# Evaluation Take Aways

Free Evaluation Technical Assistance from the Staff of ACET, Inc.

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# The Evaluation Cycle

Newcomers to evaluation often find the evaluation process mystifying, confusing, or frustrating. But the steps involved in creating and implementing an evaluation are relatively straightforward: Plan, Implement, Analyze, Report, Reflect, and Use (see the figure below). The purpose of this *Evaluation Take Away* is to provide an overview of the entire evaluation cycle for those unfamiliar with evaluations.
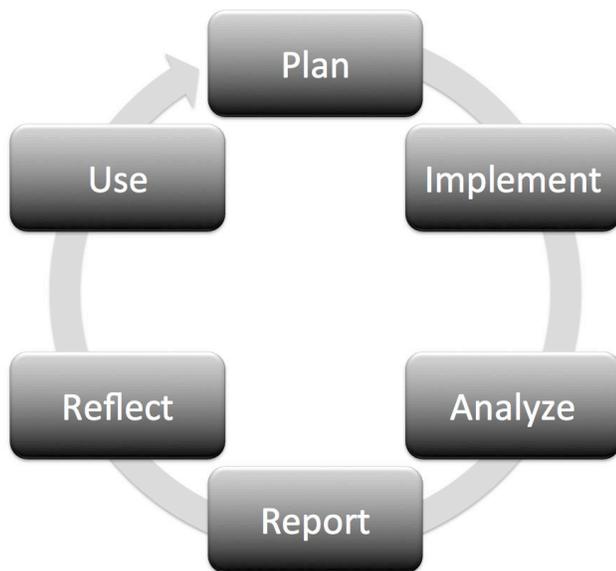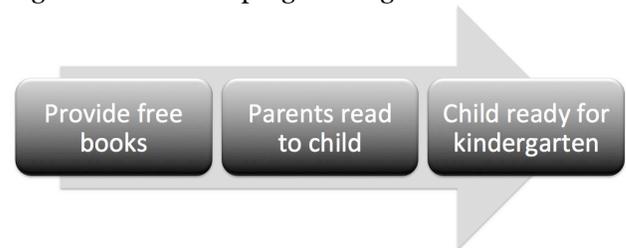
## Plan

The first step in the evaluation cycle is to plan the entire evaluation. In the same way that an architect creates a blueprint of a house prior to starting the building process, evaluators want to plan the evaluation before it begins. One of the first steps in the planning process is developing a *logic model*. A logic model defines or describes how a program makes change happen. Logic models can be linear or non-linear but, regardless of format, the logic model will specify how a program's activities produces desired change. Typically, logic models will include the program's goals, a list of available resources, stakeholders, activities, anticipated results, and short-, intermediate, and long-term outcomes.

Let's say there is preschool literacy program in your town. The goal of the program is for 3- and 4-year old children from low-income families to be ready

for kindergarten. The program provides books to parents, free of charge, and parents agree to read to their child for 2 hours per week. A very simplified logic model for this program might look like this:



But notice that the logic model does not explain how the program will determine if their goal has been met. For that we will need an *evaluation plan*. While the logic model specifies how programs create change, the evaluation plan specifies how change will be measured. At a minimum the evaluation plan will include: what data will be collected, by whom, and when. The evaluation plan may also include a description of data analysis and reporting. The intent of the evaluation plan is to have a comprehensive list of evaluation activities to be carried out in a timely fashion for reporting.

During the planning phase, it's important to take an inventory of instruments currently being used such as surveys, check-in sheets, databases, etc., to determine what data the program is already collecting. The next step is to align current instruments with the evaluation plan to ensure *all* data specified in the evaluation plan will be collected. Aligning the current instruments with the evaluation plan will identify any gaps in existing data collection practices so that new questions or instruments can be developed to address the gaps. The alignment may also identify redundancies in data collection that can be eliminated by removing duplicative questions or instruments.

## Implement

During the implementation phase, data is collected. Program participants and program stakeholders may complete checklists or surveys, sign an attendance sheet or participate in focus groups or interviews. In addition, evaluators or program staff may review program records, participation information, or retrieve data from a program database.

## Analyze

After data has been collected, analysis can begin. In general, some preparation of the data will be needed prior to analysis. Qualitative data, like recordings from focus groups or interviews, may need to be made available in a narrative form (i.e., transcribed), and quantitative data, like survey results, may need to be entered into a computer program. In addition, quantitative data should be verified with data cleaning processes to ensure the data are accurate.

The specific analysis technique will depend upon the type of data that was collected and evaluators will carefully match the type of data with an appropriate analytic technique. In the case of qualitative data, the most frequently used analytical strategy is content theming, or identifying patterns in the qualitative data. For quantitative data, a wide range of analyses could be used, including simple descriptions of the results (e.g., frequencies of responses), relationships between data (e.g., correlations, regression), grouping responses (e.g., factor analytic techniques), and predicting trends (e.g., regression models).

## Report

After data has been collected and analyzed, a report summarizing the evaluation findings will be developed. Reports may be oral or multimedia presentations (e.g., Prezi, PowerPoint), narrative reports, or brief summaries for distribution to the community. In general, the report will likely include what was evaluated, how it was evaluated, what was found, program strengths, and program challenges. But the exact content and format of the report will depend on the needs of the program, its staff, and stakeholders. For example, a report to state or federal funders may need to include more detail than a report to policy makers or board members.

## Reflect

Once the report is completed there is an opportunity to reflect on the findings. The evaluation report will include a summary of *what* was found during the evaluation but program staff generally hold the key to understanding *why* the evaluation findings occurred. As a result, a discussion of the evaluation findings can be invaluable to contextualizing the evaluation results for program staff, stakeholders, and evaluators.

## Use

After reflection, program staff are encouraged to use the results from the evaluation to inform or guide adjustments to their program. The number of changes or adjustments to the program will likely be guided by the findings in the evaluation report and staff may want to prioritize changes based on client or stakeholder needs. One way to use the evaluation data is action planning.

Action planning is a process by which staff identify program strengths and opportunities for improvement. For both the program strengths and the opportunities for improvement, staff identify potential reasons why the strength or opportunity occurred, resources needed to maintain the strength or address the challenge, and a standard by which success will be measured. Note that, with action planning, staff are encouraged to identify strategies or actions to improve the program, but not at the expense of program strengths. Because evaluations can identify more than one opportunity for improvement, action planning can help staff prioritize which opportunities should be addressed first and those that can wait.

In addition, modifying the program may have an impact on the evaluation plan. As a result, once changes are made to the evaluation plan, data collection techniques may need to be adjusted so accurate and useful program data are collected.

## Resources

ACET, Inc. (2013). *Finding the right report for your needs.* Minneapolis, MN.

Fitzpatrick, J. L., Sanders, J. R., & Worthen, B. R. (2004). *Program evaluation: Alternative approaches and practical guidelines* (3rd ed.). Boston: Pearson.

Frechtling, J. A. (2007). *Logic modeling methods in program evaluation.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Patton, M. Q. (2008). *Utilization-focused evaluation* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage.

For additional information about this or other ACET, Inc. resources, or for evaluation assistance, please contact:

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