

# 9 Program Evaluation

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## Nature and purpose of evaluation

The effectiveness of successful family literacy programs must be demonstrated in order to:

- validate compliance with funding regulations,
- maintain collaborations with community stakeholders,
- identify programmatic strengths and weaknesses,
- identify outcomes and impacts on participants, and,
- continuously strengthen the program through informed decision making.

National studies of family literacy programs have produced mixed results and raised major questions about the validity of family literacy as an economic and educational strategy (Hayes, 1999). Family literacy is a relatively new field that demands clear objective data to inform those responsible for making sound judgments about the educational, social, and economic policies associated with its reform agenda. As with many program initiatives, there are strong supporters and strong opponents of the family literacy agenda. While it is rarely if ever possible to please everyone, it is important for local programs to produce evaluations that link outcomes and impacts with clear and consistent programmatic goals.

Program directors are responsible for managing the four program components in a holistic manner that assures measurable outcomes for adults and children participating in the family literacy program. An evaluation may be considered valid when it is framed with a set of scientific criteria. Validity means that the real target of a program evaluation is the staff of practitioners who are charged with getting the job done — right. In order to see how their job reflects high standards, practitioners need continuous feedback about the effectiveness of their work. Learning outcomes achieved by the adults and children in the family literacy program are indicators of an effective staff. Program quality is assured, strengthened, and sustained by obtaining accurate and credible information to support decisions ranging from the intensity and duration of services to



### FACT



Effective evaluation involves systematic, disciplined inquiry based on collaboration. It is always spiraling toward and documenting change.

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the way the family literacy center is decorated. Programmatic goals are best and most efficiently achieved when a system is developed to make them happen. This system should involve staff and information users as they determine what is essential for providing a quality family literacy program.

One myth about program evaluation is that it is based on a “foreign language” known as “statistics” which renders the process meaningless to the common staff person, participating family, or community partner. While quantitative (numerical) data is a very important component of program evaluation it is important to understand that this form of data can be “translated” into stories about program strengths, staff professional development needs, unmet challenges, resource allocations, and unanticipated impacts. We should heed Albert Einstein’s theories concerning relativity and focus on determining what information is needed to plan and deliver a family literacy program in your particular community. As Einstein cautioned regarding the relative nature of data, “Not every thing that counts can be counted and not everything that can be counted, counts.”

Key questions associated with program evaluation guide program planning. Evaluation questions may include:

- How does the program director determine which families in the community are in most need of a family literacy program?
- What are the families’ long and short term learning goals?
- How does participation in your family literacy program increase the likelihood that children and their families will strengthen their literacy abilities?
- What are the most pressing needs of children labeled “at risk” entering the school district?
- What are the key employment concerns in the immediate community? What learning skills are needed to secure new jobs with local employers?
- What do program components for achieving educational, employment, and family goals “look like” (action plan)?
- How and when will the program operate? Evenings only? Year round?
- What are the essential qualifications for staff members working with adults and children?
- Is all staff required to participate in cross training activities?
- What professional development and technical assistance does the program provide?
- What is the nature of community collaborations to assure program success?
- How will the program continue beyond initial start-up funding?
- What are the benefits to the community?

## **Collaborative Action Research Evaluation (CARE) Model**

Collaborative Action Research Evaluation (CARE) is a model of program evaluation based on action research (Levesque, 1999). CARE is a user-focused model that emphasizes the collaborative interests of the stakeholders. From this perspective, formative evaluation strategies continuously inform project planning and implementation to strengthen the project as an organizational process. Valid evaluation uses qualitative and quantitative assessment tools and strategies to capture the spirit of a program, assess content that is taught, learning achievement, and the diverse nature of the population served.

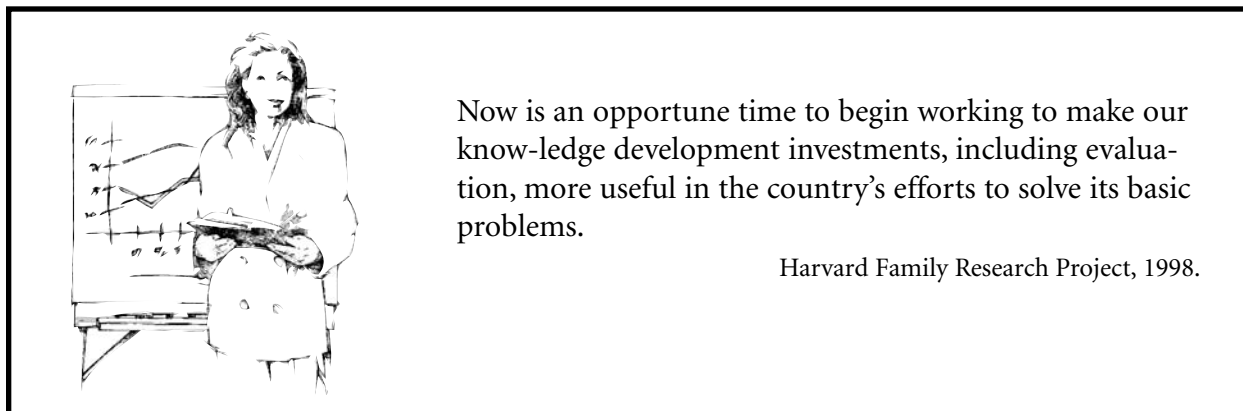
Action research is a systematic form of inquiry that is usually carried out by a team. The Action Research Team (ART) is charged to better understand the nature of their work, and/or to improve the very nature of that work (i.e., practice), and to improve the situation associated with their work (Carr and Kemis). Collaboration is essential for planning, implementing, and evaluating a family literacy program. From writing the original funding proposal to final dissemination of programmatic results, a family literacy project reflects a vision of optimal achievements by the families served. The mission of family literacy is extended through the decisions and actions that drive the program. This means that all components — from learner intake to professional development, from instruction to learning achievement — be analyzed as to how each contributes to optimizing participants' goal achievement. Planners work together to negotiate the meaning of the data collected and use it to construct a coherent explanation of how the program assures continuity and integrity. This vision scaffolds all program components and connects program goals with high expectations for participants' achievements.

While many programs opt for university-based evaluators who are well versed with evaluation design and practices, it is essential that the common sense and moral commitment of the “key players” temper the actual ongoing evaluation process. Many action researchers refer to their key collaborators as a “circle of critical friends.” Just as all staff and adult learners are responsible for meeting their program responsibilities, everyone should play a role in the evaluation process.

Action research is frequently associated with social and educational change agendas. The changes associated with improving a particular situation are driven by questions such as “What is the impact of our early childhood program on children’s language development after nine months of program participation at age two?” These questions result from a deep thinking process known as reflection. Reflection often occurs when the program planners ponder something that occurs when a situation is not as it should be or could be. For example, what happens when many families in a community live in poverty and the children in these families experience severe problems learning to read? So the question is, how do we use the program to break the cycle? First get parents gainfully employed or begin with a strong adult education and early childhood program?

### **CARE Phase One: Reflect and Question**

During the initial phase of CARE, the evaluation team, or “circle of critical friends” engages in reflection, poses questions, defines program goals, designs program components that act on the goals, prioritizes, and focuses on the intended forces of change. During this time of CARE, the



evaluation team begins to focus on what is happening within the operational system and what occurs as a result of that system. The evaluation team identifies the focus and data needs. They may share and regularly update their evaluation plan as the program evolves. Listed on the following page are several questions and their relevant strategies to guide program planners as they begin to CARE.

### **CARE Phase Two: Document Change**

The outside evaluator is responsible for providing technical expertise and working with the Project Coordinator (and the ART) to ensure a systematic approach to quality improvement. The Project Coordinator and staff members make and compare observations of their work and student behaviors. They collect this and other data in an ongoing manner and use insights to modify and improve the project in a timely way. For example, low attendance figures from particular activities may initially suggest eliminating the activity in favor of another more popular activity. Or, low attendance at a special event could be weighed in light of the favorable response to the activity by the few whom attended it. In such a case, the Project Coordinator could then review and modify recruitment strategies before scheduling similar activities.

Throughout each program year, evaluators collect data to describe the demographic makeup of the project staff, participating parents, participating children, and the community served by the project (age, educational, social, economic background).

Just as programs follow a calendar year, it is important to establish a yearly data baseline to monitor the program and make timely revisions. Evaluators should visit the site each quarter, observe and reflect with the staff about evolving challenges, resolving problems and ensuring high expectations for staff performance and learning outcomes.

Triangulation is a way to plan data collection and increase the probability that anticipated changes will be detected and documented. Like the geometric construct, triangulation, is an assurance that a minimum of three data points are observed to validate change. For example, the effects of PACT time on the literacy interactions between a mother and her child could be observed and documented by 1) timing how long a mother reads aloud from a story book when asked by her child to read, 2) the number of books borrowed from the center's library, and 3) a home visit report from the parent educator describing the home literacy environment.

## Questions for CARE Phase One

1. What are the primary goals of your project that are to be evaluated?

Create a schematic map of the program goals as they relate to the four components of family literacy programs.

Refer to the Even Start Guide to Quality Standards.

2. Prioritize your goals. What areas require immediate change?

Goal	Priority Level	Change Target
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3. What are the participants' immediate needs?

4. What should adults know and be able to do when they complete the program?

5. Identify steps taken to train staff to meet the immediate needs of the participants.

CARE planning strategies for question 5:

- Contact the state literacy resource agency (LIFT-Missouri), Early Childhood and Adult Education directors at DESE for NCFL and DESE sponsored professional development activities.
- Local project directors should register as members of the State International Reading Association and National Association of Educators of Young Children to take advantage of state and national conferences, professional journals, newsletters and web site listservs
- Register a member of the staff on each of the National Institute for Literacy Listservs (family literacy, learning disabilities, adult literacy, EFE, women and health). Delegate the staff member to monitor the listserv and share pertinent information with other staff members and the families served.
- Contact local literacy agencies regarding training opportunities.

6. What resources are needed to initiate the program and achieve the priority goals?

CARE planning strategy for question 6:

- If resources are not available, revise program goal.

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CARE planning strategies for Phase Two:

- Set up a computer data base for cumulative record keeping. Tally data on a monthly basis to inform program planning.
- Begin a portfolio for each family upon program registration.
- Design a comprehensive intake form to address all component (PAT etc.) data points. Transfer data when the family is not present to complete registration.
- Use post-it notes near the data file or on the inside cover of each portfolio notebook to record “quick snips” of pertinent data.
- Adjust data collection strategies as needed. “Poor data is worse than no data.”
- Write a formative evaluation report midway through the grant year. Include a summary of initial data collected from focus groups, staff interviews, intake forms, TABE scores, etc.
- Include in the report an analysis of how the data base relates to initial and ongoing questions, federal/state policy, and changing contexts.
- Share the report with the staff. Direct the staff to annotate the report in preparation for a meeting to discuss the report and pose strategies to strengthen the program and/or resolve specific quandaries.

The Missouri Family Literacy Initiative (MOFLI) Consortium is developing a series of Indicators of Program Quality for guiding program self-evaluation. Criteria for each indicator reflect efforts to streamline program evaluation by drawing from existing standards adopted by professional organizations and agencies associated with family literacy. The effort seeks to minimize the data burden associated with program evaluation while targeting information that is critical to local program goals and evaluation questions. Local programs will review and comment on the indicators as part of this statewide effort to assure, enhance, and support high quality programs that help adults meet their goals as parents, workers and community members.

### **CARE Phase Three: Respond to Change**

The next phase of the CARE model is to monitor program implementation. Once the project’s goals and objectives are operationally defined, the evaluation moves toward objective program assessment. During this phase the Project Director keeps detailed records of all project activities, attendance, and participants’ and staff responses to the activities. Many programs display data and integrate it with adult education lessons and staff planning.

Program response is a good example of critical thinking and problem solving. This reflects a shared effort to draw causal inferences between program activities and participant outcomes. The evaluation team should meet regularly to discuss the data and draw conclusions regarding the Project. One example of critical thinking shared with adult learners involves posting contact hours. At one site the ABE teacher reserved part of the bulletin board to keep a monthly tally of contact hours. She explained to the students that contact hours were critical for funding that keeps the program going. When contact hours decreased she engaged the students in a brainstorming session about how to get everyone to class as often as possible. The students then took action to increase participation and regular attendance.

CARE planning strategies for Phase Three:

- Engage adult and early childhood educators on staff to review formative and final annual evaluation reports.
- Invite the parent learner to regularly review her portfolio. Include questions or schedule an interview to monitor the parent's self-reflection of progress made to personal and project goals.
- Share cumulative data with staff. Compare monthly data with program expectations in light of attendance, retention, learning outcomes, client satisfaction, and resource allocation. Pose case reports for group analysis and cross categorical training.
- Use data to resolve problems, strengthen curriculum, identify training and professional development needs, secure external resources.
- Open staff meetings to include time for brainstorming solutions to particular areas of challenge related to achieving program goals. Document these concerns under "Process Evaluation." Later, document how the issue was or was not resolved.
- Schedule a midyear and final evaluation meeting. Identify a staff recorder to note new strategies for program revision. Highlight short term accomplishments and share these with immediate stakeholders. Accent the positive, address the challenges.

## **CARE Phase Four: Report Change**

After analyzing and synthesizing the program in terms of the process (internal operational system), outcomes (educational, economic, personal, unexpected), and impact (external change in the community), the team is charged with getting the news out to the funders, policy makers and community stakeholders. Findings that support the validity of family literacy are of great interest to local, state, and federal policy makers. When areas are targeted for growth, the program director needs a strong system of support to determine which resources, including technical assistance, are needed to restructure the program component in question. (See Family Literacy in Action vignettes)

There can be multiple forms of a each annual evaluation report. The report should include case studies of families that exemplify key program components. These stories about family literacy personify the program. Case studies often take the form of a personal narrative which details a family's journey from the original crisis that lead them to the family literacy program on through their celebration of personal and educational achievements.

Strategies for CARE Evaluation Report:

- Present a strong case to explain and document in what ways achieving the project's primary goals changed/improved. Performance indicators may include:
  - Adults (Job change, career identification, continued education, GED achievement, literacy level)
  - Children (school readiness, grade level reading achievement, placement in Title 1, and school attendance, standardized achievement scores.
  - Staff (retention, job satisfaction, performance review, and participation in professional development or training outside of the program)
  - Community (new collaborative partners)

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Use the final annual evaluation report as a “State of the Family Literacy Program”.

- Write an executive summary to highlight program strengths, areas targeted for growth, resource-need projections, and service to the community.
- Include a roster of collaborators with a special note of thanks.
- Send a copy of the report to each collaborating agency (school district -superintendent and principals, Parents as Teachers, ABE, DESE Early Childhood, Title 1 Coordinator, etc.).
- Use data to support fund raising and program institutionalization beyond the grant.
- Send a copy of the report with the budget to your local legislators.

### Even Start program end-of-the-year-reporting

The Even Start Family Literacy Program must conduct an independent local evaluation, participate and submit data for the national Even Start Program Information Reporting System (ESPIRS), and complete reporting information for DESE. Training for ESPIRS is conducted annually by the US Department of Education. The following guidelines are direct text from the regulatory agencies.

### DESE guidelines for final project reports

A Final Expenditure Report and Project Evaluation Report are due in the Federal Discretionary Grants Section of DESE within 30 days following the project ending date. The project evaluation consists of a review of the goals and objectives of the project along the following lines:

1. Introduction and Need

Briefly describe the context for your project and activities. Note any changes that occurred during the project period.

2. Plan of Operation and Evaluation

Address the objectives of your project, providing an evaluation of your success in achieving each one. Any supporting evidence should be summarized here; do not include original evaluative instruments, such as participant rosters (e.g., if you used participant evaluations to judge the effectiveness of a seminar, summarize the findings of the evaluation but do not send in the evaluations themselves). Include also the number of people influenced directly by your project’s activities (in seminars, workshops, classes, presentations, conference attendance, and so on). As much as possible, indicate the numbers of students and grade levels indirectly affected. Supporting documentation should be kept on file for a period of three years.

3. Budget

Summarize your actual budget expenditures with respect to the original request. If you requested a budget amendment, be sure to include a copy of that page here. Do not provide detailed amounts; they appear on the Final Expenditure Report.