

We did it ourselves

An Evaluation
Guide Book



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Chapter 1.

Evaluation: Planning to Learn

On October 16, the Children's Collaborative sponsored a Health Fair.

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On October 16, the Mytown Children's Collaborative sponsored a Health Fair. Twenty local agencies participated in the Health Fair, including the Mytown Hospital, the Public Health Department, Sam's drug store, the Mytown school district, and Friendly's Market. The Health Fair was attended by 285 people. Ninety percent of those attending live in Mytown, and 60% were parents of children age 8 years or younger. Forty-six children were immunized at the Health Fair, 150 people were screened for high blood pressure, and 200 nutrition packets were given away. Those who attended were highly satisfied with what the Fair had to offer, and most said they hoped that Mytown would do it again next year.

In order to know whether your collaborative is making a positive impact on your community, you will need to evaluate your collaborative's efforts. Evaluation is a tool for learning: it teaches you when you are successful, why you're successful, and what went wrong when you're not.

This chapter introduces some fundamental concepts related to evaluation. Many of these topics will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

What is an evaluation?

An *evaluation* is the systematic collection, analysis, and reporting of information for decision-making.

There are several important parts to this definition. "Systematic" is one. Systematic means the information for the evaluation is collected in an orderly way according to a set of procedures.

Another important phrase is "for decision-making." The point of doing an evaluation is to learn, and then to do something based on what you learned.

Why do an evaluation?

There are lots of reasons to do an evaluation. The first and most important reason to do an evaluation is to learn about something that is being carried out to see how it can be improved. A major theme of this series is to encourage your community to become a "learning community." A *learning community* is one where people try to improve community activities based on information and reflection. On the basis of evaluation data, learning communities can decide to stay with what they are doing, to alter it slightly or significantly, or to abandon it altogether. It is highly likely that not all of your activities will be perfect successes the first time through. If your collaborative does a good evaluation in its first year, you'll be able to improve on that year for the next. And when you look at what you've learned from your evaluation in the second year, you should be able to make the third year even better.

A second reason to do an evaluation is that it will provide data about your activities so that you can celebrate your successes within your collaborative and your community. You will also be able to communicate concrete information in materials you produce for your community, a funder, or the media. For example, contrast:

Evaluation data will allow your collaborative to communicate specific information about what it has accomplished to its members and the community at large.

The third reason to do an evaluation is that an organization such as an outside funding source is requiring it. Communities are often required to evaluate their efforts as a condition of receiving funding.

A fourth reason is to have evaluation data available for the future when the community might choose to apply to an outside funding source for additional support. Evaluation data in grant proposals communicate to potential funders that the community (1) has experience implementing an approach, (2) has examined the approach and shown it to be sound, and (3) values evaluation and is capable of conducting one. In short, evaluation data can show a potential funder that the applicant community is both capable of carrying out a proposal and committed to learning from what it is doing.

Finally, remember that your community is involved in an exciting experiment—collaboration is an innovative approach to improve the health and well-being of children. Foundations, universities, and government agencies all over the country are trying to figure out solutions to the same issues you are facing in your community. There are lots of organizations that want to learn and will learn from what you are doing in your community. Your evaluation data can make an important contribution to what is known nationally about community-based solutions to improving the lives of young children.

Who are the audiences for your evaluation?

Your evaluation might have several audiences:

1. Your collaborative
2. Your community
3. A funding organization
4. Other potential sources of funding
5. Those interested in improving the health of young children

But isn't evaluation about judging something to be good or bad?

Evaluation is about answering questions. One of those questions can be whether a *strategy* or activity worked. However, there are also many more questions that an evaluation can answer that extend far beyond whether an approach works. Evaluations can provide information about what was done, how it was done, whether those participating liked it or got anything out of it, and how much it cost to do something one way versus another way.

We already know what works. Why do we need an evaluation?

Enthusiasm and confidence in what your community is about to undertake are a very important part of the momentum to keep your work going. Confidence, however, shouldn't overshadow being open to improvement. No matter how well thought out your plan is, there is probably some way that it can be made better that you will see as you implement it. Being a learning community means being open to the possibility that what the community is doing can be done better—and your evaluation will provide the information to identify where and how it can be made better.

How big should our evaluation design be?

Your collaborative will have to make a number of choices during the planning process that will affect how large your evaluation will be. One factor in determining the size of your evaluation will be the number of evaluation questions you hope to answer. (Evaluation questions are discussed in Chapter 5.) The number of evaluation questions you write will depend largely on how many strategies your collaborative chooses to implement and how many *child and family outcomes* your collaborative decides to address. (Child and family outcomes are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.) When designing your strategies, be aware of the human and fiscal resources that you

have available to implement them. Also, remember that you will need to devote some of your effort to evaluate what you carry out. The more strategies you undertake, the more you will have to evaluate.

Based on these and other factors, your evaluation can be minimal or it can be very extensive. The more comprehensive the evaluation, the more you will learn. However, if the scope of your evaluation significantly exceeds the resources your collaborative has to carry it out, you won't learn very much at all—except that you can't do it. Your collaborative needs to design an evaluation that (1) will answer the questions that are most important to the collaborative and (2) is doable given the human and fiscal resources available.

We offer this as a rough guide. A general rule is that about 10% of the resources should go to evaluation. This means that if an activity requires 500 hours to carry it out, 50 hours should go to evaluation. If an activity costs \$7,000, then \$700 should be spent on evaluation. Remember, this is a general guideline, and your collaborative may have a very good reason to go higher or lower.

But we've never done an evaluation before.

Where do we start?

The first step in an evaluation is to spell out exactly what you are trying to accomplish (so you will know whether you have accomplished it when you are done) and what needs to happen for your community to get from where you are now to where you want to be. The first part of this guide, *Getting Started: What Do You Hope to Achieve?*, walks you through this process.

The second step is to figure out the best way to capture the information that will tell you whether your collaborative is on the right track. Part II of this guide, *Methods: How to Get the Information You Need*, reviews different ways to gather data and discusses which methods are most appropriate for which types of questions.

Finally, the last step is to make sense of the information you collect and to answer the question "Did we accomplish what we hoped to achieve?" for yourselves and your community. Part III, *Analysis: What to Do with All These Data?*, helps you determine the best way to summarize the data you have and report your results to your community.