

Chapter Seven - Evaluation of Family Programs

Box 7.1 Evaluation or Research?

The staff of the Southwest Family Center wants to know if babies who attend a program like the Indoor Playground (which includes opportunities for climbing and exercise on playground equipment) on a regular basis show more advanced motor skills than babies who do not attend such a program. This type of study would be considered research.

The staff of the Southwest Family Center wants to know how the parents who attend the Indoor Playground feel about the program and if they find it to be a good opportunity to connect with other parents in their community. This type of study would be considered evaluation.

Box 7.2 Formative Evaluation

The Indoor Playground is held each Friday at the Southwest Family Center. Once each month staff distributes a survey to the attendees. The survey includes questions such as:

- How many times have you attended the Indoor Playground?
- What is your main reason for attending?
- Is this a convenient day for you to attend?
- Is this a convenient time for you to attend?
- If not, when would be better?
- What changes would you like to see in the Indoor Playground?
- How did you hear about the Indoor Playground?
- Do you attend any other Southwest Family Center events?

Box 7.3 Summative Evaluation

The Southwest Family Center sponsors a New Parents support group for parents of newborns. The meetings are facilitated by parents in the community who have completed a 16-hour small-group-facilitation training program. Parents enter the program before their babies are born or just after. The program meets twice a month for 2 hours for a 2-year period. A summative evaluation of the New Parents program would be carried out at the end of the 2-year period. Participants might be interviewed or asked to complete a questionnaire. The intent of the survey or questionnaire would be to determine how the parents benefited from the program. Did they learn new skills regarding parenting? How about new knowledge about child development? Did their participation help them to feel more confident about their abilities as parents? Did they feel less alone and isolated? Do they feel more connected to their community, having met other families in a similar situation? Results of this summative evaluation will help the staff of the Southwest Family Center know if their goals have been met. The results may determine if the program will be replicated.

Box 7.4 Inputs

Inputs at the Southwest Family Center would include financial support provided by the sponsoring agency, staff members and staff time, and members of the community who volunteer their time to various programs and services offered through the Southwest Family Center. The site at which the Southwest Family Center is located, including meeting space, materials, supplies, playground equipment, and toys available through the Indoor Playground would also be considered input.

Box 7.5 Outputs

How many people attended the Indoor Playground? How many sessions of Family Fun Night were held? How many people used the toy library? How many brochures or flyers about the Southwest Family Center were distributed at neighborhood festivals and community events? These questions attempt to gather information about outputs—the direct product of programs and activities carried out by the Southwest Family Center. In addition to attendance, further qualitative information might reveal interesting results. Program observers could tally specific parent-child behaviors.

Box 7.6 Outcomes

Parents attending a monthly class, "Discipline and Your Child," learn new techniques for directing the behavior of their toddlers. The staff hopes that providing comprehensive information about child development and discipline alternatives will expand parents' understanding of these topics. By increasing parents' knowledge, the staff hopes that parents will make better choices about strategies when disciplining their child. Because making better choices about discipline strategies includes approaches to preventing misbehavior, the staff believes that parents will use less punitive means and employ more appropriate choices with their children. By preventing misbehavior, the staff hopes that parents will have a more positive attitude about discipline, feel more confident about being able to prevent misbehavior, feel more successful as parents, and enjoy their child more. These are all examples of outcomes—the benefits and changes experienced by the participants of the parenting class.

Box 7.7 Indicators

One of the goals of the Indoor Playground is to provide opportunities for parents in the community to connect with each other. Staff at the Indoor Playground events might observe parents to see if they are interacting with each other and if relationships are forming. This interaction between the parents, especially if the same parents sit together and talk to each other at subsequent events, could be considered an indicator that the parents are connecting with each other. Staff might observe other Southwest Family Center events to see if some of the same parents attend and if they interact with other families.

An overall goal of the Southwest Family Center is to increase learning readiness of children entering kindergarten. One indicator of learning readiness is having received all recommended shots before entering kindergarten. Another indicator might be that children have been screened for hearing, vision, or speech problems and have received the appropriate intervention. These problems have been identified early enough for actions to be taken so that the children are ready to learn by the time they enter kindergarten.

Box 7.8 Qualitative Data/ Evaluation

If the staff of the Southwest Family Center wanted to gather qualitative data or carry out a qualitative evaluation, they could interview or survey the participants of the programs to collect information on how they feel about the programs and how they think they have benefited. Another option would be to observe parents at various activities and record information about their interaction with their children or other parents. Or they might hold a focus group of parents of 4-year-olds to determine what issues are of most concern for them at this stage in their children's lives. This information could be used to help them design future classes or determine what resources might be most helpful.

Box 7.9 Quantitative Data/Evaluation

At each event held by the Southwest Family Center, a sign-in sheet for the participant's name and address is provided. Staff uses this information, in addition to attendance, to monitor how many people are attending each event. They may collect information on how many kindergartners had received all their shots when entering first grade in 2000 and compare that number with the number of kindergartners inoculated in 2005. This would be considered quantitative data.

Box 7.10 Levels of Outcomes

Initial Outcomes?By attending the "Terrific Threes" and "Fabulous Fours" parent education class, there is a measurable increase in the number of minutes that most parents spend reading to their child in one-on-one parent-child time during the class.

Intermediate Outcomes?Several months into the program, the staff member who oversees the program's lending library notes that the library is busier. When she checks her records, the librarian notes that library usage has more than doubled for most parents.

Longer-Term Outcomes?Two years into the future, as kindergarten teachers collect information about their students' preschool experience, they discover that children who participated in "Terrific Threes" and "Fabulous Fours" with their parents scored significantly higher on all school readiness assessments.