

# DOES IT MEASURE UP?

## *Tips for conducting program evaluation*

***You have prioritized your evaluation questions and developed a general plan for collecting information. Now you need to prepare the materials to collect the data. Before you do, however, you'll want to anticipate possible challenges to obtaining the information you need. This tip sheet presents some of the issues most often encountered, possible solutions, and guidelines for selecting data collection tools.***



### **Data collection challenges and possible solutions**

**“I want to get evaluation information from former program participants, but I no longer have their contact information.”**

When appropriate, ask your participants for their contact information when they receive services. In addition to asking for their phone number, you may want to ask for a phone number of someone who will know how to reach them, such as a family member. You could also gather evaluation information at the time you provide services, rather than at a follow-up period. In some cases, you may have to collect evaluation information from people other than your participants, such as program staff or advocates.

*Note: There are additional challenges if your program participants are victims of a crime, including ensuring their confidentiality and safety. Upcoming tip sheets on conducting interviews and ethics will address these challenges.*

**“My program serves hundreds of people each year. I want to include all of them in my evaluation, but cannot spend too much time or money.”**

With a very large program, it may be more manageable to gather information using a survey, rather than try to conduct interviews. If interviews are your best strategy to get the information you need, consider interviewing

only a sample of your participants. For example, you could conduct interviews with people served in specific months, or select every tenth person to interview. As long as your sample is large enough and similar to the overall group of people served, your interview responses should generally reflect the opinions and experiences of your entire group of participants.

**“I developed a data collection plan, but had trouble collecting the information.”**

Having a plan is only the first step – it is important that your plan is realistic and can be carried out. Consider the following:

- Focus on your priorities. It is better to measure a few things consistently and reliably than try to collect more comprehensive information that may be unreliable.
- Assign responsibility for overseeing data collection and make it part of that person’s job description.
- Ask staff for input into the evaluation design to increase their “buy-in” when the time comes to collect information.
- Integrate data collection into program activities when possible, rather than making it an “add-on” activity to tackle later.

*Data collection, continued:*

- Consider using existing data before you develop plans for collecting new information.
- Identify the specific barriers that are interfering with the data collection, and develop strategies to address them.

### **“I don’t know when to collect evaluation information.”**

Use your program theory and logic model to help you. Scheduling of data collection should be decided, in part, by your understanding of the types of goals participants have when they enter the program and when you expect these outcomes to be

achieved. You may be able to collect some information, such as participants’ satisfaction with services, at the time that services are completed or even midway through a longer-term program. However, if you want to know about changes people have made in their lives, you will need to allow them more time, and plan accordingly. If it is important to your evaluation to show change in someone’s attitudes, behavior, or situation over time, you may need to collect information at least two times, such as at the beginning and end of services.



## **Selecting your data-collection tools**

Now you need to begin preparing the actual materials that you will use to gather information. Whether you use existing evaluation tools, or develop something new specifically for your evaluation, you will want to make sure that they will meet your needs.

### ***What should I look for in my evaluation materials?***

You may need to locate or develop surveys, interview questions, or forms that you will use to track information for your agency.

How do you know that these materials will provide you with useful information? When selecting this material, make sure that it is:

- Valid – accurately measures the concept or idea that you want to measure.
- Reliable – yields consistent results over time when used the same way with similar respondents.
- Culturally appropriate for participants in terms of language, measurement approach, and questions asked.
- Developmentally appropriate for the age of your participants.

- Ethical and legal - conforms to laws and standards for the ethical treatment of evaluation participants.
- Useful for multiple purposes – ideally, the results can be used for additional purposes such as identifying goals or intervention approaches for program participants.
- Sensitive to change – scores on the measures can reflect changes in outcomes for participants over time.

The materials must also be easy to use. For example, you may find a set of interview questions that fits all of the above criteria, but it is too long for participants, and staff would need extensive training in order to conduct the interview. In that case, it may not be a feasible evaluation tool, even if you believe it would provide useful information.

Other considerations:

- Reasonable cost.
- Reasonable time for administration.
- Clear guidelines for how to collect information and interpret the results.
- Easy-to-use format.

***Why should I look for existing measures, instead of just creating my own?***

Before you begin to develop data collection materials yourself, look for existing tools such as questionnaires or surveys. Finding these materials can be challenging. In the long run, however, the search may be worth the effort since developing valid and reliable questions can be surprisingly difficult. For example, it can be complicated to measure changes over time in parenting skills or to describe the amount or type of violence that someone has experienced. Using materials that were developed by someone with specific expertise in test development will help ensure you get quality data.

***How do I find evaluation materials?***

Finding these assessments often requires some investigative skills. Try these strategies for locating materials:

- **Search online databases.** These databases have descriptions of tests and research instruments (see Quick links on page 4). However, it is important to note that the actual tests are often not available online. Instead, they will usually give you the name of the author for you to contact or will refer you to a journal article or other source. This may require some persistence on your part – sometimes the journal article that is referenced is *about* the test, but does not actually include a copy. It can sometimes take some additional searching to find the actual materials.
- **Look through books of tests and reviews.** There are numerous books about evaluation materials. Many of these are available at libraries. Your best bet is a college or university library.

Some of these books contain actual instruments, but for others you will need to contact authors or consult other sources.

- **Review catalogs from established test publishers.** Many publishing companies specialize in data collection tools. The disadvantage of going through publishers is that you must purchase the tool. However, you will often find high quality materials that are well worth the cost. These assessments are typically created using rigorous test development techniques. Some publishers will send you a free copy of the test to review. Others make you purchase one to review, but will accept returns if you choose something else.
- **Review the published literature about the type of program you are implementing.** It is always a good idea to look for evaluations of similar programs. There are many good literature search systems available. Consider going to a college or university library and getting help from a reference librarian if you are unfamiliar with these systems. When reviewing existing studies, make note of how other programs conducted their evaluations and the tools that they used. If they look promising, track them down by finding the original article or source or by contacting the author directly.
- **Talk to others in the field to see what materials they have used and what they recommend.** These individuals include other program directors or staff, as well as those conducting research or evaluation.

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*Tools, continued*

### ***Questions to ask when reviewing existing materials***

Once you have found some possible materials to use, ask yourself the following questions:

- Was the material designed to be used in a way similar to how I will use it?
- Will it provide information that is useful? Does it measure the right things given my evaluation priorities?
- Are the materials appropriate for my audience? Will people be able to understand and complete the materials?
- Are the procedures for collecting information clear and reasonable?
- Is the test free to use? If not, is the cost reasonable and affordable?

- Do I need any special training or authorization to use the materials?
- How long does it take to complete the materials? Is this reasonable?

If you follow these tips, you may end up locating evaluation materials that will provide you with reliable and useful information. In some cases, even a thorough search does not reveal any materials that will help you answer your evaluation questions. When this occurs, you may need to develop your own materials. The next tip sheets will provide suggestions for writing your own surveys and conducting interviews.

## **Quick links to more information**

### ***Educational Testing Services—Testlink database***

<http://ets.org/testcoll/index.html>

### ***Buros Institute of Mental Measurement online test reviews***

<http://buros.unl.edu/buros/jsp/search.jsp>

***FAQ: Frequently asked questions about finding psychological tests – a website maintained by the American Psychological Association that provides information about locating assessment materials online.***

<http://www.apa.org/science/faq-findtests.html>



## **In future tip sheets**

- Writing surveys
- Interviewing people appropriately
- Ethical issues in conducting evaluations

Find previous tip sheets on the web: [www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm](http://www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm) or [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org).

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