

# Preparing to Evaluate Your Child Care Center's Performance

by Cindy Ratekin and Gary Bess

Directors of child care programs are increasingly realizing the value of developing a comprehensive evaluation plan around which measurable objectives can be later assessed against performance. Just as the annual budgeting process includes projections of anticipated revenues and expenses, other measures can be established that allow us to predict program and administrative activities for the coming year, to assess our performance relative to predetermined objectives, and to learn from our experience.

You may recall that in the 1970s and 1980s, planning was all-too-often viewed as a fatalistic exercise. We would look at where we were as an organization and what was happening around us; and, based on this information, we would conclude that we were likely to wind up in a particular situation — either for our good or not.

Today, we can plan *strategically*. By carefully considering where we are as an organization and the environment in which we are operating, and *also* by

clearly stating where we wish to go and the resources that are needed to get us there, we chart a course that moves us in the direction that we choose. The difference is that we have empowered ourselves to take charge of our organization's future. We decide where we want to go, how we will get there, what we will need to do along the way, and how we will know that we have arrived in either India or the New World. This approach assumes we can affect our future. Bryson (1995) defines strategic

planning as "a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and why it does it."

Efforts of this kind are most effective when they involve consistent and open communication among staff, members of the board of directors, parents, and others who are invested in the center. In this way, the *a priori* directions that are chosen and the outcomes that are anticipated are *owned*, not just by the administrators, but also by all those involved — staff, board, and families.

## Background Information Needed

Before developing a thoroughly measurable evaluation plan for your center, baseline information must be collected from which predications can be made. If you are a new organization just starting out, you will likely draw on your personal experience or that of other programs. There are also administrative and program stan-

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dards, such as those found in licensing and accreditation, which provide guidance as to acceptable objectives. To begin, we must have a clear idea as to the purpose of our center; and second, we must be able to un-defensively look at our present situation. These are indispensable footings on which we assess our performance. The simple wisdom of knowing that from whence you came is a precursor to knowing where you will go is part and parcel of this process.

Every child care center should have a mission statement (Kettner, et. al.). If the center is legally incorporated, it is generally part of its articles of incorporation or bylaws. The mission statement, which provides a *sound bite* summary of the center's purpose, was written at the time of its creation and possibly revised since then as part of a strategic planning process. Centers that are affiliated with a larger institution such as a university may not have a separate mission statement, but can draw upon written promotional materials such as brochures and parent manuals to convey the center's primary purpose.

With the child care center's mission in place, it is a good idea to periodically meet with the staff, board, families, and others invested in the center's success — especially at the beginning of the new program year — to reconsider your organization's mission. Think of the mission as a dynamic document; it grows and changes as you do. Word choices, their order and meaning, can be powerful indicators of who you are and what you do. Thus, what you elect to include and not include are also important. Here's an example:

*To provide high quality, culturally enriched child care services and parenting education to families with children, two to five, who reside in Anytown and surrounding communities.*

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There is no doubt that there is much more to say about this center, but the mission statement is the starting place from which all other commentary begins. It's the foundation on which you will continue to build your organization (Ratekin & Bess, 1995).

With your mission clearly constructed (for the moment), you next want to assess what, within your organization, is working and what, as yet, needs addressing. A good tool is a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats), (Barry, 1986) whereby in the course of one hour or two, you sequentially ask the following questions:

- What are your organization's internal and external strengths?
- What are your organization's internal and external weaknesses?
- What opportunities are present within your organization and in the environment that surrounds you?
- What threats exist — either internally or externally — that could adversely affect your efforts?

As you see, the SWOT assesses both internal and external dynamics. This is to say that your focus is divided between organization issues, and community and environmental issues. Combined, they represent the full spectrum of issues that concern your child care center (Table 1).

Emerging from the SWOT process are themes, a summarization of consistently stated observations or concerns said in different words by participants. The themes represent broad areas of administrative and programmatic activity that will be the basis of your coming year's workplan. Within each thematic con-

Table 1  
**Situational Analysis**

**Strengths**

- Valuable service and programs
- Stability of program, funding, staff
- Common shared values among staff and board
- Experienced staff
- Good agency benefits
- Well respected director
- Center administration receptive to change
- Balanced budget

**Weaknesses**

- Decision making process is unclear
- Fees inadequate to cover all costs
- Higher than ideal staff to child ratios
- Parking situation inadequate
- Infrequent feedback on staff performance

**Opportunities**

- Need for child care in the community
- Neighboring facility can be acquired for more space
- Young families moving to community
- Expansion of child care resources in the city's general plan
- Availability of Proposition 10 dollars for program improvement

**Threats**

- Unlicensed providers in the community
- Staff burnout
- Declining local economy affects parents' ability to pay tuition
- Low visibility may affect ability to maintain enrollment and raise donations
- Negative image in community of recipients of state subsidized services, including child care

struct (e.g., resource development, daily census or enrollment, or staff burnout or absences), will be several of the specific SWOT observations. Thus, as you begin your planning, you will want to make sure that the organization's strengths are upheld, its weaknesses and threats addressed, and opportunities pursued (Barry, 1986).

Though it is always helpful to have data to substantiate a particular concern or observation, *felt* issues are in many ways just as relevant because they color our

perspectives, dictate our activities, and affect our morale. Before you move and begin implementing a strategic course, however, it is essential that you make sure that these impressions are indeed based on fact and not fantasy. The quantifiable information that you need can come from within your center (e.g., daily census or revenues and expenditures), from local, regional, state, and federal data sources (e.g., population databases and planning studies such as by United Way or local universities), information solicited from your parents

or staff (e.g., surveys or focus group interviews developed and administered by your organization), and other sources based on your specific line of investigation.

## Collecting Current Program Information

Once you have a sense of your organization's mission and the status of what is working well and what is not, you can begin to develop an annual evaluation plan with measurable outcomes. Sometimes we rely on outside standards or accreditation criteria (e.g., NAEYC, Head Start, or Family Day Care) for the purpose of assessing our progress. It is equally appropriate to set individual objectives based on your agency's prior year's experience drawn from SWOT-generated themes. For example, if last year's revenues were less than expenses and a deficit occurred, this year your budget projects a balance between revenues and expenses or excess revenues over expenses.

Similarly, if you determine that your board of directors is not sufficiently diversified, you may plan to alter its composition by adding persons with financial or legal backgrounds or parents. You would thus project recruitment onto the board an accountant or attorney, or an increase in parent representation by a minimum of two additional parents. Regardless of context, annual performance evaluations require that you determine meaningful baseline measures.

We sometimes balk at the idea of creating an expectation that we may not be able to meet. While certainly the unknown is always a matter of some conjecture, remember, too, that externally derived performance standards and accreditation criteria are also made-up measures, based on the best thinking of professionals in the field. Within your

Desired Outcome	Target Population or Group	Desired Change	Timeframe	Measurement Indicator
Increase parent satisfaction	Parents in the program for two months or more	10%	12 months	Pre- and post-test satisfaction survey comparisons

organization, who knows better than you do what is possible with hard work and dedication?

## Developing Performance Measures

To develop performance measures, the following elements must be in place (Brody, 1982):

- **Desired outcomes:** The desired anticipated change, improvement, or standard of performance that the child care center intends to meet
- **Target population/grouping:** The target of change, improvement, or level of analysis that is to be affected
- **Desired change:** The level of change quantifiably determined (e.g., percentage of improvement or attainment of a specific level of performance)
- **Baseline data:** Current information on the child care center in a quantifiably understandable form
- **Timeframe:** The period during which change, improvement, or comparison against standard is made
- **Measurement indicator:** The method and specific measurement that your child care center will rely upon to determine whether change, improvement, or achievement has been pmet

Here is an example of how this works: You have decided you want to increase parent satisfaction among parents of preschool children. Let's proceed by filling in the matrix above (Table 2) based on the following questions and answers:

- *What is your desired outcome?* An increase in parent satisfaction within your child care program.
- *Who exactly are you targeting (target population/grouping)?* Parents who have been with the program for two months or more.
- *What do you hope to see changed (desired change)?* An increase in parent satisfaction by 10%.

From what was the 10% projection derived? It could be based on a comparable survey that you did last year, or a survey to be given at the beginning of the current year and again at the end, where you compare results. In either instance, you have a *baseline* on which to assess your progress.

- *What is your timeframe?* Twelve months.

It is important to note that though we generally operate in 12-month cycles, there is nothing special about 12-month periods. It can be less or more — let it be driven by your sense of how much time is required to perform the intervention.



What is your measurement indicator? Pre- and post-test satisfaction survey comparisons.

If you were to write this as a program satisfaction objective, you would add conjunctive prepositions (e.g., to, among, or by) and it would read:

*To increase parent satisfaction among parents in the program for a minimum of two months by 10% in 12 months according to pre- and post-test satisfaction survey comparisons.*

Below is an example to help you optimize your fiscal performance (Table 3). This focus is on increasing fees paid by parents and you are proposing a 15% increase. The strategy associated with this objective may require raising fees, increasing enrollments, or a combination of the two. This is an important strategic decision that you will need to make in order to meet the following fiscal performance objective, again using conjunctive prepositions:

*To increase revenues from parent fees by a minimum of 15% in 12 months according to the previous year's budget.*

Here are a few more matrix-organized examples for staff performance, community visibility, funding, and enrollment (Table 4):

Here are the fully stated objectives based on Table 4:

Table 3 Planning Matrix for Fiscal Performance				
Desired Outcome	Target Population or Group	Desired Change	Timeframe	Measurement Indicator
Increase revenues	Parents fees	15%	12 months	Previous year's revenues and expenses

■ Staff relations

*To decrease number of sick days among staff by 50% in 12 months according to personnel attendance records.*

■ Community visibility

*To increase visibility among the community by a minimum of 10% in 12 months according to inquiries received by the center from parents stating they learned about the program from promotional materials.*

■ Funding

*To decrease reliance on support from sponsoring agency by 5% in 12 months according to financial records of center and sponsoring agency.*

■ Enrollment

*To stabilize enrollment from children at current levels in the next six months according to the previous year's enrollment records.*

**Summary**

This article has offered a provisional tool for assessing your organization's overall performance, showing you how to combine programmatic and administrative concerns into one assessment format. Just like budgeting is an annually expected occurrence, so is engaging in the annual process of measuring your and your organization's performance.

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Table 4  
**Planning Matrix – Other Examples**

Example	Desired Outcome	Target Population or Grouping	Desired Change	Timeframe	Measurement Indicator
Staff Performance	Decrease number of sick days	Child center staff	50%	6 Months	Personnel attendance records
Community Visibility	Increase visibility	Community residents	10%	12 months	Inquiries stating that they learned about program from promotional materials
Funding	Decrease reliance on financial support	Sponsoring agency	5%	12 months	Previous year's revenues
Enrollment	Stabilize enrollment	Children enrolled in the program	At current levels	6 months	Previous year's records

For those of you who are compensated by your board of directors based on the child care center's program, this is one way of setting up performance measures against which you will be evaluated.

We have presented a sequential three-part process to maximize your child care center's potential: (a) mission clarification; (b) SWOT analysis; and (c) performance measures. Mission clarification involves all stakeholders and requires clear and precise communication. The mission statement itself is dynamic in that it changes over time as words convey different meanings and your program evolves.

The SWOT analysis is a snapshot of your organization. On the day that you are conducting the SWOT, you are assessing your organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. From this process emerge themes that shape the last component — performance measures — that can encompass programmatic as well as administrative concerns.

In addition, specific strategies have been presented to help you develop opera-

tional and measurable objectives against which you can assess your organization's performance. The success of this annual process is as good as the organization's commitment to seriously monitor performance based on a plan of intervention that addresses the specific objective.

This can be an enriching and empowering process that takes seriously the quality of care you strive to achieve and the administrative infrastructure you know is required in order to offer child care services.

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