



## PARTNERSHIPS IN EVALUATION: TRAINING IMPLICATIONS

**I**ncreasingly, family members are becoming involved in evaluations of their children's mental health services. Family involvement in evaluation was recommended by the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (2003) and the Surgeon General's Report on Mental Health (2001). Family participation is required in the evaluation of systems of care funded by the Center for Mental Health Services' Comprehensive Community Mental Health Services for Children and Their Families Program.

In order to prepare family members to participate actively in the evaluation process, the Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health (2002) has developed a three-part

training in evaluation. However, if collaboration is to be successful, professional evaluators need to learn to collaborate with family members. University training for research and evaluation has traditionally emphasized objectivity and maintaining distance from participants. As a result, evaluators may be skeptical of and/or unprepared for collaboration with family members and other stakeholders. In this article, we focus on the work of the *Families as Evaluators* project at the Research and Training Center. One of the primary areas of work in this project has been to build understanding of the training needs of evaluators participating on evaluation teams with family members. After reporting on findings from a study

of the perspectives of evaluators and family members on evaluation teams (referred to as *family evaluators*) on their work together, the article goes on to describe a training program to meet evaluators' needs for training in collaboration.

By becoming involved in evaluations of their children's services, families gain tools for influencing service improvements. Participatory evaluations are program evaluations in which people most affected by the program—in this instance, families—collaborate with evaluators in all aspects of a study. When family members participate in developing and conducting program evaluations, it is more likely that study questions will be relevant to the needs of families

and that findings will be used to improve services for children. Participatory evaluations also promote increased attention to cultural differences. As an additional benefit, family members who are employed on evaluation teams gain knowledge and skills that contribute to their professional development and their sense of empowerment.

### Evaluation Study

To gain understanding of evaluators' experiences and learning needs in regard to family participation, we invited evaluators and family evaluators to tell us, in their own words, about their work together, their training for participatory evaluation, their training needs, and their recommendations for future training. Responses were recorded and analyzed to identify categories and themes.

Results reported here are based on interviews with 20 evaluators and 10 family evaluators from different regions of the U.S. Findings on the roles of family evaluators, work-related challenges, and effective strategies used on participatory evaluation teams are reported elsewhere (Schutte, Savage, Robinson, Jivanjee, & Pullmann, in press).

#### *What preparation for undertaking participatory evaluation did evaluators and family evaluators receive?*

Most evaluators reported that there had been no attention to family participation in their university training and over half reported being trained to maintain distance from research participants. They reported receiving little or no preparation to lead a team or offer staff supervision and support. Two-thirds of the evaluators reported that they learned to work with family members by doing the work, often commenting that they had "muddled through" or learned from their mistakes. Some evaluators reported creating a climate of mutual education in the team as a way to meet all participants' learning needs. To gain skills in participatory evaluation, evaluators reported learning

from a mentor, reading articles, talking with other system of care evaluators, or learning from members of local family advocacy organizations. Family evaluators reported that they received information and help from the lead evaluator on their project or from other family members and research assistants on the team. Some family members who had participated in the Federation of Families' training reported that the training had been helpful.

#### *What are evaluators' and family evaluators' learning needs in regard to family participation?*

Evaluators described many situations in which they felt unprepared to respond to challenges in their work, for example, when called upon to help family members reconcile the dissonance between their roles as advocates and as evaluation team members. Evaluators also reported difficulties supporting family members to deal with the stress of parenting a child with mental health needs, while also completing their job-related responsibilities. Evaluators expressed a desire to learn concrete strategies to facilitate collaboration. Evaluators wished for opportunities to learn from other evaluator-family member teams about how to respond to challenges related to recruiting, hiring, training, and supporting family evaluators. Participants suggested that collaboration would be enhanced if they had access to "a compilation of effective strategies," "lessons learned and suggestions from those who have done it," "a comprehensive guide to how best to engage and benefit from family members' input," or a manual to guide evaluators in training family evaluators to do interviewing and other tasks.

While some family evaluators commented positively on the evaluators' personal attributes and skills, others noted evaluators' needs for training in collaboration. For example, one family evaluator said that evaluators needed to learn about "the challenges

and obstacles that the families have to face in the real mental health world." Others said that evaluators needed training related to cultural difference and "to communicate clearly and openly in everyday language." Finally, family members expressed a desire for more training in evaluation skills for themselves.

#### *What training will be most helpful for participatory evaluation?*

Evaluators wished for journal articles addressing evaluators and family members working together, a "comprehensive training guide," a manual, or other written materials. Members of both groups wanted access to face-to-face training provided by teams of evaluators and family evaluators who had collaborated successfully. They appreciated seeing evaluators and family members making joint presentations at conferences. There were also recommendations to incorporate training for collaboration in the existing training for systems of care, especially the training for new sites. Some evaluators wished for joint training modeled after the Federation of Families training for family members. Some evaluators recom-



### rtcUpdates

In the spring of 2000, the Center began to send out **rtcUpdates**, monthly email messages with current information about our recent research, publications, and other activities, as well as information about developments in the field of Children's Mental Health. In four years, the number of subscribers to **rtcUpdates** has increased steadily to over 7,000.

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mended including participatory evaluation in university curricula. Finally, there were suggestions about using technology, including e-newsletters, listservs, and conference calls to deliver information and to build supportive networks among evaluators.

### Implications for Training

Based on findings from our interviews and advice from members of an advisory group of family members and evaluators, we are developing training materials. The training is designed for use by evaluators, family members, and other stakeholders who are working together as teams, and it provides opportunities to practice the skills of participatory evaluation via experiential exercises. We believe that evaluators, often acting as team leaders, are well positioned to make training for collaboration a priority, to obtain training materials, to set aside time for team training, and to serve as facilitators or recruit training facilitators.

Training modules are based on principles of self-directed adult learning, which builds on an appreciation of what participants already know and can do. Modules are designed around case-based and experiential learning, with encouragement to organize follow-up activities and provide continual coaching for the team.

Each training module includes learning objectives; information about the topic; a case study, vignette, and/or role play; experiential exercises designed to improve participants' capacity to collaborate; and a reading list. Topics addressed in the training include

- team formation and stages of team development;
- team roles and negotiation;
- power dynamics in collaborative evaluation teams;
- staff support and supervision;
- the tensions between advocacy and rigor in evaluation;
- decision making, communication, and conflict management in teams; and
- the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities.

Here we feature a summary of the first module on participatory evaluation as an example.

The first training module introduces evaluators and family members to participatory evaluation. Teams review training content in the manual and engage in a series of activities including a self-assessment of learning needs. A training exercise invites evaluators and family members to privately identify and then share their stereotypes about each other and discuss the extent to which these stereotypes are based in reality. A case study is provided so that participants may

engage in a role play in which they represent stakeholders in the early stages of developing an evaluation of a family support program. Participants in this role play are invited to identify and resolve tensions that arise between a new evaluator, who is hired to lead a collaborative evaluation, and family members who are determined to use the evaluation to influence local officials to make program changes.

In other modules, training participants go on to examine evaluator and family member roles in a range of evaluation activities, for example as advisory group members, evaluation team members, and even project co-leaders (Vander Stoep, Williams, Jones, Green, & Trupin, 1999). They practice collaborative activities at different stages of the project, including designing the study, reviewing proposals, developing survey instruments, collecting data, analyzing data, interpreting findings, writing reports, and disseminating findings (Osher & Telesford, 1996). Participants consider family members' varied levels of influence over the evaluation (Vander Stoep, Williams, Jones, Green, & Trupin, 1999) and differences related to culture, social class, and the "cultures" of the academic and service delivery worlds as they affect evaluation.

### Conclusion

Despite the presumed benefits of family participation in evaluation, there are few models to guide evaluators in how to engage and involve family members. Given their varied roles, all members of evaluation teams need opportunities to reconcile their different world views and goals, and they need a repertoire of strategies for building collaborative teams while producing useful findings.

Responses gathered during our study indicated that if evaluators are to collaborate effectively with family members, they need strong communication skills, the capacity to manage a diverse work team, the ability to manage and resolve conflict, and



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the ability to supervise and support team members. The training modules described in this article were developed to offer ideas for improving collaboration to evaluators with different levels of expertise and to teams at different stages of the evaluation process. We plan to complete the training materials and make them available on the web in September 2004.

Check our website at <http://www.rtc.pdx.edu/pgProjEvaluators.php> for progress reports.

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