

METHODOLOGIC ISSUES

Program evaluation for prevention projects

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'Prevention programs should improve quality of life, reduce the incidence or severity of disease or injury, and reduce premature death through early detection or interventions to reduce risks or exposures associated with incidence'.¹ But how do we know if our program is successful? Program evaluation can help to determine what works, why it works, what doesn't work, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the strategies attempted so far.² Unfortunately, at the local or community level, evaluation of prevention projects is not common. This is so for a number of reasons: lack of financial resources, insufficient time or personnel, or limited technical skills.³ Nevertheless, further attempts to evaluate remain essential.⁴

Benefits of program evaluation

The benefits of evaluation can be categorized into three areas: accountability, program improvement, and decision making.

First, in these times of economic restraint, it is essential that we can justify resources used for prevention strategies. An evaluation provides an accounting of the services provided and the results achieved. For example, Green and Lewis summarize 17 calculations that provide a comprehensive analysis of needs, inputs, and outputs of health education programs such as impact, program cost, and effectiveness.⁵

Second, evaluation provides feedback that could improve a program. Acquiring information that describes which aspects are successful, those that are not, and what requires improvement, provides a basis for choosing actions that can be taken in the future.² The results of an evaluation can be used to attain more partners for reasons of need, affiliation, success, or simply to reduce duplication of services.⁶

Third, evaluation research is becoming a more popular tool among managers for decision making.^{7,8} Results can assist in policy formation and resource allocation and can also be a critical component to assist in advocacy efforts for healthy public policy and program funding.

Thus, few of us would disagree with the benefits or need to evaluate programs; the challenge comes with learning how to do so.

Getting started . . . and even finishing a program evaluation!

'Program evaluation, or evaluation research, is the systematic application of social research

procedures for assessing the conceptualization, design, implementation, and utility of social intervention and human service programs'. To accomplish this, consider the following phases: develop a plan; design and implement the evaluation, use and disseminate the results. This is consistent with the message Benson provides for the evaluation of community based injury prevention activity.⁴

A community example

Building a support team to share the workload, provide expertise, and acquire resources has merit.⁶ An evaluation team formed to assess a community playground safety resource guide in Alberta, Canada made the task manageable. The project was a partnership of four agencies: the Alberta Medical Association, the provincial ministry of Community Development, Aspen Regional Health Authority, and SAFE KIDS. The key was an evaluation consultant contracted at a reasonable fee through a request-for-proposal announcement to provide technical expertise. University professors or their graduate students can also be recruited to obtain this assistance.

With the team in place, each partner contributed in a number of ways: a cash contribution of approximately \$1000 (Canadian), reviewing proposed methods, sharing related studies, reviewing the collection tool and report, and by disseminating and implementing the results of the evaluation. SAFE KIDS agreed to be the lead agency, providing coordination and ensuring the goals were met. With this level of involvement, the total cost for the study was only \$4000 Canadian.

When developing the evaluation plan, our foremost question was, 'What do we want to evaluate?' A comprehensive evaluation focuses on four areas: (1) rationale, (2) processes, (3) effectiveness, and (4) program efficiency. Realistically, however, it was not possible to undertake all four so we agreed to focus primarily on determining the effectiveness of the playground guide.

Evaluation studies are 'designed for making value judgments, for informed decision making, for accountability purposes, and for contributing toward solving practical problems'. This is different from academic research which is typically methodologically rigorous, hypothesis testing, theory driven, and single discipline. In contrast, front line program evaluation is more multidisciplinary and uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.¹⁰

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Knowing when to begin the evaluation is critical in the planning. Too often, evaluation is only considered during or after the program is implemented. By considering your evaluation questions before you begin, feedback can be attained throughout the planning cycle to assist with the assessment.¹⁰

Selecting the method of evaluation was challenging because of the need to balance the issues of time and money against rigor. Being creative and flexible allowed us to stay on time, within budget, and be reasonably credible.

As a team, we outlined our goals and key research questions. It was beneficial having committee members provide different perspectives as we formed our questions. Needs assessments or focus groups can also be used to help define the tools, process, and timeline required to get the information you need.¹¹ We agreed to collect telephone interview information from Albertans who had purchased a manual. To ensure our method would capture the information efficiently, we conducted a small pretest, and then modified the questionnaire. The evaluation consultant coordinated the interviews. Over a two week period, we made 141 contacts and completed 89 interviews, using the playground guide database, maintained by the local Rotary Club. The information collected was reviewed by the evaluation team and they provided an outline for the report drafted by the consultant.

A record of the administrative process and decisions made were kept by the lead agency as we progressed. This proved helpful when it came time to create the final report, as well as serving a record for future studies.

Disseminating results

The value of a program evaluation is not realized unless the results are disseminated and used. Findings can be shared in a number of ways. Publishing results in journals is the goal of academic researchers and should be pursued by program evaluations. However, too many projects have been evaluated but remain unknown to others in the field because they have not been published. Yet, do not underestimate the value of distributing the executive summary to a list of key people in your community.¹² Our results were sent to agencies, government officials, educational institutions, current and potential funders, industry, and the media. Because the media is a main

source of consumer health information, this venue should not be forgotten.¹³ Their assistance in communicating our results and recommendations extended the life and reach of our report. It also raised the community's awareness of the need for ongoing assessment and maintenance of playgrounds. Through media exposure of our results our partners renewed their involvement in playground safety; funding was secured to produce a second edition of the guide; and sales increased. The evaluation recommendations were reviewed by the team and a working group incorporated these changes into the second edition. Feedback was also provided to agencies and others how the program was modified as a result of the evaluation. This was done through a standard slide presentation by each partner, and an article in local publications.

Our experience shows that lack of resources to evaluate safety programs can be overcome. Adopt a strategy that includes the needed technical expertise, secure some funds, and allocate personnel wisely. Make a plan; do it; and use it!

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Toy store hit and run

An elderly member of the public was hit by a budding Damon Hill driving a battery powered toy car. The store in question allows children, under close parental supervision, to try out such vehicles in the shopping aisles (*Environmental Health News*, November 1996).