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Program Evaluation for Child Care Professionals

by Theresa M. Sull

An evaluation can sound like an unexciting or even an intimidating event, but evaluation is an ongoing and necessary process in the life of a child care professional who has mastered child development or early childhood education, and then keeps up with any new developments.

Consider the case of another professional, your family pediatrician. Wouldn't you expect your doctor to be up to date? If your pediatrician finished her training in, say, 1970, and then never read another journal article or took another course, she could not be current with new drug therapies or diagnostic technology. You probably wouldn't trust her with your children's health because the field of medicine has changed so much in the last 30 years.

Parents have the right to expect that caregivers entrusted with the future of their children be professionals who are current in the knowledge base of their field. Ongoing evaluations of the child care program and the child care staff ensure that the program and the people involved remain current.

Any evaluation is easier when the process starts with thoughtful planning. The *Evaluation Planning Worksheet* (Figure 1) can be filled out by individual teachers or directors or used as a tool to help program staff coordinate evaluation efforts through small group brainstorming.

Identifying the Object of the Evaluation

Before we undertake an evaluation, we must first decide exactly what it is that we are going to evaluate:

- The entire child care program?
- Health and safety routines?
- A specific part of the program that is funded by a grant?
- Playground equipment?
- Curriculum?
- Only the literacy or science education portion of the curriculum?
- Parent involvement in the child care program?
- The supervision of teachers?
- The performance of teachers themselves?
- Director performance?
- Progress of the children?

This list demonstrates that many different aspects of a child care program *could* be evaluated. Instead of focusing on the whole program at once, it is wise to narrow the focus of your evaluation to a subset of program characteristics. Before you can narrow your focus you must know **why** you are conducting this particular evaluation.

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The purpose and **type** of evaluation are interwoven. Evaluations can be categorized as either **formative** or **summative**. *Formative* evaluation is conducted to provide information to improve a new or ongoing program. To ensure a healthy program, the program budget should somehow address the financial and personnel costs of ongoing evaluation.

Summative evaluation is conducted to determine, after it's all over, how well a program has worked. Summative evaluation is usually required to justify expenditures to a funder or to enable a director to report to the board of directors on the program's success at year's end.

When you have chosen the object, the purpose, and type of your evaluation, jot those down on the *Evaluation Planning Worksheet*.

Making Value Judgments

Looking at a formal definition of evaluation, we see that the process involves making value judgments. When we make **a value judgment**, we ask ourselves, is the object of our evaluation *good? needing improvement? bad? better? worse? poor? adequate? excellent*? These value words are meaningless unless we ask questions like, *better or worse than what*? Or, *good or bad according to what standard*? In other words, we need an object of comparison, or some **criteria** for making a value judgment.

Families may judge a program by whether or not the program's philosophy of child rearing matches their own or whether the tuition is affordable. Funders, however, will use entirely different criteria for judging a program, such as the relationship of the needs assessment to the program goals as outlined in a grant proposal.

Smith and Glass (1987) identify five different types of criteria for evaluation: *effectiveness, efficiency, fairness, acceptability,* and *aesthetics*. The following list provides some examples of ways that child care professionals might use one or more of these criteria.

Effectiveness could involve the cost effectiveness of a child care center's meal service program, the effectiveness of the hygiene routines in keeping rates of illness down, or the effectiveness of the school-age program in meeting children's academic, physical, and social-emotional needs.

Efficiency compares some attribute to an outcome. For instance, higher adult:child ratios might have the attribute of being inexpensive; but, high ratios are not *efficient,* if they result in the outcome of a less intellectually stimulating environment for the children. Diapering routines might become very quick, another attribute; but, quick diapering won't be efficient if the outcome is that illness spreads more quickly because hands aren't thoroughly washed.

Fairness, or justice, could involve questions about whether the program staff respects all children, including those of different ethnic or economic backgrounds, or those with disabilities. Fairness might also involve questions about teachers' salaries or the distribution of the work load at the center.

Acceptability refers to consumer satisfaction. For instance, how satisfied are parents with the curriculum that their children experience; how happy are children with the activity choices provided in the playground; or how satisfied are staff with the facilities that meet adult needs, such as restrooms, coat closets and adult-sized chairs.

Aesthetics involve qualities of beauty, unity or harmony of the program. Some programs, such as those based on the ideals of Reggio Emilia, Montessori, or Waldorf education, typically place high value on aesthetics.

In choosing criteria for judging value, we ask ourselves, what questions do we want answered by this evaluation? Questions about developmental appropriateness, cultural relevance, or even the amount of fun that happens, can be addressed through evaluation. The criteria to be used should be noted on the *Evaluation Planning Worksheet.* A value judgment is only meaningful if we know why, and by what standard, we judge.

Gathering Evidence

Our definition of evaluation indicates that value judgments must be based on **evidence**. We gather evidence for evaluation using **assessments**. Assessment tools include surveys like attitude surveys or consumer satisfaction surveys, systematic observation using criterion-based checklists and scales, and naturalistic case studies with anecdotal records. The evidence, referred to as data, falls into two main categories: **quantitative** and **qualitative data**.

Quantitative data collection results in numbers, like amounts that you can count or percentages that you can report. Numbers are usually easy to interpret so they make your reports more meaningful.

You can turn your classroom observations into quantitative data by systematically counting the activity of interest over several weeks and then computing an average. For example, you could justify buying new books for the classroom library with data showing that rotating books out of storage causes children to choose more literacy experiences (see box).

Surveys scored on a Likert-type scale are another common way to obtain quantitative data. You can create your own surveys using the sample items (Figure 2) as models. Staff can respond to surveys about the training they attend, about working conditions, or about the quality of the program. Families can be surveyed to provide valuable information concern-

ing their needs and their experiences in the program.

Using more than one assessment instrument can broaden the focus of an evaluation. Published assessment instruments can yield valuable data to inform of program improvement. The Environment Rating Scales (ITERS, ECERS-R, SACERS, and FDCRS) created by Thelma Harms, Richard Clifford, and Debby Cryer are being used in many states, and in several countries outside the United States, to evaluate child care environments. These instruments have proven to be reliable measures of quality in child care settings. Longitudinal studies have shown that children cared for in higher quality child care, as measured by the scales, do better socially and academically than children cared for in lower quality facilities (Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study, 1999).

Several other published instruments, such as the accreditation instrument of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the Head Start Performance Standards, and the Child Development Associate Credential (CDA) guidelines, can all provide quantitative data on the quality of a the child care program. *Qualitative* data is harder to interpret but sometimes easier for the audience of the evaluation to understand. Qualitative data includes records of observations, anecdotes, or narratives about what is happening in the environment that you're studying, or what steps you are taking to improve your program. What assessment tools will you use for your evaluation? Both qualitative and quantitative data are used in formative *and* in summative evaluations. Note on the *Evaluation Planning Worksheet* whether you plan to collect quantitative or qualitative data, or both.

Usually, several assessment tools are used to perform one evaluation. For example, a child who is being evaluated for special needs will be assessed in all the developmental areas, including gross motor, fine motor, speech and language, self-help, and social skills. Evaluation of a program may include assessing the physical plant, curriculum, health and safety routines, communication patterns, administrative effectiveness, financial health of the organization, experience of the staff, and staff levels of education.

To use assessment tools, decisions must be made about who the evaluators are or who will administer the assessments. Evaluation can be conducted by **internal** evaluators (program staff) or by **external evaluators** (for example, NAEYC validators or assessors for a rated license). It's a very good idea to perform adequate evaluations *internally* before any external evaluator is involved. Consultants who specialize in evaluation, such as quality improvement specialists at the local Child Care Resource and Referral Agency, can assist programs with internal evaluation.

Decisions about which **informants** to use are also made. Will you talk to parents or even give parents a survey? When a program's effectiveness is being evaluated, assessments may include surveys administered to child care teachers, to parents, and maybe even to kindergarten teachers who observe children after they leave the child care center.

Evaluations also have **stakeholders**, those people or groups of people who have an interest in the program being evaluated and the evaluation results. Who might these stakeholders be? The board of directors, the church that houses the center, a funding agency, the parents, the corporation under which auspices the center operates, the community at large? How will they be included in a needs assessment prior to the evaluation? How will they be involved in the evaluation itself? How will they be informed of the results of the evaluation?

If an evaluation is to be useful for program improvement, it must be done well, performed in the most thorough manner possible given the constraints of time and money. A thorough evaluation is an intense and time consuming process, but, it is well worth the invest-

A Teacher-Designed Assessment

To evaluate the literacy program in her preschool classroom, a teacher keeps track of the number of books that the children look at during free choice. She carries a clipboard during free choice on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for three weeks. She learns that, on average, two children look at two books each.

After a trip to the public library, she begins to add three borrowed books to the shelves each Monday and puts three old books in storage. After three weeks of rotating books she once again records book use during free choice over a period of three weeks. She finds that, on average, four children are choosing three books each day, a 200% increase in book usage.

When the board reads her report, the data presented convinces them to allocate funds for new books on a quarterly basis.

Figure 1 • Evaluation Planning Worksheet

Name _____ Date _____

I plan to evaluate: _____ to find out:
(name of program or one aspect of the program)

_____
(questions to be answered)

Why? _____
(purpose of evaluation)

The type of evaluation will be: (circle) formative and/or summative

I will use the following criteria to judge the program: _____

_____
(effectiveness, efficiency, fairness, acceptability, aesthetics)

The type of evaluation will be: (circle) quantitative and/or qualitative

Why? _____

I will use the following assessment tools: On the following dates:

1)_____ _____

2)_____ _____

3)_____ _____

4)_____ _____

The evaluators will be: _____

The informants will be:_____

Our stakeholders are: _____

The format of the evaluation report will be: _____

The report will be distributed to: _____

Figure 2 • Samples of Likert-Type Survey Items

Please circle your level of satisfaction with the training:

	Unsatisfactory		Adequate		Excellent
Trainer's communication skills	1	2	3	4	5
Organization of the meeting	1	2	3	4	5
Usefulness of the handouts	1	2	3	4	5

Please circle your level of agreement with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
Literacy curriculum in the preschool classroom is age appropriate	1	2	3	4	5
Child care center playground is safe for toddlers	1	2	3	4	5
Quality of care that my child receives at the center has improved since September	1	2	3	4	5

ment. High quality programs are constantly evaluating and improving. Good as they are, they can always be better, just like the professionals who run them.

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