Family Life Education: The Practice of Family Science

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NATIONAL COUNCIL ON FAMILY RELATIONS
1201 West River Parkway, Suite 200
Minneapolis MN 55454

Toll-free: (888) 781-9331

Fax: (763) 781-9348

www.ncfr.org

info@ncfr.org

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Principles for Improving Family Programs: An Evidence-Informed Approach

Stephen Small and Mary Huser

In recent years there has been growing pressure for family life education programs, as well as prevention and promotion programs of all types, to demonstrate greater effectiveness and accountability. Funders, organizational boards, and elected officials want to be assured that their dollars and support are being invested in high-quality programs that produce results. Program administrators and staff want to demonstrate that their programs are the best they can be and that they are achieving their intended outcomes. These are commendable expectations but often unrealistic for most emerging programs. Unrealistic situations often occur when stakeholders and funders expect or require data on a program's impact soon after its initial implementation, before the program has had time to become established. Most programs—whether a simple parenting class or a sophisticated clinical prevention trial—need time to develop. Rarely is a program fully mature after only one or two iterations.

In order for a program to become effective, a cumulative and deliberate process of development, improvement, and refinement is required. Such a process involves a type of evaluation known as *formative*. Formative evaluation is typically used during a program's development to provide information about how best to revise and modify it for improvement. It can be contrasted with *summative* (or outcome) *evaluation*, which involves assessing a program at its conclusion to determine whether it was effective and whether it should be adopted, continued, or expanded (Weiss, 1998). Although evaluation is most often equated with summative evaluation and the assessment of program impacts, formative evaluation positions a program to be ready for summative evaluation, thus underscoring its importance. This is because formative evaluation increases the likelihood that a program will be well functioning and actually have significant impacts worth assessing.

In this chapter, we present a formative evaluation process that can be used with family-focused programs. This approach, which we call *Evidence-Informed Program Improvement* (EIPI; Small, Cooney, & O'Connor, 2009; Small & Huser, 2012), draws on recent science regarding what is known about effective youth and family programs. The EIPI model can provide family life educators and other family practitioners with a method that can be used to improve the quality and impact of new and existing youth and family programs. The approach is built on the current knowledge base of what makes evidence-based programs effective and draws on the work of a wide range of youth, family, and prevention scholars (e.g., Bond & Hauf, 2004; Borkowski, Akai, & Smith, 2006; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003; Nation et al., 2003; O'Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009; Small et al., 2009) as well as our own experiences working with youth and family programs.

We begin by describing the 13 principles of effective youth and family programs and briefly discussing how these principles are used in the EIPI process. Drawing on these principles, we pose some initial questions for program staff to consider in regard to their own programs. Finally, we discuss how this process of program improvement can be used by family life educators and the organizations they support. These 13 principles are organized into four categories, reflecting (a) program design and content, (b) program relevance, (c) program delivery and implementation, and (d) program assessment and quality assurance.

Throughout the chapter we use the analogy of constructing a building to illustrate the EIPI process. This is because developing an effective family life education program is like constructing a well-designed, functional building. Both have a clearly defined purpose, draw on the expertise of a wide range of individuals, need a well-designed plan, take into account best practices, and require regular feedback and communication so that the process is well coordinated and the staff can learn as they develop their project and refine their efforts. The chances that positive outcomes will be achieved are greatly increased if the developer understands how the construction process works and takes an active role in its implementation.

Principles of Effective Family Programs

Program Design and Content

Just as blueprints and building materials are critical to the construction process, so too are design and content to the development of family programs. This first category of principles is concerned with the program's goals, theory of action, and the scientific evidence that underlies it. You cannot create a building without knowing what purpose it will be serving and having a well-designed plan based on sound science and best practices.

Effective programs have clear goals and objectives. When constructing a family life education program, you need to know its purpose. If you are not clear about who the program is for, or what you hope to achieve as a result, it is difficult to design an intervention (or a building) that will meet the needs of its participants. Consequently, the first step in designing a program is having a clear understanding of its purpose or goals (Kettner, Moroney, & Martin, 2013). Although this may seem obvious, in our experience many family programs have only vaguely defined program goals and objectives—or, even more problematic, they have goals and objectives that are unrealistic or poorly aligned with the needs of the target audience. Sometimes this is a result of a funding source that requires certain objectives be addressed and, in the process of meeting these funder objectives, the needs of the participants get discounted or haphazardly integrated. Program goals can also change over time as program designers and staff gain a better understanding of the audience and how their needs and strengths evolve. In a well-designed program, staff and stakeholders agree on and have a mutual understanding of the goals and objectives that need to be achieved along the way if the intended results are to be realized.

Case example: *In our work with local organizations, it is not uncommon to be asked to recommend a program, any program, which can be used with a particular audience. What is often missing from this request is information about the purpose or goal that is sought. Our first response is usually to ask questions to clarify the purpose (e.g., who is the audience, and what are their needs? Is an educational program a realistic approach to meeting these needs? If the program were effective, what would success look like?). After working to clarify the purpose, we then explore possible strategies and programs with our partners that can help them reach their clarified and agreed-on goals.*

Effective programs are theory driven and research based (Bond & Hauf, 2004; Borkowski et al., 2006). Before you begin construction of a building or a program, you need to create a blueprint to serve as a plan; otherwise, there is no guarantee what you create will serve your purposes; have the appropriate elements; or fit together in a thoughtful, logical, and well-designed way. Effective programs are based on empirically supported theoretical models. They target risk and protective factors or assets that research shows are related to the program's targeted outcomes (Durlak, 2003; Sussman & Wills, 2001). In addition, an effective program's design and implementation are guided by a clear and logical program theory about how the program's activities are linked to one another and to the program's intended goals (Sussman & Sussman, 2001). Ideally, there is empirical evidence that such activities are effective in bringing about the desired changes.

Case example: *During a consultation with the advisory board of a juvenile delinquency program, we learned that much of the program was composed of unrelated sessions mainly determined by who in the community was willing to offer their time to teach. For example, one major program activity was nutrition education; another focused on financial management skills. Although nutrition education and financial management are important life skills, research has not found them to be significant factors linked to delinquency prevention. As we explored this with the group, it became clearer that focusing on more established factors linked to delinquency, such as peer refusal skills and school engagement, would likely result in a more effective program.*

Effective programs are of sufficient dosage and intensity (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008; Kumpfer & Alder, 2003). Dosage and program intensity can be measured in quantity of contact hours, duration of the total program, intensity and complexity of the program activities, and participants' level of engagement. In general, the more severe or entrenched the problem or issue being addressed, and the larger the change desired, the greater the dosage and intensity need to be (Borkowski et al., 2006). Like a building that is constructed in a high-risk area (e.g., a hurricane or flood zone area) and needs to have stronger materials and structural designs, programs that are targeting higher risk individuals and families also need to be specifically designed to meet more intensive needs. This may involve a greater number of sessions; longer, more in-depth classes; and smaller group sizes. In addition, many effective programs also include booster or follow-up sessions to help reinforce behaviors and knowledge that might have faded over time. What is crucial is that participants are exposed to enough of a program or intervention for it to have a significant effect.

Case example: *On several occasions when we have been asked to consult on an evaluation of a child maltreatment prevention program, we have discovered that the program consisted of little more than a single session or one-time media campaign. As part of our consultations, we worked with the program staff to generate ideas on how to bolster the dosage and intensity of their programs, such as increasing the number of face-to-face sessions or complementing media campaigns with other services. By increasing the intensity of their program efforts, the staff increased the likelihood that their future efforts would have a positive impact and thus be in a better position to conduct the summative evaluation they were requesting.*

Effective programs are comprehensive (Durlak, 2003; Kumpfer & Alvarado, 2003). To construct a quality building requires the use of many different materials and a variety of different tradespeople working together. Similarly, quality family programs usually target more than one setting or process in their design, or they partner with other programs that reach the same audience in different settings. This is because they recognize that learning and behavioral change are most likely to occur when individuals are exposed to a variety of settings and processes working together. For example, many effective child development programs have components involving both families and schools. Similarly, the most effective drug prevention programs address a range of risk and protective processes, resulting in a more synergistic effect.

Case example: *"Raising a Thinking Child" (Shure, 2000) is a parent education program that targets parents of 4- to 7-year-olds. It is an evidence-based program with good proof of effectiveness. Yet the most rigorous evaluation for the program shows that even stronger outcomes are possible when the school-based companion program is in place. This provides a 1-2 punch of reinforcement across both home and school. In our own work with the program we have tried to find ways to involve teachers and child care providers in order to complement our direct efforts with parents and create a synergy across settings.*

Effective programs use a variety of learning approaches (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2008; Caspe & Lopez, 2006). Construction crews work in a variety of ways while building a structure. Sometimes they rely on individual workers to independently complete a specific task using a written set of directions. Other times, they gather together to plan a team approach around a bigger task, and sometimes they need to practice a building technique in a test setting before using it on the actual building. Similarly, participants in family programs learn in many different ways, and programs that are able to appeal to the different ways people learn are better able to help them acquire new knowledge, develop new skills, and change unwanted behaviors.

Most people learn best when they are actively engaged and have opportunities to practice new skills. Programs that use active and varied teaching methods and keep participants interested tend to be most successful. Whether allowing parents to practice using a calm tone of voice while disciplining their children or role playing with youth how to refuse drugs when they are with their peers, effective programs engage participants in the topic and encourage them to practice and apply new behaviors, rather than just presenting information.

Case example: *Incarcerated parents are one of the newest audiences for our work around parenting and family strengthening. Jails and prisons have stringent rules about the materials that can be brought into correctional facility classrooms, sometimes forbidding anything beyond paper. This severely limits the types of educational strategies that can be used with learners and calls for more creative approaches. In addition, it is not uncommon for many inmates to have had negative school experiences in their youth, thus making them wary of any educational program. As we have worked to adapt programs to this environment, we have made an effort to limit the amount of traditional lecture and sought to find creative ways to build in other learning techniques. For example, educators have experimented with a variety of learning activities such as charades, role playing, and storytelling.*

Program Relevance

From skyscrapers and igloos, to log homes, pyramids, and pagodas, local architecture differs a great deal across cultures around the world. These differences are influenced by many factors, including religious and cultural preferences, weather trends, geographical features, and economic conditions. In general, the people who live in and use these structures find them appealing, comfortable, and functional because they are reflections of local religious, sociocultural norms and well adapted to economic and geographical conditions. Similarly, when family programs are tailored to reflect the sociocultural, religious, developmental, and personal characteristics of the targeted audience they are more likely attract and retain participants and result in broader success (O'Connor, Small, & Cooney, 2007).

Effective programs are developmentally appropriate (Nation et al., 2003; Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003). Buildings are designed for the intended occupants and reflect the attributes and characteristics of these users. Consider how unique and specific to the audience are a child care center, an office building, and a student dormitory. Similarly, effective programs are specifically tailored to particular ages or developmental stages. Rather than trying to address the widest possible group of individuals or families, they acknowledge the developmental differences that often characterize children and youth of even slightly different ages as well as the needs and interests of their parents. For instance, a parenting program that addresses a specific developmental stage will typically be more attractive, engaging, and beneficial to parents than a program that addresses parenting more generally.

Case example: *Age-paced programs and newsletters that target parents when they most need and desire information have been found to be particularly effective. For example, the University of Wisconsin—Extension's Parenting the First Year newsletter (University of Wisconsin—Extension, 2014) is a series of 12 age-paced newsletters delivered monthly to new parents. The content is timed to parallel a baby's typical development over the first year of life, making it highly relevant and useful to parents at exactly the time they need and desire such information.*

Effective programs reach people when they are ready to change (Durlak, 2003; Lowenkamp, 2004). Programs with the greatest impact tend to intervene when the targeted individuals are most receptive to change. This can mean reaching out to families or individuals as they go through a transition (e.g., birth of a first child, divorce or separation, transition to middle school) or when a

problem first becomes apparent (e.g., concerns from school staff about a child's behavior or a teen's first contact with law enforcement). In addition, effective programs are careful to confirm that participants are "program ready" so that they are able to take advantage of the resources, support, and learning activities that the program provides. Ensuring that participants are program ready might mean connecting people to other programs and resources to help them first meet more immediate needs such as safety, housing, or treatment for substance abuse or mental health issues.

Case example: *We were asked by a group of family educators to recommend an effective parenting curriculum to use with parents who had been referred by the court system or child welfare services as being possibly neglectful or abusive. After gaining a better understanding of the targeted population it became clearer that most of these parents were experiencing a variety of other challenges that were undermining their ability to parent effectively. For instance, some of these parents had mental health issues; others were struggling with drug-related problems. The group decided that without first addressing these deeper seated issues, it would not be productive to provide only parent education. As a result, community-wide initiatives to promote child well-being and safety and build capacity for parents were launched.*

Effective programs are socioculturally relevant (Kumpfer, Magalhaes, & Xie, 2012). What does it mean to feel "at home"? Families are likely to feel at home in a building that reflects their personalities, values, and lifestyles. As such, families are more likely to feel comfortable and ready to learn in programs that reflect their culture. A family's culture is not limited to only their racial and ethnic background; it also includes their socioeconomic status or class; whether they live in an urban, suburban, or rural community; their religious traditions and beliefs; their level of education; and, for recent immigrant families, length of residency in the United States.

The simple act of striving to meet cultural norms shows respect for a group's culture and makes it more likely that a program will be accepted. This is because it creates a more welcoming environment where participants feel comfortable and to which they will be more likely to return. A comfortable and welcoming setting also leads to greater participation and ongoing engagement in the program, increasing the chances that a program will have a positive impact (Small et al., 2009). In addition, cultural adaptations that go beyond surface changes can address deeper issues and processes that may be unique to particular racial/ethnic groups (Castro, Barrera, & Martinez, 2004). For instance, some cultural groups may use parenting practices that are considered maladaptive from the dominant culture's perspective. Sensitively addressing this issue would be an important element to include in a program directed at such an audience. One strategy for doing this is to involve consultants from the targeted community in the design of the program and in the recruitment of participants. At the very least, enlisting members of the targeted cultural group to review the appropriateness of program materials, activities, and marketing strategies can increase the chances that the program will be well received.

Case example: *Several years ago, we received a grant to provide an evidence-based program to strengthen families with early adolescent children. The targeted audience was Hmong families who had unique language and cultural issues. The evidence-based program to be implemented had never been used with Hmong families. Consequently, we worked closely with leaders and individuals in the Hmong community to tailor the program to their culture by adding and adapting the program in a number of ways. As part of the process, we included the program authors. This resulted in an evidence-based program that still adhered to its core components but reflected the nuances, traditions, and practices of the Hmong participants.*

Program Delivery

Whether building a house or delivering a family program, perhaps the most important factor contributing to success is how well each is implemented. If the construction crew or program staff are inexperienced, poorly trained, or unprepared, the chances of success are greatly reduced. Similarly, the effectiveness of most programs depends a great deal on having high-quality, well-trained staff who possess the right tools, skills and knowledge, and know-how to work with one another and with their clients.

Effective programs foster good relationships (Small & Huser, 2012). Behavior change most often happens in the context of positive, supportive relationships in which individuals feel safe and trust one another (Kohlenberg, Kanter, Bolling, Parker, & Tsai, 2002). Effective programs are structured to foster trusting relationships over time among participants, staff, and volunteers. Thoughtful program planning recognizes that trusting relationships can take time to develop. For example, activities that require participants to reveal personal information to staff or each other should be saved for later in the program after there has been time for trusting and supportive relationships to develop.

Case example: *During an observation of a family program, we were stunned when the first session began with the facilitator asking each participant to introduce themselves by saying something that they've never before told anyone else! One of our recommendations after that session was to find a different, nonthreatening, and trust-building icebreaker.*

Effective programs are delivered by well-trained and committed staff (Mihalic, Fagan, Irwin, Ballard, & Elliot, 2004). Most of us would be reluctant to hire inexperienced and indifferent contractors to build our home. Likewise, family programs are more likely to be effective if the staff (and volunteers) are motivated, experienced, and well trained. Staff effectiveness is often dependent on adequate training; good supervision; and support and recognition from managers, boards, and administrators. Quality

programs provide regular opportunities for staff, volunteers, and stakeholders to discuss and reflect on the program (e.g., what is working and what is not) as well as the emerging needs of the participants. There are also opportunities for supervisors to provide constructive feedback. In addition, many successful programs have what is referred to as a *program champion*, who is enthusiastic about the program and possesses enough organizational power to influence decisions and allocate resources.

In addition, program staff should feel comfortable working with the targeted cultural group and have a good understanding of their cultural traditions (O'Connor et al., 2007). Although it can be beneficial to have program staff who are members of the cultural group with whom they are working, this is not always feasible.

Case example: *Home visitor programs for at-risk mothers have been found to be most effective when they use well-trained professionals such as nurses (Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Other home visiting programs that use paraprofessionals or volunteers have not been found to be as effective. The biggest differences between these approaches appear to be in the quality of training and the follow-up supervision and reflection that are a regular part of the professionally staffed programs.*

Program Assessment and Quality Assurance

When constructing a new building, regular monitoring of each step is critical. Good builders do not just rely on a mandated inspection when the building is completed; they perform quality checks throughout the process. Similarly, when it comes to family life education programs, evaluation should be an ongoing activity that occurs throughout all phases of the program's design and implementation. Evaluation is an important activity for learning about how well a program is doing and for developing ways to improve it. Evaluation is most often equated with measuring program impacts on participants, but it also includes identifying problem areas and needs, understanding program processes, tracking implementation, and guiding program improvement. In order for a program to be considered evidence based it will eventually need to undergo a rigorous impact evaluation with some form of comparison or control group. However, before undertaking such a time- and resource-intensive evaluation, it is important that significant effort has been spent assessing and improving the program's functioning so that it is worthy of a summative evaluation.

Effective programs evaluate at the right time using the right tools. Programs, like buildings, go through various phases of development. At the beginning they are only a faint idea in need of a plan. But over time they evolve into a finished product that can have a significant impact on the people who participate in them. At each phase in a program's development—from initial conceptualization to bringing a program to scale through widespread dissemination—different evaluation strategies are appropriate. This approach to evaluation is well described in Jacobs's (1988; Jacobs, Kapuscik, Williams, & Kates, 2000) Five-Tiered Approach to program evaluation (see Table 25.1). In the implementation phase of a program (Tier 1), before the program has even been developed, evaluation might take the form of a needs assessment to document conditions and needs and help identify potential audiences and program goals. After a program has been launched (Tier 2), evaluation might focus on documenting who is participating and which parts of the program are most often used. In the program clarification phase (Tier 3), information is typically gathered on program implementation and how well the program is aligned with current research and principles of effective practice. This information can be used to improve and refine the program's design. As the program moves toward maturity (Tier 4), short-term outcomes, such as knowledge gain or simple behavior changes, might be assessed. Once the program is well established and appears to be well functioning (Tier 5), a rigorous, summative evaluation, using a control or comparison group and assessing long-term behavioral impacts, may be appropriate. We propose a sixth tier (not discussed in Jacobs's [1988] original model) after a program has had a long history of documented effectiveness. In this phase of evaluation, dissemination strategies (e.g., approaches for bringing the program to broader audiences) might be evaluated as well as the potential economic benefits of the program (e.g., cost–benefit or cost effectiveness analyses).

Case example: *Over the past 6 years, one of our colleagues has built a major educational initiative around family support and reentry for inmates and their families. A major piece of this project is a 16-week fatherhood program. Her work on this initiative began with a careful assessment that supported the need for such a program and a thorough search for and selection of a research-based curriculum that fit the audience and goals. Over several years, as she implemented the program, she monitored the participation levels of learners, documented the program activities that were most effective, and explored ways to improve the delivery of the program. In addition, she used post-program surveys and follow-up interviews with participants to better understand their experiences so that she could continue to refine the program. Using evaluation strategies that were well matched to the stage of the program has resulted in a well-functioning, mature program that is now ready for a more intensive summative or impact evaluation.*

Effective programs are well documented and implemented with fidelity (Small et al., 2009). The process of constructing a new building or a new family program requires that there is a plan that has been clearly documented so that staff can follow it. Documentation of what happens in a program is key to demonstrating and maintaining its effectiveness. When working with a locally developed program it is important to document details about the program so that it will be consistent from one session to the next and so that others can replicate it as closely as possible. To successfully implement the program, staff need to know what the program is designed to accomplish and the details of the program's components. In addition, when implementing a program that has shown promising results in the past, it is important to track how well implementation matches the original program design (i.e., program fidelity).

Table 25.1. Jacobs's (1988) Five-Tiered Approach to Evaluation

Evaluation tiers	Purpose	Evaluation tasks
Tier 1: **Pre-Implementation**	• Document program need and guide program design • Establish baseline status on key indicators • Describe program vision, mission, objectives, and goals • Develop a theory of change to map out program strategies and resources needed	• Gather information to document and pinpoint needs and problems • Develop goals and objectives • Identify key audiences • Gain funding, garner community support • Identify indicators of change that are of interest to various stakeholders and a baseline against which later progress can be measured
Tier 2: **Accountability**	• Better understand how program is being used by target audience • Justify current expenditures • Build a constituency • Aid program planning and decision-making	• Assess program utilization rates and describe characteristics of the participants • Document services provided, costs, and scope of program • Examine whether targeted audiences are being reached • Begin building organizational capacity for self-assessment and learning
Tier 3: **Program Clarification**	• Improve and refine the program • Examine and modify (if necessary) the theory of change and the short-term indicators	• Assess participant satisfaction, perceptions of program, and whether their needs are being met • Reexamine program theory and logic model • Gather information on the program process and how well the program is being implemented • Compare program with standards, best practices and expectations • Conduct an EIPI process • Promote a culture of learning among staff
Tier 4: **Progress Towards Objectives**	• Assess short-term program outcomes on participants, staff, and others • Modify the theory of change, if necessary • Provide feedback about the program's initial impacts on both internal (e.g., staff, board) and external stakeholders (e.g., funders, community leaders)	• Examine progress on short-term outcomes like knowledge gain, attitude change (intentions), and simple behavior changes • Assess differential effectiveness among individual participants • Assess community views and awareness of program
Tier 5: **Program Impact**	• Document long-term behavioral impacts on participants and others, and build accountability • Examine evidence of differential effectiveness • Contribute to knowledge development in the field • Identify program models worthy of broader replication and dissemination	• Develop comparison standards such as a control or comparison group • Develop a design that can show long-term change (usually longitudinal) • Identify specific impact outcomes to be assessed
Tier 6: **Program Dissemination**[a]	• Understand the long-term economic benefits or cost savings of the program • Develop and improve strategies to effectively disseminate the program more widely (i.e., bring the program to scale) • Expand and adapt the program to new audiences (e.g., new racial/ethnic groups)	• Conduct a cost–benefit or cost-effectiveness analyses • Evaluate and improve the effectiveness of dissemination strategies • Conduct "effectiveness" trials to see how well the program performs under real-life conditions • Evaluate the adapted program with new audiences

Note. EIPI = Evidence-Informed Program Improvement.

[a]This tier was added by the current chapter authors and is not included in Jacobs's (1988) original model.

Case example: *On several occasions when we have been asked to consult on an evaluation of a grassroots program, we have discovered that the program staff had no written documentation of what actually constituted the program. Different people were unknowingly implementing different variations of the intended program. In some cases, the program had existed only in the head of the individual implementing it. If this person had left the organization, there would have been no record of the program, and it would no longer exist. When this has occurred, our first action was to work with the staff to document the program, including its goals, objectives, activities, implementation plan, and the theory of change that guided it. This process often became an opportunity for staff to learn more about what they were actually trying to do and to explore ways to improve their efforts.*

Effective programs focus on evaluation and refinement (Nation et al., 2003). When constructing a new building or renovating an old one, it is generally expected that there will be unforeseen problems that will arise and require modification of the plan. Few plans work perfectly, and most contractors build in extra time and money in anticipation of changes that will need to be made. The same holds true for most new programs. Evaluation is the primary tool for learning about how well a program is doing and developing ways to improve it. The EIPI process we have described in this chapter is an especially useful evaluation tool for learning about the strengths and weaknesses of a new or existing program and developing a strategy for how the program can be improved. In the next section, we provide some suggestions for how family life educators and other youth and family program staff might implement this formative evaluation process.

Case example: *After a few consultations with us, an advisory board from a local prevention program was enthusiastic to move ahead with a careful analysis of their program. We designed a rating form (see the Key Resources noted at the end of this chapter) to serve as a guide for the board members to assess the status of their program specific to the EIPI principles of effective programs. The form provided the group with a simple, direct method to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their program. The process made apparent specific actions that would improve the program and secured a consensus from the group on how to proceed.*

Using the Evidence-Informed Program Improvement Process to Improve Your Program

Putting into practice the EIPI process described in this chapter requires time and resources. Although it can be done by an individual, the process works better when a team of stakeholders committed to improving the program of interest is involved. The group might include staff responsible for developing, delivering, and administering the program, past program participants, volunteers, board members, funders, and community and university colleagues with expertise in the program's content area.

An EIPI program assessment manual, as well as related resources and tools for conducting an EIPI assessment, can be found online at http://whatworks.uwex.edu. We have found that having other materials available can also be helpful. These include the program's implementation manual, curriculum, handouts and presentation notes, and any kind of existing evaluation data. We always ask for a copy of the program's logic model. Also important is any research-based information on risk and protective factors, assets, and best practices related to the particular goals of the program. We have developed a list of questions in (see Table 25.2) that can be used to guide a critical and informed analysis of how well your program meets each of these principles and to facilitate further discussion with other program stakeholders.

Table 25.2. Guiding Questions for Effective Programs

Effective Programs Have Clear Goals and Objectives	• Can you articulate your program's goals and objectives? • Do your staff and stakeholders have a common understanding of what they are? • Are they consistent with the needs of your targeted audience? • What are the objectives that need to be addressed if the broader program goals are to be achieved?
Effective Programs Are Theory Driven and Research Based	• What is the logic to your program and the activities that comprise it? • What is the program theory guiding the program and its activities? • Is it plausible? Is there research to support the program theory? • Which risk and protective factors and/or assets does your program target?
Effective Programs Are of Sufficient Dosage and Intensity	• How does your program dosage and intensity compare to that of similar evidence-based programs? • Are the number of hours and sessions sufficient for the outcomes you aim to achieve? • Does your program include any booster sessions or other ongoing contact with participants to help them maintain changes in their behavior after the program has ended?

Effective Programs Are Comprehensive	• Does your program address a sufficient variety and number of processes, people, and/or settings that research identifies as important for bringing about desired changes? • What additional processes, people, or settings could be targeted to strengthen the program?
Effective Programs Take Into Account the Different Ways People Learn	• Does your program require more active than passive participation? • What opportunities are there for participants to practice new skills and behaviors and apply them to their own situations?
Effective Programs Are Developmentally Appropriate	• Does your program target risk and protective factors or assets that are relevant for the participants' ages and developmental stages? • Is the age range of your audience so broad that the program's content is not relevant for all participants? • Does participant recruitment focus on those individuals for whom the program is most appropriate?
Effective Programs Reach People When They Are Ready to Change	• Do you have a method for assessing whether an individual or family is ready for your program? • What events or transitions can you identify that might motivate youth or families to participate in your program? • Do you connect participants with other local services that can help them meet immediate needs or overcome obstacles to learning?
Effective Programs Are Socio-culturally Relevant	• Are the staff and volunteers of your program comfortable working with the targeted population and familiar with and respectful of their culture(s)? • How are your program activities and materials consistent with the traditions of participants? • Have representatives from the targeted cultural group reviewed the program materials and approaches for appropriateness?
Effective Programs Foster Good Relationships	• How supportive, safe, and comfortable do program participants feel while participating in your program? How do you know? • Are staff and volunteers respectful of participants and each other? • How are positive relationships among participants, volunteers, and staff fostered?
Effective Programs Are Delivered by Well Trained and Committed Staff	• Are staff members and volunteers given adequate training before implementing or becoming involved in your program? • Do staff members and/or volunteers regularly meet to discuss and reflect on the program? • Is there a high rate of turnover among staff or volunteers? If so, what's the reason? • Do staff and volunteers regularly receive guidance and feedback from supervisors?
Effective Programs Evaluate at the Right Time Using the Right Tools	• Are outcomes being assessed after formative evaluation refinements are incorporated? • Does your evaluation match your program's stage of development? • Do current evaluation approaches build on prior evaluation? • How are you able to satisfy stakeholders' demand for evaluation evidence while improving your program to be summative evaluation-ready?
Effective Programs are Well Documented and Implemented With Fidelity	• Is your program adequately documented so that others could implement or replicate it? • Do program staff and volunteers know what the program is supposed to accomplish and what each session or component involves? • How well do those facilitating the program understand the program and adhere to the program's design?
Effective Programs Focus on Evaluation and Refinement	• Have you carefully assessed the alignment of your program with the principles of effective programs? • What processes are in place to monitor how well your program is being implemented? • What evidence do you have that your program actually achieves its intended outcomes? • What is the quality of this evidence? Are you collecting the information that key stakeholders want to know?

Carrying out the EIPI process over a series of meetings is usually most effective because it provides time to gather new information as needed and to reflect on what you are learning. Another strategy is to divide the group into smaller work teams, each taking the lead for one category of principles and sharing their findings and insights with the rest of the group.

Those involved in the process may have different perceptions of what goes on in the program, including its strengths and weaknesses. Differing opinions should be taken into consideration and respected. Sometimes, gathering additional information or perspectives can bring further clarity and help resolve disagreements or misunderstandings. The EIPI process can be completed without outside assistance but can benefit by involving an external facilitator or consultant who can provide objectivity to the process, something that often evades those who have been working closely with the program. In addition, an experienced consultant can contribute expertise about program design, improvement, and evaluation as well as knowledge about the content area of the program.

The Politics of Program Improvement

We are well aware that real-world realities and pressures can make carrying out an EIPI formative evaluation process challenging. Funders, elected officials, administrators, and staff are facing their own pressures to show results. How can we balance the demand to show results with the careful and deliberate program planning and formative evaluation necessary to build a program that will be well functioning and actually have significant impacts worth assessing down the road? Below we offer a few ideas on how to communicate the importance of engaging in such a process:

- Find ways to communicate with your stakeholders the importance of building a strong program. Draw on analogies or metaphors (e.g., constructing a building) that illustrate these concepts in a simple, succinct way. Use examples that will resonate with your stakeholders and continually reinforce how critical the building stage is. Find multiple ways to educate key individuals and groups, for example, through newsletters, individual conversations, group reports, and so on. We view this as part of our educator role in working with family programs. Our "learners" reach beyond youth and families to the policymakers and decision makers who have an influence over whether and how our work is supported.
- Consider how anecdotal stories might be used to provide feedback to interested (and impatient) stakeholders. Anecdotes should not be substituted for program impacts, but in the meantime they may be a way to share opinions and comments from participants, partners, and staff. For some stakeholder groups (e.g., elected officials), stories from constituents hold great influence.
- Develop a logic model, program theory, or other visual piece that illustrates your program's design and development. Use this over and over in meetings, presentations, and reports to continuously reinforce the journey of program development and evaluation and the necessary pieces leading up to impact evaluation.

Conclusion

If we want our family life education programs to achieve their goals and provide the types of results that will truly benefit the participants, we must commit the time and effort required to "build" successful programs. Rather than succumb to misplaced pressure to show instant results, it is important that we build in the time for formative evaluation and create learning opportunities so that we can continuously improve our work. This should not be used as an excuse for failing to show positive results; instead, it justifies deliberate and careful program development that leads to informed decision-making about a program's future. Nothing comes easy, and it is only through such ongoing improvement and refinement that our programs will become ones of which we are truly proud and that, most important, create positive changes for youth and families.

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Key resources related to this chapter can be found at
http://www.ncfr.org/fle-practice-family-science

Discussion Questions
1. What is the difference between formative and summative (or outcome) evaluation? Why is it important to conduct formative evaluation before undertaking a summative evaluation?
2. Select one principle from each of the four categories of effective programs, describe the principle, and discuss how it contributes to program success.
3. Think about a program that you are familiar with. Which of the 13 EIPI principles do you think this program does well? Which do you think it could improve upon?

About the Authors
Stephen Small, PhD, is a Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Wisconsin—Madison and a Human Development & Family Relations Specialist at the University of Wisconsin—Extension, Cooperative Extension, Madison. His work spans both research and its practical application and focuses on adolescent and adult development, parenting, program design and evaluation, and the role of wisdom in professional practice. E-mail: sasmall@wisc.edu.

Mary Huser, MS, is a Senior Lecturer with Family Living Programs, University of Wisconsin—Extension, Cooperative Extension, Madison. As a state specialist and liaison, she provides program development and evaluation support to county faculty and staff. Her areas of content priority include family-focused evidence-based programs and principles, family support for audiences affiliated with the correctional system, digital parenting, and early parenting to develop children's critical thinking skills. E-mail: mary.huser@ces.uwex.edu.