

# Condensed Version of Guide to Local Evaluation Even Start Family Literacy Programs

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Coordinators of several Ohio Even Start programs highly recommended this RMC Research paper on local evaluation which they received at a national Even Start meeting. A summary follows. This is a draft version of the article. The full article can be obtained from RMC Research Corporation, 1000 Market Street, Portsmouth, NH 03801.

## RMC Research

To comply with local and national annual evaluation requirements, each Even Start Program should:

- track progress of families' short and long term outcomes
- report progress on and attainment of objectives set forth in grant document
- analytically review program operations and participants' progress in order to improve outcomes and objectives
- comply with national evaluation reporting requirements

- evaluation is about learning
- local evaluations should be as comprehensive as possible
- local evaluation is generally in addition to national evaluation
- evaluation allows for reflection and assessment of the program
- evaluation is developmental
- usefulness of evaluations depends on having a strong, coherent program theory
- effective evaluations require the input of all key participants
- partnership of different perspectives is valued
- local evaluations are designed to encourage program improvement

- Identify goals/expected long term outcomes of program
  - needs to be measurable
- Identify program assumptions
  - basic beliefs and understandings
- Identify basic components to reach program goals
  - strategies to be used
- Describe how components work together
  - processes and effects of strategies

*Key Assumptions about Evaluation*

*Evaluation Components*

## Condensed Version of Guide to Local Evaluation

### Even Start Family Literacy Programs

- Describe how components link to the program purpose
- Evaluate effectiveness
  - Two types of evaluation
    1. outcome/summative/impact  
Respond to questions about effectiveness of program in general or a specific activity or strategy (did the program/strategy/activity cause the anticipated outcome)
    2. process/formative/implementation  
Respond to evaluation questions about program activities (what services are provided, who receives such services, how are the services provided, and what is the extent of delivery and intervention received by participants)
- Determining which evaluation to use
  - Factors involved in the decision:
    1. resources available
    2. time limitations
    3. developmental stage of your program  
Younger programs need to use process evaluation, established programs focus on outcome evaluation.
- Brainstorm from generic questions such as:
  - About program implementation:
    - What services are provided?
    - How are services provided, what strategies are used?
    - Who is receiving services?
    - Has the program reached intended audience?
    - Are services being implemented as planned?
    - Do services reflect the unique needs of clients?
    - What is our vision?
  - About overall program effects:
    - Do families stay in the programs long enough to reach their goals?
    - What is the role of this program in the larger community system?
    - What difference has program made for individuals, families and community?
    - Is the program achieving the effects we want?
    - Is this a good use of resources?
    - What additional outcomes resulted?

*Generating  
Evaluation  
Questions*

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- To break down larger questions, think about specific questions you, and others, may want answered (ask for and listen to different points of view)
- Remember that certain evaluation questions are more appropriate than others depending on the program's developmental stage or the strategies being used
  - young programs begin with questions documenting operations
  - older programs use in-depth questions about program processes and results
- Extent to which information gained through evaluation can be used is based on:
  - how well the evaluation question is refined
  - whether the program director and/or staff are in a position to implement decisions based on the findings
  
- Defining Priorities for an Independent Evaluator
  - define the program's evaluation priorities
  - identify which tasks are best completed by an independent evaluator versus other program staff
  - usually those areas where an outside perspective would be the most helpful and/or credible in the improvement of the program
- Staff should come to an agreement about their expectations of the evaluator's degree of involvement with the program
  - level of involvement depends on:
    1. Time available from the evaluator
    2. Financial resources available for the evaluation
    3. Evaluation expertise that exists in program staff
  - the following questions help determine relationship expectations
    1. Will the evaluator act as a consultant to the program for evaluation matters, i.e., preparing an evaluation design, or will the evaluator be responsible for all aspects of the evaluation, including all data collection and reporting?
    2. What are the program's expectations for evaluator involvement and visibility in ongoing activities (staff meetings, meetings with collaborators, etc.)?
    3. How much contact with program activities, participants, and staff will the evaluator need in order to understand the program?
- Caution against selecting evaluators on the basis of content expertise if they lack evaluation experience
- When estimating cost of the evaluator, remember to consider the expectations the program staff have for involvement (meetings, etc.)

*Selecting and  
Working with an  
Evaluator*

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- Suggestions to keep cost of evaluation within limited budgets:
  1. Limit the amount of logistics work required of the evaluator
  2. Share data collection and reporting tasks among staff and evaluator and concentrate evaluator expertise on design, analysis, and interpretation
  3. Use data collection methods that are less labor intensive to implement and analyze
  4. Focus on a few evaluation questions for in-depth work by outside evaluator each year rather than expecting "full" evaluation coverage of all parts of the program
  5. Use the evaluator for evaluation tasks rather than general support of the program
- Description of desired priority evaluation services should include:
  1. A brief description of the Even Start program and its scope
  2. A statement of the purposes of the independent evaluation
  3. An indication of the level of involvement of the evaluator
  4. An estimate of level of effort in terms of days or dollars per time period
  5. Special features (preferred approaches, requirements, and/or opportunities)
  6. Expected mode of response
  7. Contact information for the project
- Even Start evaluators can be located through the following local sources:
  1. College and university departments that are related to Even Start services
  2. State agencies (Even Start coordinator, department of education, etc.)
  3. Regional or state affiliates of related professional organizations
  4. Other Even Start of family literacy programs that are willing to share info
  5. Collaborators who may have employed evaluators
- Ask prospective evaluators for:
  - resume
  - summary of related experiences
  - references
  - work sample (examples of instruments developed by evaluator on similar projects or evaluation reports prepared by the evaluator)
- Look for:
  - background in family literacy
  - training in evaluation and measurement
  - practical experience in working with similar programs
  - evidence that evaluator has experience with populations like those you serve

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### Even Start Family Literacy Programs

- familiarity with state and federal Even Start program and evaluation requirements
- good listening skills
- flexibility of schedule
- willingness to work alongside program staff to make adaptations of plans
- cultural sensitivity
- Elements of an Agreement Letter
  1. Summary of evaluation priorities and tasks the evaluator has agreed to fulfill
  2. Time line for completion of tasks and deliverables
  3. List of expected products that the evaluator will provide (instruments, etc.)
  4. Summary of what the program will provide to evaluator to facilitate his/her work
  5. Mutual understandings about confidentiality of records and reports
  6. Mutual understandings about ownership of information
  7. Procedures for handling disputes
  8. Contact persons
  9. Billing procedures and schedule of payments
  10. The process for amending the contract
- Orientation to the program should include:
  1. Meeting members of the staff
  2. Sampling typical program activities and collaborative arrangements
  3. In-depth discussion of program features and issues with key staff
  4. Sharing of all *types* of materials and records including
    - program proposal
    - types of records kept on families
    - self-studies the program has carried out
    - monitoring reports
    - results of any previous evaluations
    - information about national and state requirements
- Refined evaluation plan developed with evaluator should include:
  1. Statement of purposes served by the evaluation
  2. Evaluation questions
  3. Sources of information and samples
  4. Instrumentation and measurement procedures
  5. Approximate time line for data collection and availability of findings
  6. Responsible parties