

Evaluating Family Support Programs

Program evaluation is crucial for:

- Shaping your support services for adoptive, foster, and kinship families
- Determining if your services are having the desired impact on children, teens, and parents served
- Planning for future expansion, revision, and enhancement of your services
- Making the case for ongoing funding and support

In addition to these benefits to your own program and families served, having evaluation findings about your services contributes to the overall evidence base on supporting adoptive, foster, and kinship families, which helps other child welfare systems and agencies plan and implement support services.

Planning for effective evaluation

As part of your process for planning support services, you may want to develop a logic model, which enables you to link goals with specific activities and decide how to evaluate whether those activities are achieving your goals and objectives.¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway has developed a logic model builder for post-adoption support programs that can also be used for support services for foster and kinship care families (see additional resources below).

Your evaluation plan should address how you will:

- Track services provided and people served
- Assess outcomes achieved
- Monitor how the program operates

Whatever your evaluation plan is, it's important that staff understand up front what they need to do, how to do it, and why. It helps if they know that the data they collect provides the information you need to fulfill any reporting requirements and builds your case for continued funding, partnerships, and other support.

¹ As described by Child Welfare Information Gateway: "A logic model is a map or a simple illustration of what you do, why you do it, what you hope to achieve, and how you will measure achievement. It includes the anticipated outcomes of your services, indicators of those outcomes, and measurement tools to evaluate the outcomes." For more information about using logic models, see <https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/effectiveness/models/>.

A well-thought-out evaluation plan is essential to help you make thoughtful, intentional modifications to your program or services as necessary over time and to sustain services into the future. Data from the evaluation offers evidence to internal and external leaders, community members, and potential funders about the value of your work and your ability to make a difference in the lives of adoptive, foster, and kinship care families. And, in some cases, it may tell you that you are not taking the right approach and need to shift gears.

Common approaches for evaluating support programs

Although specific evaluation approaches vary across programs—depending on scope of services, available budget, capacity of the program, and other factors—there are some common approaches that most evaluation plans include to some degree. Tracking services, evaluating outcomes, and assessing program operations (process evaluation) are the most common approaches.

Tracking services

At a minimum, your program evaluation is likely to include a system for tracking the activities or services offered and the children, teens, and parents receiving each service. Tracking methods vary, with programs using databases, tracking forms, spreadsheets, case records, and other means. With case records, the agency may have a file on each family and then record which services are provided to members of the family. Some programs use databases with a record for each family where staff can identify their needs and goals and services provided over time.

Organizations may use a tracking form for each event or service and have staff note how many or which individuals or families receive that service. Staff may also track the reason for contact.

As part of tracking services provided, some programs also track client satisfaction with the services they receive. For example, a program may use surveys to find out how satisfied foster and adoptive parents are with the support they receive from online or in-person support groups. Similarly, a program may interview youth to find out their satisfaction with cultural or recreational activities offered by the program.

Evaluating outcomes

Most programs do more than count activities and services—they seek to determine if the services are helping children and youth in adoption, foster care, and kinship care and their families.

Some key outcome indicators used by family support programs in their evaluation plans include:

- Improvements in child or teen behaviors or well-being
- Increased parenting skills or knowledge
- Decreased parental stress
- Enhanced family stability or functioning
- Case outcomes such as permanency or placement stability
- Satisfaction with services

Programs use various strategies and tools to evaluate the outcomes and impact of their services, including:

- Assessments (see text box on next page for additional information)
- Collection of case-level data or case review
- Surveys of parents and youth
- Interviews or focus groups with individuals served
- Cost-benefit analysis
- Randomized control groups or longitudinal studies

Assessing program operation and strategy (process evaluation)

In addition to tracking activities and measuring outcomes, evaluation can also be useful in guiding program activities and services and making needed adjustments and improvements in efficiency, service delivery methods, coordination, communication, and other parts of your process. Surveys of parents and youth, focus groups, and interviews are excellent ways to gather information about what families need, which services are most valuable, how well services are being provided, and if changes are warranted. Such surveys and assessments can help determine if how and when you offer services might need to change (such as offering support groups at a different time of day or offering some services in-home).

When combined with outcome data, process evaluation results can also help guide operations. With careful data collection, for example, managers might learn that families who participate in multiple services are seeing greater improvements on assessments than those who participate in only one activity. Or data might show that families who receive services for a minimum of 12 months do better than those who are supported for only three or six months. Data like these can help staff guide families to engage in additional services or change how services are offered in ways that are more likely to achieve positive outcomes.

Assessment tools

Many programs supporting adoptive, foster, and kinship care families use assessment tools, both to guide case planning and to assess outcomes. Several programs use child and youth assessments at the beginning of service to determine the client's needs and goals and set a baseline. They then use the tool again at milestones during services or at the end of services to determine if the child is doing better. Assessments can measure trauma symptoms such as anxiety, depression, or anger; negative behaviors; and factors related to resiliency such as leadership, social skills, and ability to adapt. Some programs also use pre- and post-tests, skills surveys, and other tools to assess parents' knowledge in areas such as child development, understanding trauma, and responding positively to difficult behaviors. The authors of *Implementation Resource Guide for Social Service Programs: An Introduction to Evidence-Based Programming* recommend using existing assessments when possible because it can save you time and also ensure that your instrument has been tried and tested.²

Specific assessment tools used by support programs:³

- Casey Life Skills Assessment
- Child and Adolescent Strengths and Needs Assessment
- Child Behavior Checklist
- Devereux Early Childhood Assessment
- Global Assessment of Relational Functioning
- North Carolina Family Assessment General Services + Reunification
- Parenting Stress Index
- Post Traumatic Stress Index
- Youth Connections Scale

² US Department of Health and Human Services and James Bell Associates, "Implementation Resource Guide."

³ Note: This list of assessment tools is not a comprehensive list of available and useful tools. This list is included to provide a few examples of the specific tools that have been used by family support programs about which AdoptUSKids has collected information.

Examples of evaluation approaches

The brief descriptions below provide examples of ways that family support programs across the country evaluate their services and outcomes. These descriptions give an overview of various strategies that other support program might consider as part of an overall evaluation plan. These descriptions are not full profiles of each program's evaluation methodology. For more information on the programs, see chapter three of the AdoptUSKids publication, *Support Matters: Lessons from the Field on Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families*, found on adoptuskids.org.

Adoption Network Cleveland—The Post Adoption Services program uses an outcomes-measurement tool from United Way that indicates the ways in which programs increase parental confidence in dealing with behavioral issues, knowledge about where they can go to seek services, and ability to advocate for their child's needs.

Adoption Support and Preservation (ASAP), Tennessee—Adoption Support and Preservation does several assessments before and after treatment that are used during casework and to help the family during discharge planning. The assessments include a parental stress index, traumatic stress index, and child behavior checklists.

Anu Family Services Treatment Foster Care with Permanency Services, Wisconsin and Minnesota—Anu Family Services tracks case outcomes for children and youth, such as exit to permanency. In addition, staff use two scales to assess well-being:

- The Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths assessment tool is administered within 30 days of placement and re-administered every six months.
- The Youth Connections Scale assesses emotional and relational connectedness, focusing primarily on those individuals who will be present throughout the youth's life.

Together these indicators demonstrate how the child or youth is faring, while the Youth Connections Scale also identifies possible permanency resources for the child or youth.

Bethany Christian Services ADOPTS Program, various sites—Children, youth, and parents participating in ADOPTS complete a pre- and post-test and a 12-month follow-up to assess significant changes. For children, the three tests examine trauma symptoms (hyperactivity, anxiety, depression, anger, etc.) and behaviors (social skills, leadership, adaptive skills, withdrawal, aggression, conduct problems, etc.). Clinicians also assess the children before the intervention and after on the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Scale for Children and Adolescents. As a pre-test, post-test, and 12-month follow-up, parents complete the Parental Stress Index, which measures defensive responses, overall stress, parental distress, parent/child dysfunction, etc.

Parents and children complete a 12-month follow-up questionnaire. Parents are asked to assess any changes in the family and identify how the child is doing and how the parent is functioning. Children report how they are doing and how they are getting along with their family and other children, and answer questions related to understanding and expressing their feelings.

The Child Wellbeing Project, North Carolina—The project’s evaluation approach includes the following elements:

- Assesses and tracks improvement in family or individual function using measures such as the North Carolina Family Assessment General Services + Reunification, Devereux Early Childhood Assessment, and Casey Life Skills Assessment
- Tracks child protective services involvement or foster care re-entry
- Holds monthly staff meetings to review program

The Children’s Home Kinship Care Program, Florida—A five-year evaluation surveyed all participants in the first two years of the study and followed up with a random sample of participants during years three to five. The evaluation also used county administrative data to assess child safety and permanency. The evaluation assessed the services of three organizations providing kinship support services in the county, including the Children’s Home. In a separate evaluation effort, the organization also used a random control group where some participants received program services and others a more standard set of supports from a community-based agency.

Foster and Adoptive Care Coalition of Greater St. Louis, Missouri—For families receiving crisis intervention services, family relationships are measured using the Global Assessment of Relational Functioning. Self-management skills are measured using the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale. Improvement in a youth’s educational success is measured through the Children’s Global Assessment Scale.

KEEP (Keeping Foster and Kin Parents Supported and Trained), multiple locations—At baseline and after the intervention, child behavior problems were measured using the Parent Daily Report Checklist. The program designers conducted a randomized control trial for six years, comparing results on the checklist for parents served by the program with those who did not participate in KEEP.

Native American Youth and Family Center Foster Care Support Program, Oregon—The NAYA Center evaluation, designed by the director of the National Indian Child Welfare Association, focuses on the NAYA assessment tool. The tool is a culturally based

measurement that guides case planning and assesses youth across the domains of context, mind, spirit, and body. Measurements include:

- Healthy relationships
- Connections to Native ancestry
- Safety
- Coping capacities
- Personal capacities
- Focus and determination

A Second Chance, Inc., Pennsylvania—A Second Chance randomly selects a number of cases for which to do a home visit and ask the family about the quality of services received. The agency’s quality assurance division monitors each aspect of the agency’s work to ensure it is meeting client needs.

Conclusion

While evaluation plans vary greatly in quantity and depth, the key is to develop a strategy that is reasonable given your staff and resources but is rigorous enough to determine if your investment of time and funding is paying off.

It is ideal to determine how you will assess impact as you plan the support services you’ll provide. This can help ensure that you are offering services linked to your desired outcomes and that you have the staff and data capacity you need from the beginning to conduct the evaluation and analyze results. As in other aspects of implementation planning, representatives of successful programs suggest involving parents, youth, and community members in identifying key outcome indicators. A key question to discuss—and answer—is, “How will we know if our services have been effective?”

Additional resources

For more details and additional resources on evaluation strategies for family support programs, see the Evaluating Program Outcomes and Implementation section (p. 276) of *Support Matters: Lessons from the Field on Services for Adoptive, Foster, and Kinship Care Families*, found on adoptuskids.org. This comprehensive publication provides detailed descriptions of the programs highlighted above, along with guidance on using support services to help with both recruitment and support of families; suggestions and tools for assessing the support needs of families; tips on using data to demonstrate the value of support services; and information about ways to implement support services successfully.

Evaluation toolkit

The FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention has developed an evaluation toolkit to help prevention programs in their evaluation efforts. The toolkit assists child abuse and neglect prevention, family support, and parenting programs in evaluating their effectiveness in improving outcomes for children and families. View it on their website: friendsnrc.org/evaluation-toolkit.

Logic model builder

Child Welfare Information Gateway provides a logic model builder for child abuse and neglect prevention/family support and post-adoption services programs to help programs define their service goals and outcomes, identify indicators of success, and select evaluation instruments that may be appropriate to measure success. Find it on their website: childwelfare.gov/topics/management/effectiveness/logic-model/.

If you want help developing your support services for adoptive, foster, and kinship families, we can help. Contact us at consultation@adoptuskids.org.



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