs proposes a five-tiered model of evaluation for family programs. Jacobs is writing primarily for program developers who are creating services for families, but her ideas also apply for those who conduct educational interventions with families, such as workshops. Jacobs model assumes that evaluation is intertwined with program development--that is, she assumes that family life educators don't create a program and then ask, "How should I evaluate this?" but rather that they consider evaluation issues from the outset and at each stage in program development.

Needs assessment

The first stage in program development is finding out what needs to be done. Most family life educators engage in this step, even if only informally. The purpose of this stage is to document the need for a particular program within the community. This might involve collecting information from community members who know about families, including families themselves, teachers, counselors, and child care providers. Demographic information and other indicators of family well-being--such as poverty, homelessness, and the availability of child care--are essential in demonstrating need. Many program developers also collect information about resources in the community and other indicators about the capabilities of families.

Utilization and satisfaction

Once a program has been designed, the next step is to monitor utilization and satisfaction. In recent years funders often have discounted information about utilization and satisfaction. Many of us have been criticized for only providing information about how many people attended a

particular program and the degree to which they liked it. However, in the early stages of a program or for a program of short duration, this is often the appropriate type of measurement of program outcome. For a new program, it usually makes little difference if the program has long-lasting impact on families if they don't participate and/or enjoy the experience. Likewise, to expect a brief family life education course to change parents behavior is also inappropriate--what matters is how they responded to the information. Demographic information (i.e., ethnicity, SES, age, gender, marital status, education level) should also be collected routinely from program participants to monitor who the program is reaching and/or to assess whether utilization and satisfaction differs among various groups of participants. Although utilization and satisfaction data has limits, it is nevertheless important to collect and analyze.

Program clarification

The most often overlooked stage in the program development is modifying existing programs. Evaluation data can help in this process as well. Jacobs suggests collecting data about how the program is working both from participants and program staff. Staff should review carefully the program's mission, goals, objectives, and strategies. In many cases, this information may need to be collected by a neutral third party. The major question here is, "Are we doing what we set out to do originally and, if not, are we doing something better or worse?"

Most programs do in fact change during implementation. Jacobs reminds us to pay attention to these changes and consider what we want to accomplish and what modifications we will allow. Even our publications and other types of media would benefit from this type of clarification. That is, as the first drafts are written, the authors should be encouraged to consider how the goals and objectives have been or not been met in these drafts. For many programs and products, this clarification stage can lead to better program efforts.

Short-term outcomes

Other types of outcomes should be measured only after a program is operational, families have indicated they use and are satisfied with it, and program designers feel the program makes sense. Jacobs suggests that the initial measurement of the program be linked closely with the program developers' objectives--that is, rather than pick arbitrary or available measures of children and families, program evaluators should select available measures relevant to the program's objectives or develop new measures of their own. For example, if a program teaches parents about specific types of discipline, then the measures need to assess this knowledge or skill rather than measure parent-child interaction. In other words, the initial measures of program outcome should answer the basic question, "Does this program succeed at what it is designed to do?"

Impact evaluation

The final stage in the evaluation process is to measure the program's effectiveness. This is critical for model or long-term programs. These programs need to be rigorously evaluated with experimental designs or other stringent evaluation techniques. To assess impact, it is usually necessary to have a control or comparison group to identify what program components result in significant changes in families and children. Standardized measures of well-being or skills will

likely be used to document program effectiveness. Also, cost effectiveness of the program may be considered at this stage. Impact evaluation is important for long-term progress of family life education because it helps to identify those program models that are useful for widespread use across many families and communities.

Summary

This has been a brief overview of Jacob's model of evaluation as it applies to family life education. In upcoming issues of this publication, we will examine useful techniques and methods for conducting each level of evaluation. We will also be recommending current resources that are helpful in developing evaluation procedures. Readers are encouraged to submit their ideas and suggestions for conducting successful evaluations. II

Reference

Jacobs, F.H. (1988). The five-tiered approach to evaluation: Context and implementation. In H.B. Weiss & F. H. Jacobs (Eds.) *Evaluating family programs* (pp. 37-68). New York: Aldine de Gruyter.