OPA EVALUATION TA

What is formative evaluation? Tip Sheet

Formative evaluation is an approach to evaluation that can help you understand and improve the features of a program[1] you are using, or improve the way you implement it.

Formative evaluations help implementing organizations, evaluators, funders, and developers answer specific questions in the early stages of a program's implementation. Some examples:

- Do the host organizations, youth, parents, and community like the program?

- Can you implement the program the way it is supposed to be implemented—including the content you will deliver, where, to whom, and for how long?

- How does the local context (service population, host organizations, and local community) influence program implementation?

- Do you need to make any changes to the program's structure, timeline, or content?

You can also use a formative evaluation to collect early data from participants and explore whether the program is going to lead to the desired outcomes. For example, early changes in the intentions of youth or increased comfort with discussions on sexual health between youth and parents could suggest the program's design is a promising one and may be ready for scale-up.

Formative evaluation is different from a summative evaluation (which could include or be an impact evaluation) because you use it to develop or refine a program so the program achieves its goals. A summative evaluation, in contrast, helps you understand whether the program did achieve its goals. You might conduct a formative evaluation on a new program, when you are changing an existing program, or when you offer an existing program in a new type of environment. You might also conduct a formative evaluation if the kind of staff delivering the program will be different than the ones suggested by the model. For example, you might use youth as co-leaders instead of using adult facilitators. Finally, a formative evaluation may help you realize changes you should make to improve a program's fit or feasibility for a community, population, or setting.

You can use a variety of evaluation types for both formative and summative evaluation.[2] For instance, you can conduct an implementation evaluation when your focus is either formative or summative. For details on the difference between formative and summative evaluations, refer to Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1. Overview of formative and summative evaluations

	Formative evaluation	Summative evaluation
State of program	Takes place during development of program	Takes place once a program or model or component is stable and clearly specified, with no changes planned
Learning focus	Whether the program is the right fit Whether the program can be offered as intended Whether any changes to the program are needed Whether there is reason to believe the desired outcomes will change	Whether the program has the desired impacts on outcomes How the program achieves the desired impacts
Number of groups	Might include a comparison group, but not necessary	Must include at least one comparison group

What can I learn from formative evaluation?

Before conducting a formative evaluation, figure out what you want to learn, and ensure the evaluation type you choose can help you learn it. Formative evaluations can help you understand:

- Whether you need to modify a program to fit the context, population needs, host organization's programming, or community norms

- Whether there is support for a particular program for a specific population in a particular community or host organization

- Whether the assumptions in your logic model are correct—that is, whether the linkages between inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes resemble what you expected

What is a Logic Model?

A logic model is a graphical depiction of a program. It illustrates what a program will do and what you expect to happen as a result. You can use it as a programming tool to help stakeholders and staff understand the program. You can use it in a continuous quality improvement process to identify elements you will monitor. Finally, you can use it as an evaluation tool that illuminates research questions of interest, identifies what to measure and when, and highlights contextual factors you might need to capture.

What questions can a formative evaluation answer?

You may choose formative evaluation to support your program implementation or to assess how ready the program is for the next step in building evidence on its effectiveness. Sample questions are in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2. Sample research questions by purpose of formative evaluation

To support program implementation, ask:	To assess readiness for the next step in building evidence, ask:

• Is implementation going according to plan?
  - Does the program function the way you expected it to?
  - Do parts of your program support or undermine each other or the program's goals?
• What factors facilitate or impede implementation?
  - What is helping the program work?
  - What is preventing the program from working well?
• Do you need to refine the logic model or the program components?
  - Did you encounter anything unexpected during implementation?
  - Was your logic model based on faulty assumptions?
  - What needs to change to align your program as it is with the program you envisioned? Are those changes possible?
	• Will your data collection procedures produce the information you need to answer your questions?
	  - Would more data, or different sources of data, better answer your questions?
	• Do the intended participant populations enroll and complete the program?
	• Can the program be offered the way it's currently designed?
	• Are outputs—such as number of sessions provided or activities completed—accomplished with the resources as they were planned to be?
	• Do outcomes—such as a change in knowledge or intent— suggest the desired changes for participants as a result of the program?
	• What do you need to convince partners (for example, host organizations, staff, funders) to continue to support the program?

What data will I need to collect and analyze in my formative evaluation?

Not all data come from surveys or interviews. You may already be collecting data you can use in formative evaluation. Talking with staff or youth after a session to learn what worked (or didn't) produces data for a formative evaluation. And if you do human-centered design activities like Rose, Bud, Thorn[3]—or use virtual polls as part of a debrief—you can use the resulting data for the formative evaluation.

Different sources of data might help you answer certain questions better than others. You can use quantitative data from surveys, attendance records, training records, or other administrative records to understand whether the program is meeting milestones and functioning as intended. Qualitative data from observations, focus groups, and interviews can document the experiences of staff and participants, identify why and how things are (or are not) working, and provide context for quantitative findings.

When should I conduct a formative evaluation?

✓ When you are implementing a new program

✓ When you are updating an existing program or including a new service or population

✓ When working with new partners who are unfamiliar with the program

When should I NOT conduct a formative evaluation?

X When you are unwilling (or unable) to change a program or process

X When using a well-established program with no changes planned to the program, target population, or setting

X When you need evidence of a change in outcomes to support the use of the program by funders or policymakers (and the evidence can only be produced by a summative evaluation)

> **How does a formative evaluation differ from an evaluation that would meet the standards of the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Evidence Review (TPPER)?**
>
> TPPER only reviews summative evaluations:
>
> - With at least two groups
> - Focused on existing programs that are well defined and not subject to deliberate change in implementation
> - Reporting particular behavioral outcomes that may or may not be collected as part of a formative evaluation
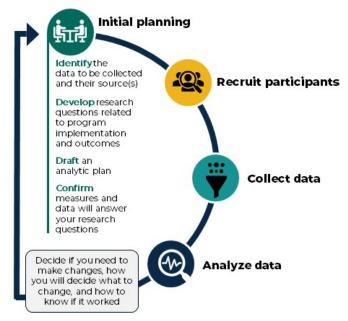>
> More information on TPPER is at https://tppevidencereview.youth.gov/.

What do I need to conduct formative evaluations?

You need a plan that documents your research questions, data you will collect, and analytic approach. When developing the plan, you should ensure the measures and data will answer the plan's research questions. You should document how you will recruit participants and collect data, and what methods you will use to analyze the data. Include information on how you will decide if your team will make changes, how your team will decide what changes to make, and how you will know if the changes worked.

Formative evaluation can seem like a continuous quality improvement (CQI), process because they both focus on learning how things are functioning and on improving a program. Exhibit 3 shows a formative evaluation process, reflecting the overlap with a typical CQI cycle.

Exhibit 3. Steps in formative evaluation process

Initial planning
- Identify the data to be collected and their source(s)
- Develop research questions related to program implementation and outcomes
- Draft an analytic plan
- Confirm measures and data will answer your research questions

Recruit participants

Collect data

Analyze data

Decide if you need to make changes, how you will decide what to change, and how to know if it worked

What could a formative evaluation plan look like?

A formative evaluation plan can be a formal document, or a set of research questions along with a description of the data sources and analytic approach. The following example is a simplified approach to a formative evaluation plan. This may be a good starting point for your team in designing your formative evaluation, even if you develop a more formal plan later.

> **Research question:**
>
> Are facilitators able to meet with youth after school each week for four hours, as planned? Do facilitators have enough program materials and space for the planned activities?

Element	Details
Data to be collected	• Number and length of sessions, by week • Facilitator's report of location of meeting • Facilitator's report of activities completed • Youths' description of sessions (number, length, activities)
Data source	• Facilitator session logs • Debrief meetings (or interviews) with facilitators • Youth focus groups
Analytic plan	• Calculate total number of hours in session, each week • Calculate average number hours in session • Analyze logs of facilitator sessions to determine whether the agreed-upon space was used regularly and whether activities were completed as planned • Analyze debrief meetings (or interviews) with facilitators to understand whether they felt the program was delivered as intended, where intended, and they had necessary materials. • Analyze focus groups of youth participants to understand whether they attended four hours of programming a week, and whether they felt the facilitators had the space and materials needed to do activities.

Endnotes

[1] We use the term "program" to refer to the program itself, the model it is based on, and any of its components examined in a formative evaluation.
[2] Examples of evaluation types are process or implementation evaluations, outcome evaluations, and impact evaluations
[3] See this website for an explanation of the rose, bud, thorn exercise: https://frescopad.com/rose-bud-and-thorn/

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