

Make Decisions

At the end of this module, you will be able to:

- ▲ Interpret the findings and draw conclusions (Step 5a).
- ▲ Decide what to do with the program and design a plan for implementing your recommendations (Step 5b).
- ▲ Prepare a report and plan its effective distribution (Step 5c).

In Step 4, you analysed the data you had collected and summarised the findings. In Step 5 you will take the next step and interpret these findings so you can make decisions about your program and design an action plan to implement them. This is the most creative part of the process. You will combine your systematic gathering and analysis of data with your wisdom and experience to make good decisions about your program. You will also learn how to prepare a report on the evaluation. This is essential to share the methods and results with others.

STEP 5 a

Interpreting the Findings and Drawing Conclusions

This section shows you how to draw conclusions about your program based on the interpretation of your findings from Step 4. How does interpreting the findings differ from analysing the data, as you did in Step 4? In Step 4, your goal was to simply report the facts as they were recorded. You reviewed the data on each evaluation question in isolation and reported what you found. In Step 5a, the goal is to go further and view the findings as a whole, to help you understand the reason(s) for the findings. You will put your own interpretation or slant on things; your own unique balance between objectivity and creativity.

Step 4 =
"Just the facts, please."

but

Step 5a =
"Ah! Very interesting,
my dear Watson."

Thinking is the most crucial element in interpreting your findings. Taking time to think over the key findings will give you the opportunity to absorb them, live with them and find the implications that may not be apparent at first glance. Even distancing yourself from them by putting them away for a few days, then reviewing them again, is a good idea.

The *Interpretation of Findings Worksheet* will lead you through the thinking process. A completed *Worksheet* for the evaluation of the Parenting Program is on the next page. Use the information from previous *Worksheets* to fill in the first 3 columns of this *Worksheet*. Copy the purpose of the evaluation from the *Purpose Statement* in Step 1a and the evaluation questions from *Evaluation Questions Checklist* in Step 1d. Refer to the *Methods Worksheet* from Step 2 and enter the expectations in the second column. In the “Findings” column, write the findings as recorded in the *Qualitative Data Analysis* and/or *Quantitative Data Analysis Worksheets* in Step 4.

Look at the expectations that you established for your program. Compare them to your findings to determine whether or not they were met. Indicate in the “Expectations Met” column whether the expectation was met; choose yes, no, or no but acceptable. It is important to consider whether the expectations were in fact realistic.

Next, think about the expectations that were not met. Consider all the *possible* explanations why. In the “Why” column, write down the most *plausible* explanations. It is important to provide the most plausible explanation for all expectations that were not met because these are aspects of the program that should be reconsidered. You might also want to highlight your success by providing some explanation for expectations that were met or exceeded.

When thinking about the possible and the most plausible explanations, consider patterns of evidence, discrepancies, internal and external factors, plus any unexpected findings.

Patterns of Evidence

Patterns are similarities in the findings from different sources. They help to confirm a finding or explain why the program did not achieve the intended result. In the Parenting Program example, the sessions in the west were not as well attended and had a lower proportion of the target group compared to those in the east. Combining this with the finding that more people in the east found out about the program through the community resource centre than in the west suggests the critical role played by the community resource centre in recruitment.

Discrepancies

Discrepancies are findings that contradict each other or are inconsistent with findings from previous evaluations. Exploring these differences can help shed light on what is happening within the program, and indicate possible changes. For example, if staff delivering the program think it is going well but the participants do not, then it suggests staff are not in tune with the participants. The program could be improved by changing it so participants and staff have an opportunity to interact more effectively.

Interpretation of Findings Worksheet

Purpose of Evaluation: *Should we continue to offer the parenting series on health topics for families with less formal education?*
 (Copy from Purpose Statement)

Evaluation Questions (Copy from Evaluation Questions Checklist)	Expectations of the Program (Copy from Expectations Worksheet)	Findings (Copy from Data Analysis Worksheet)	Expectations Met?	Why? "Most plausible explanation is..."	Conclusion(s) "In summary..."
1. How many people participated in the program?	1a At least 10 or more people attend each session in both east and west. 1b Minimum of 250 registrants in 25 series.	1a All of the sessions in the east end had at least 10 people. In the west, only half the series had 10 people. 1b 310 participants in 25 series.	No Yes	The sessions in the east end are offered in conjunction with community resource centres. The support of an existing organisation is critical to validate the program and for advertising.	The Parenting Program is worthwhile, but there are some problems. 1. Recruitment to series in west is low and not getting the right mix of people.
2. How did participants find out about the program?	2a At least 50% were referred from community resource centres.	2a 60% of east end participants were referred by community resource centres compared to only 10% of other participants.	No	Broad advertising drew a variety of people. More selective advertising in east was more effective in recruiting target group.	2. Parents want more involvement in selecting topics and more time to discuss among themselves.
3. Did the program reach the intended target group?	3a At least 50% of participants' education is high school or less. 3b At least 95% have children 2 to 4 years old.	3a 50% of participants in the east had high school education or less; 20% in other areas. 3b 100% of parents had children 2 to 4 years old.	No Yes		3. Some staff need support to develop facilitation skills.
4. Were participants satisfied with the series?	4a At least 70% of all participants rate the series as excellent or good. 4b At least 70% of parents with high school education or less rate the series as excellent or good. 4c Some suggestions for improvements in length, location, topics and other areas. 4d At least 70% of all participants say they would recommend the series to a friend.	4a 80% of participants rated the series as excellent or good. 4b 85% of parents with high school education or less rated the sessions as good or excellent. 4c Suggestions for change included involving parents more in the choice of topics and more time for discussion. 4d 85% of participants said they would recommend it to a friend.	Yes Yes Yes	Topics were relevant and facilitators were effective. Staff were well-trained and built on their experience for successive sessions. Needs of parents vary and people feel more involved if they can select specific topics.	
5. Did participants think that their parenting skills improved?	5a At least 70% of participants think their parenting skills improved immediately after series and one month later.	5a 75% of parents thought that their parenting skills improved immediately after and one month later.	Yes		
6. Did participants think that their knowledge about parenting increased?	6a At least 70% of participants think their knowledge about parenting increased immediately after series and one month later.	6a 83% of participants thought that their knowledge about parenting increased immediately after and one month later.	Yes		
7. Did parents' communication skills improve?	7a At least 70% of parents improved their communication skills.	Method was not feasible (refer to Step 2d), therefore there are no findings.	-		
8. Did staff think they were well prepared to implement the activities?	8a All staff think they were well prepared to implement activities.	8a 7 of 8 staff thought they were well prepared.	No	Staff member had had little experience facilitating groups.	
9. What suggestions did staff have to improve the delivery of the program?	9a Suggestions from staff relate to topic, location, participants and other areas.	9a Suggestions: New staff — pair with experienced one Parents want more choice More time for discussion	Yes	See above	
10. Did staff implement activities as planned?	10a At least 75% of topics are discussed. 10b At least 30 min. of discussion on each topic covered. 10c At least 75% of all planned activities take place. 10d All resources that should be in fact distributed.	10a 80% of topics were discussed. 10b 100% of topics covered had at least 30 min. discussion. 10c 90% of planned activities took place. 10d All resources were distributed.	Yes	Program was well designed.	

Unexpected findings:

Open

Interpretation of Findings Worksheet

Internal Factors

Internal factors to the health unit can have either a positive or negative impact on the likelihood of your program meeting its expectation. Some questions to ask are:

- Was there a change in the allocation of staff or resources to the program?
- Was there a change in the priorities of the health unit?
- Was there a change in staff during the program?

External Factors

External factors can also have a positive or negative impact on your program. Some questions to ask are:

- Have community needs changed?
- Does the problem for which the program was developed still exist?
- Did new problems arise?
- Did any gaps in service surface which must compete for existing resources?
- Is another agency in the community now providing a similar program?
- Has new research become available on program effectiveness or efficiency?

Unexpected Findings

Sometimes through data collection efforts, you uncover something you didn't even think to ask about in the first place. Ask yourself, "Did I learn anything beyond the evaluation questions?" Review any "unexpected findings" that you identified in Step 4.

It would be best to discuss the findings with others involved in the program, especially staff, and ask them the same questions. See if their responses are similar to yours. Ask if they have other questions once they have reviewed the findings. Including others in the thinking process not only works on the "two heads are better than one" principle, but ensures that other stakeholders are given the opportunity to give input into the interpretation of the findings.

Now that you have considered the possible explanations of your findings and have honed in on the most *plausible* explanations, you are in a position to draw some conclusions about your program. Your conclusions are a summary of what you have learned about the existing program, both positive and negative. This is the "bottom line." In the Parenting Program example, the conclusion is that the program is worthwhile but there are some problems. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Overall, is the program worthwhile?
- What is working well?
- What problems have been identified?

Once you answer these questions, you can summarise them in the "Conclusions" column on the *Interpretation of Findings Worksheet*.

step 5

Making Decisions and Preparing an Action Plan

Now that you have interpreted your data and drawn some conclusions, you are ready to make decisions about your program. This section will help you think about what changes need to be made, if any, and how the changes should be implemented. Both are crucial in determining whether anything comes of your evaluation. The *Decisions and Action Plan Worksheet* will guide you through this section. Follow along the example *Worksheet* for the Parenting Program.

This is another good time to do some thinking with others involved in the program and the evaluation. Involve the senior managers, who will likely be responsible for ensuring that any changes to the program are implemented. They will be an excellent source of knowledge about what is reasonable and what is politically saleable. Including them will give proposals a better chance of being accepted and ultimately succeeding. It is also important to involve staff, who will be affected by these decisions. The involvement of people outside the health unit will depend on the program and the ramifications of the decisions about the program. There needs to be a balance between what is practical, in terms of time and resources, and the benefits of stakeholder participation.

The Decision-making Process

The first column of the *Decisions and Action Plan Worksheet* is “Decisions about Program.” Making decisions involves:

- identifying question(s);
- collecting, analysing and interpreting data;
- developing and analysing options; and
- selecting the preferred options.

Therefore, to complete this column of the *Worksheet* you need to go through each of the above steps. They are discussed in more detail below.

Identify Questions

Your decisions are based on the purpose of the evaluation and your conclusions. In the Parenting Program example, the purpose was to decide whether or not to continue to offer the program. The conclusion was that the program was worthwhile, but there are some problems with recruitment, parental involvement and staff facilitation skills.

Based on this conclusion, a number of questions arise.

- Should we continue to offer the program?
 - If yes:
 - How can recruitment be improved?
 - How can parental involvement be increased?
 - How can staff facilitation skills be improved?



Decisions and Action Plan Worksheet

Decisions about Program	Priority / Timeframe	Tasks	Responsibility	Resources Required	Assessing Change (Evaluation Questions)
1) Continue to offer program but only offer series with other community organisations	High — next 2 months	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Meet with CRC's in other parts of region and discuss joint presentation of sessions Arrange to do two sessions with interested partners 	Program manager	15 hours	<p>Should we continue to offer parenting sessions on health topics for low-income families?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many people participated in the program? How did people find out about the program? Was the target group reached? Were participants satisfied with the sessions?
2) Modify first session and offer choice of modules.	High — next month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change facilitator's manual to include options for discussion at first session. 	Program manager	1 hour staff time	
3) Expand discussion time	High — next month	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Change facilitator's manual to decrease organised time to allow more time for discussion. 	Staff delivering program	20 hours	
4)					
5)					

Collect, Analyse and Interpret Data

To answer these questions, think about the findings from the evaluation, considering once again any internal and external factors.

- Are they still factors?
- Will they continue to have an effect on your program?
- Are there new internal or external factors that you should consider?

Develop and Analyse Options

There is rarely only one answer to a problem. Consider a range of alternative options and present the pros and cons of each before choosing a course of action. Among the options to consider are:

- make small, inexpensive adjustments (list what they are);
- make large modifications, which may or may not have resource implications (list modifications);
- stop the program and do not replace it;
- stop the program and begin planning to develop a new one; or
- delay a decision about the program until it can be considered in the context of other programs through the strategic and operational planning cycle.

Select Preferred Options

There are several factors that influence the selection of the most appropriate option.

- Are additional resources needed to get the program to an acceptable level? Are they available?
- Is staff training needed? Is it available?
- Is resource development needed? Can it be done?
- Is a new approach needed? Does the program have the skills and resources to do this?

Select your preferred options according to importance and feasibility. Once you have decided which decisions are necessary, summarise them in the “Decisions about Program” column of the *Decisions and Action Plan Worksheet*.

The Priority of Decisions and Timeframe for Action

Indicate in the second column of the *Worksheet* the priority of the decision and the timeframe for implementing any changes required.

This is based on:

- the urgency of the need to correct the problem to improve the program;
- the magnitude of the change proposed; and
- the significance of the decisions on staff and resources.



The Action Plan

It is important that your decisions be supported by an action plan for their implementation. The remaining columns on the *Decisions and Action Plan Worksheet* help plan the process for implementing your decisions. In columns 3, 4 and 5 of the *Worksheet*, identify the tasks that need to be done to implement your decisions, who will be responsible for and/or carry out each task, and an estimate of the required resources.

Ongoing evaluation should be a major part of the revised program. In the “Assessing Change” column, establish a feedback process to monitor the implementation of the decisions and track how they affect the program. Some of the evaluation questions that you established in doing this evaluation would provide an excellent foundation. This step returns you to the beginning of the evaluation process (i.e., Step 1 — Focus the Evaluation) and closes the loop in the program evaluation cycle.

STEP 5 **c**

Reporting on your Evaluation

You have completed the evaluation of your program in a step-by-step fashion. Armed with your data, your analysis, your interpretation of the findings, your conclusions and most importantly your decisions and accompanying action plan for their implementation, you are ready to present your evaluation to the world!

A report of your evaluation is a critical but often ignored last step, because people are anxious to get on with the changes to the program. The report is a record of the evaluation that can be used by others: this includes other health units, the next evaluator of the program, and existing program stakeholders.

You may or may not need to prepare a *formal* written report depending on the purpose of your evaluation and the people who will use it. If you conducted the evaluation for internal needs, then the *Worksheets* that you completed during the course of the evaluation may be sufficient. **At a minimum, you must prepare a report that includes the program logic model, the *Worksheets* in Steps 2 and 5, and a copy of each data collection tool with its accompanying *Logistics Worksheet*. These should be kept in a central file and shared with program staff and the person to whom the manager reports.**

In many cases, you may be required to draft a formal report. The next section of this module suggests how to put one together and distribute it effectively.

Audience for the Report

If you do write a formal report of your evaluation, you must consider your target audience. You will need to relate the findings to their specific knowledge, experience and concerns, and use language familiar to them. Indeed, even before the evaluation started, it would have been useful to discuss and agree upon the distribution strategy with all stakeholders. While the evaluation was underway, interim updates would have helped to maintain stakeholders' interest and enthusiasm, and would have established an avenue for feedback on evaluation activities.

To accommodate your various audiences, you may need to create more than one version of a written report. Also consider other ways of presenting the material. In this way, you can highlight the issues of interest to different readers, or present them in another way audiences may find more useful. For the media, you may use an informal style and provide a general summary of the evaluation; for a conference presentation, the style needs to be more formal, and the report should include specialised and technical analysis and discussion.

You may decide to share all or part of the results with participants in the program. This could be a brief summary report of 1 to 3 pages. There are no specific rules as to whether you should do this. Consider cost, feasibility and the interest of the participants.

There are a number of other things to remember when preparing the various reports.

- *Be timely.* Produce the report within a reasonable time after the data collection.
- *Be specific.* Limit the content to what is really needed.
- *Be simple.* Keep the report free of jargon. Use simple examples. Use pictorial methods (graphs, tables, etc.) to describe and explain data. "A picture is worth a thousand words."

Dissemination

Before distributing your results, consider the audience you are trying to reach, respecting the wishes of both program funders and program personnel. For example:

- conduct verbal presentations for senior managers, program staff and/or program participants;
- use other avenues such as in-house newsletters to highlight key portions — or all of the report — for a wider audience; or
- assist related external agencies and organisations to distribute the report.

Consider providing an opportunity for feedback, questions or discussion.



Structure of a Formal Report

Executive Summary (if the report is longer than about 10 pages)

Include a brief description of the purpose of the evaluation, evaluation questions, methods, key findings, conclusions and decisions about the program. This should be about 1 to 3 pages long.

Introduction

In this section, introduce the background and purpose of your evaluation. Be very brief. Leave the details to the rest of the report.

Program Description

Write a brief description of your program. Include your program logic model from Step 1b.

Evaluation Questions

List the evaluation questions that were selected in Step 1d.

Methods

Briefly outline the methods you used for gathering the data (Step 2). You might include copies of the blank data collection tools in the report's appendix. If it was necessary to develop new tools for gathering your data or you modified existing tools, provide an outline of the steps taken (Step 3).

Findings

In this section, briefly describe what you found when the data was analysed (Step 4). The findings should be grouped under each evaluation question. Use tables and graphs to present the data clearly. The written text should not repeat everything in the tables but rather highlight key points.

Discussion and Conclusions

Select the key findings and briefly describe why they occurred (from Step 5a). The conclusions that you reached should be listed here.

Program Decisions

Summarise your decisions about the program and include an outline of your action plan for implementation.

Acknowledgments

In this section, acknowledge anyone who has provided data or helped you complete the evaluation. This could include a colleague whom you consulted, or someone who helped with the preparation and administration of the evaluation.

Appendix

Include data collection tools, consent forms, letters of support, etc. that you wish to document in the formal report.

Key Points

- ▲ Thinking is the most crucial element in interpreting the findings of your evaluation.
- ▲ Asking questions such as, “What are the patterns, what are the discrepancies?” and, “What internal and external factors exist?” will help you interpret your findings.
- ▲ Your interpretation of the data will help you draw conclusions about the program. These conclusions will shape your decisions.
- ▲ Your decisions should include what changes will be made and an action plan for their implementation. Both are crucial.
- ▲ It is vital that the evaluation of your program is well documented. The *Tool Kit Worksheets* completed during the course of the evaluation can serve this function.
- ▲ It may also be important that you create a written or verbal report. It should summarise the steps you took in the evaluation and take into account the audience for which it is intended.

Quiz Yourself

- ▲ How does interpreting the findings differ from analysing the data?
- ▲ What factors should be considered in both the interpretation of the findings and in making decisions about the program?
- ▲ When would it not be necessary to write a formal report on the evaluation? What must you do instead?
- ▲ At several different steps throughout the *Tool Kit*, the involvement of stakeholders is recommended. Why is this important?

References:

Baskerville B., Stewart P. *Program Evaluation Workshop Materials*. Ottawa-Carleton Health Department, 1991.

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