

Using Research and Evaluation to Support Programs that Promote Parents' Economic Security and Children's Well-being

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Many nonprofits and government agencies are looking for ways to support the needs of low-income families by helping parents take steps toward economic security while improving their children's well-being. Programs that offer coordinated services to parents and their children—sometimes called two-generation programs—provide many different combinations of supports, often by partnering with other organizations (Sama-Miller and Baumgartner 2017). Participating in research and evaluation can help program leaders and staff refine their services and program models and find better ways to coordinate supports for families.

Stakeholders in these programs may find research and evaluation to be useful in a number of ways. For example, program leaders and staff may want to serve families better but, without planning for and using research and evaluation, may have trouble fully executing their vision for high quality, coordinated services that meet the needs of parents and their children. And program funders can use research and evaluation results to learn whether the programs they support are fully implemented and are ready to participate in an evaluation to assess whether they are having an impact. Impact evaluations could be premature for most programs serving parents and their children because the models for most such programs are not yet fully developed. On the other hand, many kinds of research and evaluation are appropriate for emerging programs. Moreover, using research and evaluation findings can strengthen program implementation and provide valuable insights for funders and program leaders about the quality and reach of the program's services.

Engaging in research and evaluation can:

- Help program staff articulate their goals for parents, children, and families and see whether their operations are in line with those goals.
- Show program leaders the quality and intensity of the services they actually provide versus the levels of quality and intensity they intend to provide.

This brief describes a continuum of research and evaluation that could help program leaders and staff create more robust programs offering coordinated services to low-income parents and their children.

- Inform stronger program implementation and demonstrate a program’s readiness for an impact evaluation.

This brief describes a continuum of research and evaluation approaches that could help program leaders and staff create more robust programs offering coordinated services to low-income parents and their children. The brief can also help program funders plan descriptive research and evaluation that can inform program development and identify which programs are ready for an assessment of impacts.

The brief first discusses how to build a foundation for data-informed program improvement, including how to use program data to assess whether the program is working as its leaders and staff envision. Then, it discusses how research partners can be helpful in supporting program development based on analysis of program data. As programs develop data systems and program services, a descriptive study can examine the types, intensity, and quality of program services across several programs. This will yield a picture of similarities and differences across program models that aim to support low-income parents and their children. Programs that have engaged in data-informed program improvement may be ready to participate in an impact evaluation, so in the final section, we present criteria to help program leaders and funders assess the readiness of a program for an impact evaluation.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR DATA-INFORMED PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

For programs that have not already done so, the best place to begin thinking about a vision for program services and how those services might influence outcomes for parents and children is with a logic model. A logic model is a diagram that helps program leaders (1) articulate their plans for services, including the intensity (including duration) and quality of services, (2) ensure that the plans line up with the expected outcomes for parents and children, and (3) identify expected outcomes and the associated measures for the outcomes.

After developing a logic model, program leaders can use it to help identify data needs. To ensure that research and evaluation results are relevant to and actionable for the program—without involving burdensome data collection—program leaders and staff should be involved early in planning the broad goals. Over time, leaders and

About This Project

This project, *Integrated Approaches to Supporting Child Development and Improving Family Economic Security*, was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research and Northwestern University for the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. It focused particularly on programs whose goals are both to improve the economic security of families and to support the development and well-being of children. These programs typically offer services to help parents get a job and increase their educational attainment and skill level and to foster the development and education of their children.

The project was designed to give ACF, administrators and funders of programs with an intentional approach to serving parents and children together, and other stakeholders an overview of the current state of the field, including theory, program models, evidence from research on the programs, and directions for future research. Project activities included (1) a literature review, an environmental scan, and field work to identify and describe existing program models; (2) development of a conceptual framework to inform program design and research; and (3) an assessment of future directions for research and evaluation.

Other briefs in this series describe a scan of contemporary programs operating as of early 2016, and the project’s conceptual framework. The findings from the project are presented in the final report submitted by Mathematica to ACF. Project information and publications are available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/integrated-approaches-supporting-child-development-improving-family-self-sufficiency>.

staff should provide ongoing input into the questions to be addressed and the data to be collected.

DEVELOP A LOGIC MODEL

Creating a logic model generally involves five steps (Exhibit 1). A program’s leader and staff could start by adapting the conceptual framework for services and outcomes developed for this project (see Sommer et al. 2017). He or she could also adapt the framework from “Making Tomorrow Better Together,” the report that summarizes the activities of the Ascend Network’s two-generation outcomes working group (Ascend 2016). Either framework could be adapted to a specific program’s context and goals.

EXHIBIT 1. STEPS TO CREATING A LOGIC MODEL

1. Describe the target population: the families’, parents’, and children’s characteristics
2. Articulate the services to be provided to parents and children, including the intensity, quality, and duration of services
3. Describe the expected outcomes for parents, children, and families in the short and long term, considering the intensity, quality, and duration of services for parents and children
4. Identify how to measure the *intended* and *actual* intensity, quality, and duration of services
5. Identify outcome measures for parents, children, and families

Source: W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004).

The logic model summarizes the expectations of program leaders and staff for the services provided to parents and children – their intensity, quality, and duration – and the outcomes expected when parents receive those services.

Once the logic model is in place, the program’s leader and staff should consider how to measure services and outcomes to assess how well the actual program experience matches the logic model. They can identify measures of services and outcomes from large-scale studies of programs for children and families, such as the Head Start and Early Head Start Family and Child Experiences Study, and from measures compendia.¹ We describe possible measures later in this brief.

CREATE OR ENHANCE A PROGRAM DATA SYSTEM

Once services, outcomes, and measures are defined, research partners, program leaders and staff can work together to create a plan for using existing program administrative data to measure services and shorter-term outcomes identified in the logic model. They can then consider whether and how to fill gaps in the measurement plan by expanding program data collection.

Administrative data. Program leaders may already have administrative data that meet their needs. However, in many cases, program administrative systems cannot easily combine data on parents and their children, longitudinal tracking is unreliable, and data items that measure some components of the logic model (such as employment or education services received from partners or the quality of early childhood education) could be missing or incomplete.

But program leaders can still draw on the data that are available to assess program services received and shorter-term outcomes for parents and children, using the logic model to benchmark whether the program services and client experiences are lining up with expectations. Program leaders and researchers can make plans early for how

to collect data that will support more complete monitoring and analysis of program activities and outcomes to more fully cover the services and outcomes in the logic model. They can work together to decide how to prioritize and when to make changes to the data system. They may find that their plans and decisions point toward waiting until funds and staff time are available to address the data system needs.

To provide information about how program services and client experiences line up with expectations summarized in the logic model, a program's administrative data should capture information on participants, participant feedback, and the quality of services.

- **Participant information.** Staff should gather participant data throughout the participants' time in the program, including (1) characteristics of families using the services, as captured at enrollment; (2) types of services received and attendance over time in employment training programs, education programs, and early childhood education programs; and (3) shorter-term outcomes for parents and children, such as the completion of education and employment programs, children's language, early literacy, and social-emotional development, and other outcomes from parent surveys.²
- **Participant feedback.** Staff can gauge participant satisfaction based on feedback and exit surveys to understand their level of engagement and reasons for leaving the program.
- **Quality of services.** Staff can capture service quality by examining information on staff characteristics and training (for example, whether staff in child care centers have certain types of credentials in early childhood education) and through other measures, such as observational assessments of early care and education classrooms.

External data. Research partners can provide access to useful external data sources. For example, data on outcomes after the program ends could come from administrative data systems, such as state unemployment insurance systems (for parents' employment and earnings) and state or local education data systems (for children's school achievement and progress). Parent surveys and child assessments could also provide outcomes data.

Once these foundational pieces are in place, program staff and research partners can use them to ask and answer questions about how program services and outcomes reflect the expectations summarized in the logic model.

COMPARE SERVICES TO THE LOGIC MODEL AND ADJUST AS NEEDED

Program leaders and researchers can use the logic model in two ways.

First, they can compare their data with the logic model to assess whether the program appears to be working as planned. Program leaders and researchers should assess the actual intensity, quality, and duration of services to parents and children and compare what they learn with the expectations summarized in the logic model. They can then fine-tune their service delivery or enhance service quality and assess the operations again. Exhibit 2 shows some examples of how to do this. As they work to improve the program, staff may also find ways to enhance the data system itself, which will strengthen their ability to understand and improve program operations.

Exhibit 2. Practical examples of how stakeholders can compare data to the logic model and consider how to adjust program operations

- ❖ **Ask a question based on the logic model.** Program leaders may ask whether parents are remaining in education programs long enough to obtain a credential or a degree, as the logic model suggests.
- ❖ **Look at administrative data to answer the question.** Administrative data can show parents' participation over time. If the data show that many parents are not staying in education programs long enough to obtain a credential or a degree, program leaders can then examine the data to find key points at which parents leave the program (for example, after a semester).
- ❖ **If the data do not agree with the logic model, ask staff or parents why program experiences are not as expected.** Staff can talk to parents, or they might already know, reasons for leaving education programs before obtaining the credential or degree.
- ❖ **Consider strategies to bring families' program experiences in line with the logic model.** Program leaders and staff can use the information on when and why parents leave education programs to brainstorm ways to re-engage these parents. Researchers can help by suggesting evidence-based strategies.
- ❖ **Implement the changes.** The program can then implement one or more program changes that might help improve retention in parent education programs. The program could assess a single preferred strategy or assess two or three alternatives.
- ❖ **Look at program data again to see if families' program experiences are closer to expectations in the logic model.** Program leaders can then check program data to see if the program changes helped re-engage parents sufficiently. If two or three alternative strategies were tested experimentally, the data could show whether one of the strategies was more effective than the others.
- ❖ **Repeat the process as needed.** If program changes do not increase parent engagement sufficiently, continue to brainstorm new strategies or refine the initial ideas, implement changes, and look at program data until families' program experiences align with expectations in the logic model.

Second, the data that programs obtain by examining the services received and participants' feedback can provide insights on the design of the overall program (Exhibit 3). Program leaders and funders can regularly ask themselves whether the logic model really shows what they are trying to do—and revise it as needed.

EXAMINE PARENT AND CHILD OUTCOMES USING THE LOGIC MODEL, AND ADJUST THE SERVICES

Once the program is running as expected, program staff and researchers can assess whether the parent and child outcomes are improving as anticipated. The outcome measures should be captured at the start of program services as a baseline and be checked against this baseline periodically. We suggest checking at least yearly—and more often if possible. More frequent measurement could help the assessment keep up with the rapid development of young children.

Exhibit 3. Practical examples of how stakeholders can compare data to the logic model and adjust the logic model

Parent services examples:

- ❖ **Ask a question based on the logic model.** Program leaders may ask whether parents are receiving key employment services identified in the program's logic model: one of the program's three on-site job training activities and job search assistance.
- ❖ **Look at administrative data to answer the question.** Program data might reveal that many parents are taking part in more than one on-site job training activity but they are not receiving job search services from a partner organization.
- ❖ **Ask parents and/or staff why parents' program experiences are not as expected.** Program leaders and staff can ask parents why they are not participating in job search services and may learn that the services are difficult to access because of the location and times offered.
- ❖ **Consider strategies to bring program experiences in line with the logic model.** Program staff or parents might have suggestions of changes in the schedule or location of job search services, but program leaders might decide that these changes are not possible because a partner is offering the services and is not willing to make changes.
- ❖ **Update the logic model.** Leaders would then update the logic model to remove job search services from the logic model and add in job training services. They should then consider the possible effects of these service changes on shorter-term and longer-term outcomes. For example, the actual services received might lead to less short-term employment but to more long-term employment at higher-skilled jobs with better wages.

Child services examples:

- ❖ **Ask a question based on the logic model.** Program leaders may ask whether children are attending the child development program for the two years they are eligible to attend, as reflected in the logic model.
- ❖ **Look at administrative data to answer the question.** The program data might show that children are receiving child development services for one year rather than for the expected two years.
- ❖ **Ask parents and/or staff why parents' program experiences are not as expected.** Program leaders and staff can ask parents why children participate for only one year and may learn that families move frequently.
- ❖ **Consider strategies to bring program experiences in line with the logic model.** Program leaders and staff may not know how to engage families for longer because families are moving out of the area, and the early childhood education program's wait list is long.
- ❖ **Update the logic model.** Program leaders might decide to update the logic model to show children receiving high quality education services for one year—and to modify their expectations for shorter- and longer-term child outcomes accordingly.

When program leaders and researchers review short-term participation and outcome data, they should consider what changes can reasonably happen in a short time frame, and the possibility that outcomes could move in an unexpected direction during program participation. For example, the program might offer employment training services with the goal of seeing parents obtain higher-skilled jobs and higher wages. In the short term, however, while parents are enrolled in employment training, their rates of employment and their earnings might be lower than they were at baseline.

After reviewing data on outcomes for parents and children, program leaders and staff might conclude that the changes in outcomes are in line with the services that are offered, but they were hoping that the program would yield larger improvements in outcomes. Greater improvements in outcomes might require strengthening the quality, intensity, or duration of services. Research partners can help take stock of the services being offered, including the core features of the program's service approach and its ties to evidence-based practices, and changes the program has made to fit the local context. They should also consult with program staff, participants, stakeholders, and communities of practice.³ Researchers can also pinpoint what might be unique or novel about the services and whether they are being delivered with the quality or intensity needed to produce the desired outcomes. In identifying program adjustments, researchers could help program leaders consider strategies that are supported by evidence.

Once program leaders and staff have identified feasible changes to the quality, intensity, or duration of services, they can implement them. If program leaders build evaluation into this process, they can assess whether the program changes are improving outcomes for parents or children. Evaluating whether the program change made a difference may be an important step if the program changes will increase service costs. Rapid-cycle evaluation is an approach that includes systematically implementing a program change and then examining outcomes to determine whether the program change made a difference (Exhibit 4). The research team can use rapid-cycle evaluation to assess whether program changes affect outcomes. The process might require more than one attempt to modify services before program leaders and staff reach a solution that improves outcomes.

Exhibit 4. Practical examples of how stakeholders can use program data to assess the effects of changes in service approaches

Outcomes that program leaders want to improve

A majority of children who participated in the early education program are assessed at kindergarten entry as "not school ready." Program leaders want to improve children's language and social-emotional development by kindergarten.

Practical examples of how to assess changes in service approach with program data

- ❖ **Consider strategies to increase the intensity or quality of services.** Program leaders and staff can brainstorm ways to strengthen early education services. Researchers can help by suggesting evidence-based strategies.
- ❖ **Identify feasible strategies to implement.** Two strategies program leaders and staff identify are to extend the half-day program to a full day and to provide professional development coaching for staff to improve teaching practices that support language development and social-emotional development.
- ❖ **Implement the changes strategically so they can be tested.** The program has 10 early education classrooms in five centers that offer half-day early education programs with extended-day care. The program leaders decide to pilot the full-day and staff development changes strategically so they can assess the impacts on children before deciding whether to implement the changes in all classrooms. They decide to implement full-day programs in 5 classrooms and professional development coaching in 4 classrooms, with an overlap of both full-day programming and coaching in 2 classrooms. Three classrooms will continue without any of the changes. Children enrolling in the program will be randomly assigned to classrooms.
- ❖ **Look at program data again to assess implementation and to see if families' program experiences are in line with expectations.** Program leaders can then check program data to see if teachers are receiving the expected level of professional development coaching and children are attending early education programs as expected.

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- ❖ **Examine outcome data to assess the impacts of the two strategies.** The kindergarten assessment data can show whether one of the strategies was more effective than the other, or if the combined strategy was more effective than either strategy alone.
- ❖ **Repeat the process as needed.** If program changes do not demonstrate that the program changes improved children's outcomes sufficiently, program leaders and staff could continue to brainstorm new strategies or refine the initial ideas, implement changes, and examine outcomes until they align with expectations in the logic model.

USING RESEARCH PARTNERS AND PROGRAM PARTNERS TO SPUR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

Programs that use data-informed program improvement may find that the process strengthens services and improves program leaders' ability to make strategic program changes. However, the process may also require a sustained focus on cycles of data analysis and program improvement that can be difficult for program leaders to sustain when other pressing program demands arise. Partnerships between programs and external researchers can ensure that data systems development, analysis, and learning move forward amid other administrative demands on program leaders' time. With an outside—and ideally, an objective—eye, researchers can help program leaders and staff assess program-specific findings in the context of other research on program development. For example, they can provide a broad perspective on refining program activities; finding evidence-based service approaches; and identifying ways to measure outcomes for adults, children, and families.

In a scan of programs that coordinate services for parents and children (Sama-Miller and Baumgartner 2017), we found that most such programs did not have external research and evaluation partners, nor did they have in-house staff with data analysis capacity. Three programs that had in-house capacity used data to inform their program development (Exhibit 5). The two programs that had external research partners identified those partners early in implementation and infused research and evaluation into the process of developing the program. Partnerships such as these can help programs build their capacity to improve services.

Partnerships with organizations that support peer networking can provide a community of practice that provides an opportunity for practitioners and program leaders to share ideas and work together to learn new ways to engage families, coordinate services, and address other issues. For example, the Strengthening Working Families Initiative of DOL supports peer sharing in various ways. They may participate in moderated discussion where experts weigh in on questions grantees pose about challenges. Grantees also may join facilitated conference calls that provide a forum for sharing challenges and solutions on specific topics, such as recruiting participants or connecting to child care resources. Exhibits 6 and 7 provide examples of such communities supported by federal grant programs and private organizations. Researchers who take part in these networks can support the learning community by sharing research-based best practices and promising innovations. Practitioners and program leaders, in turn, can share their knowledge about program operations and the types of changes that are feasible. They can also discuss shorter-term outcomes for parents and their children that they have observed, which could point to new ways to think about program effects, improving research and evaluation.

Exhibit 5. Research and evaluation capacity of three programs that coordinate services for families and children

In-house data capacity. Next Generation Kids (<http://jobs.utah.gov/edo/intergenerational>), run by the Utah Department of Workforce Services, is an intensive case management program for families in the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. It targets TANF families headed by adults who themselves received welfare benefits as children. To begin this pilot project, program leaders used longitudinal administrative data to identify the second-generation welfare beneficiaries who were eligible for the program.

External research partners. College Access and Success (<http://www.edalliance.org/adults>) is a program that pairs Head Start/Early Head Start services for children with English as a second language (ESL) classes and help accessing postsecondary education for their parents. The program also partners with local university researchers to create program logic models, measure services and outcomes, use data to strengthen program implementation and assess outcomes, and conduct a formative evaluation. With foundation funding, College Access and Success is receiving technical assistance to help it use data more effectively. The program recently used participant feedback gathered by its research partner to improve access to career services.

CareerAdvance® (<https://captulsa.org/families/family-advancement/careeradvance/>), a program that offers employment training to parents and Head Start services for children, has a similar partnership with researchers and has used data to inform the development of educational services for parents and their children. Staff and researchers worked to design services with aligned topics (for example, budgeting for parents coupled with early mathematics for children) to promote parent-child communication about learning.

Both CareerAdvance® and College Access and Success, with their research partners, had impact evaluations under way in early 2017.

These programs are among four selected for site visits and a fifth that the research team has worked with closely. The five programs informed our assessment of the evaluability of the range of programs that provide integrated services to adults and children and the features, contexts, and challenges of such programs. We selected programs that: (1) publicly reported a quality indicator for child services—such as a state education agency rating or National Association for the Education of Young Children certification—or provided EHS, Head Start, or an evidence-based home visiting program; (2) offered a range of adult education and workforce development programming; (3) operated with some federal funds or had state involvement in administering services; (4) offered a diverse array of services, and served a variety of target populations and locations; and (5) were not participating in other research requiring site visits at the same time.

In some cases, programs may be able to analyze data in house. With dedicated staff, it's possible to answer questions about service levels and quality, participant engagement, and outcomes by examining available data and strategically supplementing and improving these data. This information can help shape efforts to improve service quality, family engagement, service coordination, and other aspects of the program.

Exhibit 6. Examples of communities of practice organized by federal agencies

Rural IMPACT Demonstration Sites, HHS, in collaboration with other federal partners. Ten rural and tribal communities receive technical assistance to develop comprehensive approaches to increasing parents' employment and education and improving the well-being of children. Technical assistance includes peer learning networks that support web meetings and online sharing of documents to facilitate sharing information within and across sites (ASPE 2016).

Strengthening Working Families Initiative, U.S. Department of Labor. This grant program is helping communities strengthen the links between workforce development centers and affordable, quality early care and education to reduce barriers to employment. Grantees can participate in web meetings to facilitate discussion about challenges and solutions.

Systems to Family Stability National Policy Academy, HHS, ACF's Office of Family Assistance. This 18-month initiative provided technical assistance and support including peer sharing and learning to eight state and local TANF agencies that were implementing innovative redesigns of their TANF programs. One goal of the academy was to help programs approach case management in a way that took the whole family into account.

Exhibit 7. Examples of communities of practice organized by private organizations

Action Learning Network, Annie E. Casey Foundation. This year-long opportunity enabled programs in five communities to share best practices and provide support in program development. Participants in the network took part in the Family Economic Success—Early Childhood Initiative evaluation.

Ascend Network, Aspen Institute. This network shares ideas about state policies to support the development of more coordinated services for parents and their children. It disseminates research on promising strategies, aims to influence policy decisions, and develops practice leaders in early childhood through postsecondary education and in health and human services. The network includes 180 partner organizations—researchers, policymakers, and program leaders interested in innovative approaches.

Parents and Children Thriving Together: Two-Generation State Policy Network, Center for Law and Social Policy and National Governor's Association. Five states are taking part in a network while developing two-generation strategies for systems change.

DESCRIBING PROGRAM SERVICES AND OUTCOMES

Programs that are delivering strong services can inform the field, including other programs and policymakers, through descriptive research. Researchers can work with these programs to describe the quality and intensity (including the range) of services provided and the outcomes for parents and their children to spread the word about promising approaches.

A descriptive study might focus on several research and evaluation questions that could provide important insights on promising programs in this nascent field:

- What is the quality of the child development services offered by the program? How does the quality compare to other early care and education programs in the community? To statewide standards of quality (for example, in the quality rating and improvement system)? To national standards of quality (for example, Head Start performance standards or quality standards from the National Association for the Education of Young Children)? To other programs that jointly serve parents and their children?

- What is the intensity of child development services offered by the program? How does the intensity compare to other early care and education programs in the community? To other programs that serve parents and their children?
- What is the range and intensity of education and employment-related services the program offers for parents? Do the services meet industry standards for the intended types of employment? How do the content and quality of these services compare to other employment and education programs in the community and state?⁴
- How do child development and adult services complement one another in terms of content, delivery, schedules, and location?
- What are the outcomes for children and parents one year, two years, and three years after enrollment?
- What parent characteristics are associated with taking part in education services (such as English as a second language, adult basic education and General Educational Development credential [GED] preparation, job certification programs, and community college)? Parent characteristics could include education level; age; job experience; wage levels; and motivation to use employment, education, and children’s services. What parent characteristics are associated with participating in job training? With participation for a longer period? What are the patterns of participation in adult services?
- What parent characteristics (age, education level, job experience, or motivation) and child characteristics (age, developmental status, or whether first born) are associated with longer participation in child development services?

A study could focus on these questions for several programs that each take a different approach to combining services for parents and their children. Such a study could benefit the field by:

- Informing program leaders about alternative program designs
- Contributing more broadly to the knowledge base on the strengths and challenges of alternative approaches

The study would be best able to meet these goals if the programs included were diverse, including different program backgrounds, types of populations served, and services provided. In addition, the programs included in the study should have more fully implemented program models. Such programs would have previously conducted some work to establish their program logic models, assessed how the services they provide line up with the logic model, and started to align their services with the expectations in the model.

To describe parent and child characteristics, the types, quality, and intensity of services used, and outcomes for parents and children across programs, the study should use measures that are as consistent as possible. To ensure measures are consistent, it might require the use of data beyond that available in administrative data.

The study could be a coordinated effort among researchers that are working with each program or an effort by a team of external researchers working with several programs. Data could come from the programs’ administrative data systems if the programs collect similar information on service quality and intensity, the initial characteristics of children and adults, and outcomes. Establishing a set of common “core measures” of key service and participant characteristics would help paint a consistent picture across the programs. Data on parents and children after they leave the program could come from other data systems, such as education or employment agency data (as noted earlier in this brief) and could provide consistent measures across programs. To fill in gaps where data are not consistent across programs, researchers could conduct additional data collection.

CONSIDERING WHETHER A PROGRAM IS READY TO MEASURE IMPACTS

Measuring the impacts of programs that offer coordinated parent and child services is critical, given that few programs operating today have taken part in impact studies. Our literature review for this project showed very little research on the overall effectiveness of current programs, largely because most of these programs are still developing their service models and are not yet ready for an impact evaluation (for more information on the literature review and characteristics of current programs, please see the final report for this project, Sama-Miller et al. 2017).

An impact evaluation can seem critically important to funders, who may be anxious to measure the value of their investments in these programs. It can assess whether the program is making a difference for parents and their children. For example, an impact evaluation can assess whether the program is changing outcomes in the shorter-term, such as parents attaining certifications or improving children's early literacy development. It can also assess whether program impacts extend for a longer period, changing the trajectories of family economic well-being and children's development over a decade or more. Many important questions about programs that offer coordinated parent and child services can be addressed by an impact study (Exhibit 8).

Exhibit 8. Questions that can be addressed by an impact evaluation

- ❖ What are the impacts of a program offering coordinated parent and child services compared to other services in the community? How does the program affect parents' employment, employment-related skills and education, and family economic security? How does the program affect parenting and parent-child relationships? How does the program affect children's language development, early literacy skills and reading achievement, mathematics achievement, and social-emotional development?
- ❖ Is there a greater impact of coordinating services for parents and their children compared with offering services to parents and children separately? Put differently, does a program offering coordinated parent and child services have greater impacts on children than a program focused on just the children? Does a program offering coordinated parent and child services have greater impacts on parents than a program focused on just the parents?
- ❖ What are the critical levels of quality and intensity of services to parents and to their children that are necessary for programs to have an impact on parents' employment, family economic outcomes, and children's development?

While the questions that an impact evaluation can address are important, funders and program leaders should not rush into impact evaluation before the program is ready. Long-standing evaluation theory stresses the importance of conducting impact evaluations with programs that are well-implemented and that have shown that participants' outcomes are trending in the expected direction (Wholey 2010). Because many programs that coordinate services are still getting off the ground, while others are more fully implemented, judging a program's readiness for an impact evaluation requires careful consideration.

Here, we discuss the steps for assessing program readiness for an impact evaluation and the sources of information used in such an assessment. For most programs, a three-step "evaluability assessment" can show whether a program is ready for an impact evaluation (Exhibit 9). This assessment examines (1) the program's level of implementation and (2) the strength of its theory of change. If the program has been working with researchers on data-informed improvements, the information should be readily available and the findings are likely to indicate readiness for impact evaluation. An evaluability assessment also examines (3) other factors related to evaluation capacity, which we discuss in detail below. Program stakeholders should be closely involved

with this step of the assessment, given their front-line perspective and intimate knowledge of the program. Staff buy-in to an impact evaluation is also vital to its success.

Step 1: Assess the implementation status. In Step 1, evaluators can assess how well the program is put into practice (Metz et al. 2015; Metz and Albers 2014; Metz 2016). A program that is not implemented well is unlikely to yield positive outcomes, regardless of the positive intentions of leaders and staff.

To assess implementation status, evaluators would examine various organizational factors, such as how a program hires, trains, and supports staff; what, how, and why program data are collected; how program decisions are made; how committed staff are to the program; and the program's external partnerships and supports. Evaluators would also examine participant responsiveness, such as the number of enrollees and the amount of services they receive. This level of information – about exactly how the program operates, its staffing levels, staff training and support, and the actual level of services received – will also need to be documented during an impact evaluation. These are critical program “ingredients” needed to replicate the program if an evaluation finds that the program had favorable effects on parents and their children.

Step 2: Assess the strength of the program's logic model. A clear logic model is vital for programs that hope to show positive impacts. This important tool can help researchers and program leaders gauge the strength of the program's vision for service quality and the expectations for parent and child outcomes. As discussed earlier, program leaders and staff, working with researchers, can develop this model and then use program data to assess how well the types, intensity, and quality of the actual services line up with their expectations. Researchers and staff can also use the logic model and outcome data to assess whether the outcomes for parents and children are trending in the right direction. Building on the work that programs may have done in partnership with researchers, the logic model and analyses of program data supporting continual improvement would be helpful in making the case that the program is ready for impact evaluation.

Step 3: Consider the maximum possible rigor of the evaluation design. If a program passes the first two steps, an evaluator should determine the most rigorous research design that the program can support. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) are the most rigorous design option. A program may not have the enrollment level and staff capacities needed for an RCT (examples of such capacities include enrolling twice as many families in the evaluation as will receive services and collecting additional data at enrollment to assist with maintaining contact with families during the follow-up period). If enrollment levels and staff capacities are not sufficient to support an RCT, the next-best solution may be a quasi-experimental design (QED), which requires finding a very similar group of families to compare to program participants. QEDs do not produce the strongest causal evidence about impacts but may be the best choice for emerging program models.

Exhibit 9. Three steps to assess a program's readiness for an impact evaluation

Step 1: Assess implementation status

- *Competency drivers:* Staffing and training
- *Organization drivers:* Leadership, community partnerships, data systems
- *Fidelity of implementation:* Staff knowledge and buy-in, quality assurance, staff support
- *Participant responsiveness:* Enrollment and participation

Step 2: Assess the strength of the program's logic model

- Are the types of services for parents and children designed to achieve desired outcomes?
- Are the quality and intensity of services sufficient to achieve the desired outcomes?
- Is there research to support anticipated pathways from service components to outcomes?
- Does the logic model indicate sufficient resources and inputs and a realistic time frame for seeing outcomes?

Step 3: Consider maximum possible rigor of evaluation design

- *Target population:* number of potentially eligible families in the community exceeds program capacity and current and potential referral sources can expand the number of program applicants
- *Program capacity:* number of families who can be served, ability to increase capacity if needed
- *Evaluation capacity:* ability to enroll and randomly assign families from different sources, maintain family random assignment over time, interest in evaluation among program leadership and staff, partner and community support for evaluation
- *Evaluation fidelity:* ability to deliver a positive message about the evaluation and adhere to random assignment outcomes
- *Data capacity:* willingness and ability to assist with data collection at enrollment or baseline and at other points later in the evaluation
- *Community context:* differentiation from other services in the community

Note: Implementation criteria are derived from Metz and Bartley (2012) and Metz et al. (2015); other criteria are derived from Davies (2013), Dunn (2008), and Wholey (2010).

Evaluators should consider several factors before selecting a design for an impact study:

- The size of the potentially eligible population in the community and the current referral sources for the program (to assess the potential to expand the number of applicants through broader outreach and referrals, to meet sample size requirements, and to form a control group)
- Program capacity to provide services for the number of participants who need to be served (researchers can estimate the number that need to be served in order to measure any impact of the program that may exist)
- Leadership, staff, and community support for the evaluation
- Staff interest and ability to conduct evaluation activities, including enrolling families that might apply through either child services or adult services, providing clear and positive messages to families about the evaluation, and maintaining random assignments over time
- A strong contrast between the program's services and the generally available services in the community

Data sources to inform the three assessment steps. Some of the information needed to assess whether a program is ready for an impact evaluation could come from publicly-available data sources, including program websites, grant proposals, and reports. These sources might provide information on the number of families served each year, eligibility criteria for participation, funding sources, implementation challenges, and outcomes for parents and children. However, these sources might not always include enough detail or provide the most recent information about the program.

To obtain a more complete assessment of the program's readiness for evaluation, two other approaches might be needed:

- **Telephone interviews with program leaders and researchers and additional document reviews.** Telephone interviews with program leaders can help clarify the types of services provided to parents and children and the number of and qualifications of staff. Telephone interviews with research partners can provide details on the types and quality of services received, the levels of attendance by parents and children in educational activities, and short- and medium-term outcomes. Researchers might also have access to program data that enables them to provide customized data summaries that can address questions such as whether the parents and children served by the program are usually from the same families or from different families.
- **Site visits.** Site visits can offer stakeholders a better understanding of the program staff's buy-in and interest in evaluation, the quality and intensity of services, and the existing and potential capacity of the program to support an evaluation. Moreover, a visit can foster program staff's interest in taking part in an impact evaluation. It can allow the evaluator or funder to explain the research benefits and process to program staff and to address their concerns about participating in a random assignment evaluation.

If this assessment indicates that the program is ready for an impact study, researchers should select an evaluation design that can answer the research questions of greatest interest.

CONCLUSIONS

Research and evaluation can be beneficial to programs that combine services for parents and children. Such research can:

- Help program leaders create service approaches aligned with their vision for the program
- Inform the field about promising strategies
- Eventually, address questions about the impacts of these programs on parents' economic security and children's well-being

Importantly, the type of research and evaluation should be appropriate for the program's stage of development. Most current programs that target parents' economic security and children's well-being are in the developmental stages. Thus, the research and evaluation activities most useful for them are descriptive approaches that support stronger program implementation. This type of research and evaluation can help programs develop logic models; strengthen their data systems; and use the data to assess program activities, outcomes, and costs. This assessment, in turn, can pinpoint priority areas for program development.

Program leaders can engage in continual improvement as well as rapid-cycle testing of the improvements to see how they are working. Partnering with researchers, other programs, and communities of practice can also help program leaders develop services that line up with their goals for the program. Programs that are delivering strong services can participate in descriptive research that can inform the field, including other programs and policymakers, about service strategies that engage families and show promising outcomes for parents and children.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ <http://www.jbassoc.com/reports-publications/dohve>) and the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation measures compendium (Kopack Klein et al. 2017)
https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/ehsrep_measures_final_508.pdf.
- ² The logic model can also include longer-term outcomes for parents and children, but program administrative data is unlikely to be the most cost-effective and accurate way to measure these outcomes.
- ³ A community of practice is a real or virtual space in which program leaders can share ideas and experiences and network with peers about solutions.
- ⁴ The quality of adult education and job-related services is of interest, but there are no national or state standards for quality to use as benchmarks. A study can address questions of quality by comparing the services to what is required for jobs in the target industry and by obtaining feedback from participants about their experiences.

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