Wilder Research

Evaluating Prevention Programs

Tip sheet for measuring what doesn't happen

Prevention programs support the strengths of individuals, families, and communities. However, evaluating prevention programming can be particularly difficult because the ultimate goal is to reduce or fully stop an activity or behavior from occurring. A strong evaluation is worth the investment because it can:

- Assist in program design and improvement
- Recruit and sustain funders or other contributors
- Promote the program
- Enhance the field
- Engage partners, staff, and clients

In order to successfully evaluate a prevention program, there are four key steps.

STEP 1: Define what prevention means for your program

In your program, does prevention mean completely avoiding a behavior, reducing a behavior, or demonstrating a new behavior? Defining prevention will help to shape your program theory and evaluation design.

STEP 2: Specify a program theory

A program theory describes your program and how it accomplishes its goals.

A program theory should:

- Include risk and protective factors, or the factors that are likely to increase or decrease the chances of a behavior (such as substance abuse) occurring. These can include factors such as easy access to alcohol (risk factor) or the presence of caring adults (protective factor).
- Logically connect program activities with outcomes, or changes, you expect to see.
- Incorporate short-term and long-term outcomes.
- Use "if-then" statements to link activities and outcomes. E.g., *IF* we do [this great program activity] with participants *THEN* [something] will change.

Strategic Prevention Framework

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has developed an evidence-based framework built on a community-based risk and protective factors approach to prevention. It is a cyclical, five-step, data-driven process that starts with assessment and ends with evaluation. The principles of cultural competence and sustainability guide each step. While each step of this framework is important, this tip sheet focuses on the evaluation step. For more information about the overall framework, visit http://captus.samhsa.gov/access-resources/about-strategic-prevention-framework-spf.

To ensure your linkages are logical:

- Review the literature (especially when using evidence-based practices) to identify what outcomes have been achieved before with similar activities.
- Seek out evaluation findings from other organizations or similar programs to learn what outcomes they have sought and achieved.
- Ask for input from experts in the field or in the particular activity you are implementing to ensure your linkages reflect the experts' experiences.
- Gather input from staff and participants to understand how they see your program working and what impacts they have seen from the program.
- Reflect on your own experiences about the effects of your activities.

Using logic models to depict your program theory

A logic model can be used to visually depict your program theory in a clear, succinct way. Logic models can be helpful for:

- Developing a shared understanding of program activities and goals among stakeholders.
- Promoting communication through the development and dissemination of the logic model.
- Creating realistic expectations through the strong linkages between activities and outcomes.
- Increasing credibility by demonstrating logical, thoughtful linkages.
- Monitoring progress in achieving the different levels of outcomes.
- Serving as an evaluation framework by clarifying outcomes and how activities link to those outcomes.

A logic model includes the following key components:

- **Inputs -** Resources or materials you need to do your work
- **Activities -** Key services you provide
- **Outputs -** Quantifiable products of the services you provide
- **Outcomes -** Impact on individuals and/or communities, usually broken into:
  - Short-term - Changes in knowledge, skills, or attitudes
  - Intermediate - Changes in behaviors or practices
  - Long-term - Changes in the environment or system

Wilder Research has created a series of tip sheets providing more information about developing and using logic models, which can be found at www.wilderresearch.org.

STEP 3: Develop your process evaluation

A process evaluation measures *how* the program is implemented. A process evaluation is important for evaluating prevention because it can help:

- Explain the impact of the program.
- Provide information to key stakeholders about your services, including who, what, when, where, and how.
- Inform program expansion or replication.
- Determine how closely your program matches evidence-based programs.

Process evaluation questions

Specifically, a process evaluation can answer many questions, such as:

Participants

- How well do services match participants' needs?
- What influences participants' ability to access services?
- What makes people more or less likely to benefit from the program?
- What factors influence participants' ability to easily access your services?

Services

- How much/what kind of service is delivered to participants?
- How do services relate to differences in outcomes or satisfaction?
- How have challenges to service delivery been addressed?
- How does the program define completion?
- What percentage of participants successfully complete the program?

Logistics

- How much does the program cost?
- Are the costs appropriate for the outcomes?
- How are partnerships or collaborations working?

Program fidelity

One particularly important reason to conduct a process evaluation in prevention is to determine "program fidelity." Program fidelity is the extent to which the program is implemented as the developer intended, which is especially important for evidence-based programs. If you can demonstrate that an evidence-based program is implemented with fidelity, then you can reasonably believe the program will result in its documented outcomes among program participants.

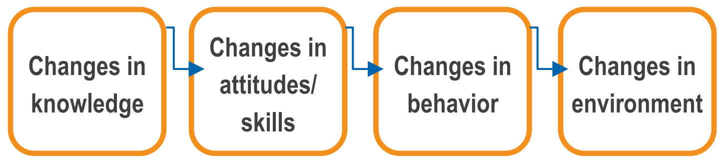
Program fidelity can be measured by collecting information about:

- **Dosage,** such as the amount of exposure (e.g., hours, days, months, sessions) to the program a participant has and whether or not a participant has had sufficient exposure to experience benefits from the program.
- **Access,** including how many people were able to access services, how many people were not able to access services, and what the barriers to accessing services were.
- **Staff competency,** for example staff training, staff fit with participants, and staff credentials as they pertain to the program.
- **Quality of services,** such as the quality of information provided, the delivery of information in an understandable way for the audience, and the level of engagement from providers and participants.

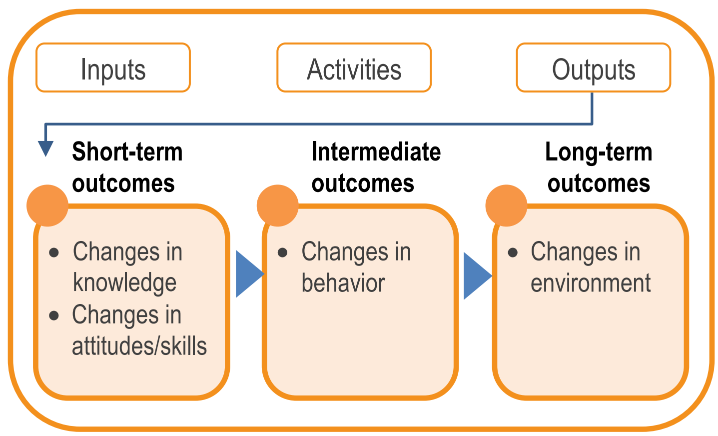
STEP 4: Develop your outcome evaluation

Your outcome evaluation will measure your program effects in your target population. This can include measuring changes in attitudes, beliefs, skills, knowledge, risk behaviors, protective behaviors, and/or the overall environment.

Different outcomes require different lengths of time to develop, and outcomes often build on one another, as shown here:



As mentioned, these outcomes are usually depicted in a logic model as follows:



When evaluating prevention efforts, it is common to focus the evaluation on the short-term and intermediate outcomes. Not only are these outcomes often easier to measure than long-term outcomes, but your program also has a more direct effect on these outcomes than it has on the long-term changes in the environment. Also, if you have a strong, research-based program theory, you can reasonably argue that achieving your short-term and intermediate outcomes is contributing to achieving your long-term outcomes as well.

You will need a strong research design to most effectively demonstrate that you are achieving your outcomes.

The elements of a strong design for evaluating prevention include:

- **Gathering information from as many participants as possible** to make sure your results reflect the perspectives of a broad range of participants, especially participants who may often be excluded from evaluations, such as those with less comfort participating in evaluation or those with limited ability to read or write in English.
- **Following program participants over time** in order to determine if the effects of the program are sustained and to measure effects that may take time to develop.
- **Collecting data from multiple sources,** such as participants, community leaders, and program staff, to view your program's outcomes from different perspectives, identify patterns across sources, and have information that appeals to different stakeholder audiences.
- **Including a control or comparison group** to see what happens with a group that did not experience your particular prevention efforts, which will help you more confidently attribute your outcomes to your efforts.

If you are unable to implement all of these components, it is helpful to understand why each is important so you can accurately consider and explain the limitations of your design.

Protecting participants

One essential element of any evaluation design is making participation as safe and simple as possible, so respondents are able to be open and honest, ensuring the information you collect is accurate and meaningful. You can achieve this by:

- **Providing participants with information about the evaluation,** including why it is being done, what you are asking them to do, how you will use the information, and how long their part will take.
- **Using accessible language** in the evaluation description and questions that all participants can understand – avoid jargon and translate if needed.
- **Keeping evaluation procedures as brief and convenient as possible** to minimize disruptions in participants' lives.
- **Avoiding emotionally troubling questions,** unless they are necessary to help you improve services.
- **Allowing participants opportunities to ask questions** about the evaluation, including the overall purpose of the evaluation and any particular evaluation questions.
- **Collecting data in a private location** where surveys cannot be seen and interviews cannot be overheard.
- **Protecting participants' privacy** by not discussing information about individual participants with other people. Findings should generally only be discussed at an aggregate level or with identifying information disguised.
- **Keeping completed surveys or interviews in a secure location** where they cannot be seen by other people and shredding or securely disposing of completed evaluation materials when they are no longer needed.

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For more information
To find out more about evaluating prevention programs, please visit Wilder Research's website at www.wilderresearch.org and the evaluATOD website at www.evaluatod.org.
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