



Australian Domestic & Family Violence Clearinghouse

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ISSUES IN GOOD PRACTICE

Evaluating domestic and family violence programs and services

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Good practice issues

Organisations and services evaluate their domestic and family violence interventions to assess outcomes, identify ways to improve the quality of programs and services, and identify opportunities to refine their goals and strategies. Evaluation findings can also help build financial and other support for a program or service. There are many written guides to conducting evaluation, including some excellent online resources. There are also ways to improve evaluation efforts in the area of violence prevention and this article focuses on some key issues for good practice.

An understanding of domestic and family violence

Research has shown that depending on the philosophical understanding of domestic and family violence taken, interventions can differ substantially, resulting in quite different outcomes (e.g. Strategic Partners 2003). It is important, therefore, that evaluators working in this field have an in-depth understanding of violence within families, its dynamics and impacts. Evaluators need to recognise the use of violence in relationships as a means of maintaining power and control, its gendered nature, the multiple forms of abuse, the impacts for victims and likely responses to violence. This knowledge will inform the evaluation design and increase evaluators' sensitivity to particular issues, such as the safety of participants, victim empowerment and perpetrator accountability.

Conducting participatory evaluation

A criticism that can be directed towards evaluation (and other forms of research) is that it can be a process where evaluators dominate and participants have little power or say. For a person who has experienced domestic or family violence, this can become another process that disempowers them. Participatory evaluation is a good practice approach that aims to change that dynamic by allowing people involved in a program or using a service to influence the evaluation process and assess the outcomes.

This approach actively involves those who have most at stake in the program or service.

They are involved in developing the research questions, designing the evaluation, identifying performance measures, gathering and analysing information, reaching consensus about findings, conclusions and recommendations, disseminating the findings and implementing changes. This is usually achieved through a reference group (e.g. involving funders, workers, users or target groups).

This approach is often described as fundamentally democratic, promoting equal partnerships between participants and evaluators. Participants can feel a sense of ownership of the process and outcomes because they are involved in all stages of the evaluation and are encouraged to implement findings. It builds participants' capacity around evaluation. It allows organisations to be reflective and promotes organisational learning and accountability.

The challenges of conducting participatory evaluation include:

- achieving representative participation amongst stakeholders
- resolving conflicting agendas between participants
- balancing professional and local knowledge
- balancing objectives and accountabilities to participants and to those commissioning the evaluation, and
- allocating the time and resources required to develop evaluative capacity among participants and allowing participatory processes to take place. Articles and guides are available on conducting participatory evaluation and addressing these challenges.

Adopting an action research approach

An action research approach represents good practice in terms of value-adding to programs and services, and skilling-up participants. This approach involves evaluating and continuously incorporating findings into interventions or organisational practices. It allows organisations to learn and improve during the process of evaluation. Action research can be conducted in cycles; for example, drafting questions, gathering information, conducting analysis, forming conclusions and recommendations, taking action and starting again. These cycles can be conducted over varying lengths of time (such as weeks, months or years).

An action research approach also allows for the testing of evaluation findings and refinement of the research process. Participants are involved in each stage of the research, learning and review, or implementation process. The process is, therefore, seen to be both empowering and participatory. It encourages organisations and their partners or users to respond to feedback, to consider their practice and to take action. This approach can positively contribute to an intervention's development, which is particularly important for smaller or community organisations. Evaluators can assist organisations to improve and refine interventions, rather than simply delivering a final report (which, if involving negative findings, might lead to reduced funding or closure).

Timing the evaluation

A concern for decision-makers is when to conduct an evaluation; i.e. during implementation of an intervention or following implementation. Ideally, evaluations are conducted as a program or service is implemented, to capture immediate and fuller information. Evaluations conducted after implementation may have to contend with faded

memories, limited data records and departed workers and users.

However, victims may be too vulnerable to participate in evaluations while they are still accessing programs or services and perpetrators may be unwilling to participate while accessing programs or services. The benefits of programs or services may be felt most strongly some time after they are accessed. In such cases it may be more useful to conduct the data collection following the intervention.¹ If doing so, evaluators will need to explore ways of enhancing data reliability and ensuring a representative and adequate sample of participants.

A key concern for evaluators is also longevity of outcomes from interventions. Attitudes and behaviours may change immediately following an intervention but might not be sustained. Evaluators can measure sustainability through follow up assessments at intervals over a period of time. Keeping in contact with participants during this period is a key challenge.

Identifying performance measures

Performance measures for interventions allow evaluators to measure what the program or service did, how well it was implemented, whether the outcomes were those expected and whether there were any other outcomes. Performance measures work better if they are specific; e.g. in terms of what was done, who did it, where it occurred, in what time frame, by how much, how many, how often, how long, how well, etc.

A common trap for organisations is to establish performance measures that the intervention cannot possibly meet. Performance measures should be realistic and reflect only what the program or service can actually have an impact on; e.g. only measuring assistance provided to clients who contacted the service, not the entire community. Generally, performance measures for outcomes should reflect those that the client or target group identify as important to them, rather than only what the service or organisation identify as important.

Domestic and family violence interventions ultimately aim to prevent violence and improve outcomes for victims. There is an explicit social justice and social change goal in this work. Therefore, while some evaluations may concentrate on the performance of the process rather outcomes, good practice dictates that evaluations question whether interventions have actually reduced violence, made perpetrators accountable and resulted in improved outcomes for victims. The Western Australian audit of the Armadale Domestic Violence Intervention Program is a good example of an evaluation that has attempted to do this (see the Good Practice Update in this issue). These big picture questions can be lost in assessments of whether a program worked well and met its internal goals.

Asking these broader evaluation questions is complicated by the fact that there is often a staged process to achieving longer term outcomes (also referred to as an 'outcomes hierarchy'). For example, it may be necessary to make connections with a particular community, build victims' self esteem, provide information about violence and raise awareness of services and support, before an intervention can begin to make victims safer and prevent further violence. Evaluations in this instance can be used to assess whether

¹ In addition, funding for evaluation may not be available or recruitment of evaluators may only take place some time after the program or service commenced.

interventions are on track with their outcomes hierarchy.

While collecting data about the number of clients or workshops run is relatively straight forward, it can be more difficult to collect other data (particularly qualitative data) about how well a program or service is performing or what people thought about it. Furthermore, it is tempting to collect superficial information about user or target group reactions and feelings towards a program or service (like whether they felt it was “good” or if they liked it). This generates poor quality information that is limited in informing improvements in interventions.

It is more useful to ask questions about whether the intervention addressed user needs, reached the anticipated target group, was appropriately designed for that group, and was executed efficiently, safely and respectfully. In terms of outcomes, it is more useful to know if the users or target groups gained new information or knowledge as result of the intervention, acquired new skills, changed their attitudes or behaviours, if their circumstances were changed (e.g. whether it actually made victims safer or perpetrators more accountable), and whether these changes were sustained.

Collecting baseline data

In order to measure the degree of change brought about by an intervention, it is necessary to collect some baseline data for comparison. This may be data collected before the intervention was introduced or data collected through a control group. A control group might be clients who do not have access to this program or a similar community without a service of this kind. A control group is particularly useful if a service or program has been operating for some time and it is not possible to collect data from before its introduction. A control group needs to approximate the study group as much as possible, while recognising every community or group differs from another in some respect.

Promoting data quality

In order for evaluation findings and conclusions to have any weight, the information or data gathered needs to be of good quality and relevant to the questions being asked. While organisations often record data about their programs or services on an ongoing basis, this information may not be directly relevant to the evaluation questions. Evaluators may need to design and implement specific data collection processes.

Data quality and validity can be promoted through:

- detailed planning
- undertaking a stakeholder needs analysis
- using relevant theoretical models
- using validated tools (e.g. validated in the literature and/or by stakeholders)
- pilot testing tools before use
- using multiple sources of information to verify data (also called triangulation); such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, organisational records, observations, crime statistics, pictures, diaries, etc., and
- conducting rigorous data analysis.

Evaluators need to ensure that any conclusions drawn are supported by the data and findings.

Making use of findings

The valuable insights evaluations provide about the performance of programs and services should be applied to their improvement.

Findings are more easily accessed and more likely to be used when they are tailored to targeted audiences. Agreement between evaluators and those commissioning the evaluation about audience-appropriate language and formats will assist in this process. Evaluations can take diverse formats, such as a report, executive summary, verbal presentation, display or video, and dissemination practices may include public forums, staff workshops, mailouts and press releases.

Good practice involves dissemination of findings and contributions to the knowledge base on violence prevention. By sharing evaluation findings with their funders, workers, users or target groups, and others, organisations demonstrate their transparency and accountability. It is also respectful and good practice to share lessons learned with evaluation participants. If participatory or action research approaches were used, the process of disseminating findings may have already begun during the evaluation.

Ethical practice and safety of participants

Finally, good practice dictates that evaluators conduct themselves ethically. They can promote this by adhering to ethical guidelines of professional organisations or research bodies (e.g. of the Australasian Evaluation Society, universities or National Health and Medical Research Council). At a minimum, evaluators need to ensure that participants give informed consent, have the option of withdrawing from the process, are compensated for their time and participation, have their privacy protected and are not endangered by participating in the process.

When evaluating domestic and family violence work, safety issues for participants need to remain paramount. Disclosure of violence through the evaluation can put participants at risk of abuse from perpetrators and others, and interrupt their healing processes and help-seeking.

Evaluation processes need to maintain participants' confidentiality and anonymity. Ways to promote this include:

- using secure processes to gather, store, use and destroy data
- limiting the number of people handling data
- requiring that those people handling data maintain confidentiality
- disaggregating and coding data
- recognising that even where participants are not named directly, they may be identifiable in small communities, or amongst small client or target groups, and taking steps to avoid this.

Evaluation investigations can have emotional and other negative impacts on participants. Where possible, evaluators should aim to inform, assist and empower participants, rather than to distress or endanger them. Given the potentially vulnerable state of participants, evaluators should make information, support and other assistance available as part of the consultation process.

Useful references

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