



## Families and Evaluation

Ideally, families should be meaningfully integrated into many aspects of the planning and operation of the system of care, including evaluation. Sources stress the importance of family involvement in assessment, and in monitoring and outcome evaluation (AACAP, 2009). Involving families in evaluation is also a priority for SAMSHA in their expansions of System of Care grants, so much that it is one of the approximately 12 indicators that SAMSHA requires quarterly reporting on. Specifically, SAMHSA tracks data on “The number of consumers/family members who are involved in ongoing mental health-related evaluation oversight, data collection, and/or analysis activities as a result of the grant” (SAMHSA Infrastructure Survey). Besides being an emphasis of grants, family involvement in evaluation is also important and valuable because researchers express that family involvement improves the quality of the data collected (Osher, van Kemmen, & Zaro, 2001).

However, there is scant literature and guidance available on how to best incorporate families into evaluation, how to prepare families and evaluators for collaborating on evaluation, and what the benefits and costs associated with incorporating families into evaluation may be (e.g. AACAP, 2009). This shortfall is described by Jivanjee and Robinson (2007): “there has been little guidance to communities about how to translate broad requirements into specific practices at the local level.” Few sources describe the how family evaluation is actually implemented in local contexts. The following section draws from relevant literature to describe some of the ways that families can be involved in evaluation.

### How can families be involved?

Family roles in evaluation vary substantially from community to community. In some cases, families may have little influence beyond conducting interviews or other data collection. In others, family members may have much greater influence and were seen as partners. The roles of families in evaluation may vary

depending on family member interest and availability and local community conditions (Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007). It may be an effective strategy to offer many opportunities for families to be involved in evaluation with varying levels of commitment, that way family members can choose what works best for their particular situation.

Family involvement in evaluation can also run along a continuum of difficulty/complexity. Some of the most basic practices to implement include having families as participants in evaluations and ensuring that all families and youth are well-informed about any assessments or evaluation materials that they receive and participate in, including the results of any assessments or evaluations. Some more complex forms of family involvement in evaluation include involving families in research development and data collection, analysis, and dissemination processes. The following table offers some examples of ways that SOCs can be more family driven in their evaluation processes. Sources are also included, where applicable.

**Ways evaluation can incorporate families:**

<b>Families Informed on Evaluation</b>	
Family members are well informed and knowledgeable about any assessments that are offered to youth or families members.	AACAP, 2009
Family members are involved in monitoring their own child's outcomes and are informed on	Osher et al., 2006; AACAP, 2009

understanding and interpreting the data.	
Family members receive training on evaluation.	Funchess, Spencer, & Niarhos, 2014; Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007
<b>Information/data from Families to Inform Program Changes</b>	
Family members can offer input on Continuous Quality Improvement procedures through participation on Family Advisory Councils. Youth and families draw on their own experience and expertise to enhance service delivery and improve overall.	e.g. <a href="http://www.nichq.org/blog/2015/%20september/qi_tips_start_pfac">http://www.nichq.org/blog/2015/%20september/qi_tips_start_pfac</a>
Families are included as participants in evaluations.	
Measures for any programs/initiatives should include quantitative measures of “family	Funchess, Spencer, & Niarhos, 2014

<p>outcomes” (e.g. family functioning) and “family involvement,” and these results should be used to improve services and supports.</p>	
<p>Utilize qualitative feedback from families (e.g. focus group and interview responses) to improve services and the youth/family experience.</p>	<p>Funchess, Spencer, &amp; Niarhos, 2014</p>
<p><b>Families Involved in the Planning of Evaluations and Collection of Data</b></p>	
<p>Family members can help develop and review research questions, measures, and evaluation materials and provide feedback.</p>	<p>Slaton, 2003; Jivanjee &amp; Robinson, 2007; Pullmann, 2009</p>
<p>Family members provide input</p>	<p>Jivanjee &amp; Robinson, 2007; Schutte, Jivanjee, Robinson, &amp; Koroloff, 2003</p>

through participation on advisory councils and committees.	
Family members can be consultants and/or grant reviewers and provide important cultural and experiential context to inform procedures and findings.	Schutte, Jivanjee, Robinson, & Koroloff, 2003; Slaton, 2003
Families can be involved as data collectors.	Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007
<b>Families Involved in Analysis and Dissemination of Data</b>	
Family members can be involved in analysis and interpretation of data.	Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007; Schutte, Jivanjee, Robinson, & Koroloff, 2003
Family members can present and disseminate evaluation findings.	Slaton, 2003; Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007
<b>Evaluate Family Involvement in Evaluations</b>	
Evaluators can analyze the effectiveness of	Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007

<p>family-evaluator teams using qualitative methods to understand the processes and teamwork to inform team improvement.</p>	
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## Important Considerations for Family Involvement in Evaluation

There are several important considerations that should be explored if families when families are involved in evaluation (e.g. Schutte, Jivanjee, Robinson, & Koroloff, 2003).

**Evaluation Models.** Most researchers favored incorporating families into research with the use of evaluation teams that are made up of a combination of traditional researchers and family evaluators, where decisions are made collaboratively (e.g. Osher et al., 2001). These teams often incorporate aspects of participatory action research into their plans and models.

**Preparing Families for Evaluation.** It is not appropriate to throw families into evaluation roles unprepared. Many may not have had previous experience in data and evaluation and/or in the particular manner of data collection. Families that are involved in collecting data should be thoroughly trained and informed in evaluation prior carrying out evaluation activities, so that all family members can feel competent and confident in their roles. Trainings should include explanation of evaluation jargon/terminology (Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007; Slaton, 2004; Schutte, Jivanjee, Robinson, & Koroloff, 2003). It also may be necessary to have families complete training in protecting participants and data (Slaton, 2004). Typically, families find training to be valuable and useful (Schutte, Jivanjee, Robinson, & Koroloff, 2003). One source for trainings is a

three part training program developed by the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health called: The World of Evaluation<sup>1</sup>. In addition to more formal trainings, evaluators often provide on the job training, supervision, and/or consultation in areas like interviewing, data analysis, and presentation skills (Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007).

Families are not the only ones who need training. Evaluators also are often not trained in working with families and conducting participatory research. Training for evaluators in family voice and participatory and participatory action research is important for a successful working relationship and evaluation team (Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007; Pullmann, 2009).

Both family members and researchers should have training on working together and collaborating effectively (Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007). Having researchers and family evaluators co-train can be an effective strategy to foster teamwork (Schutte, Jivanjee, Robinson, & Koroloff, 2003).

**Family Member Balance: Time Commitment & Work and Family Stress.** Many families are very busy with their youth who are in care as well as with other priorities. Some SOCs hire family members who had a child with a mental health disorder who is now grown up and no longer living at home. This has advantages and disadvantages. The family member is more available to do the job, but their knowledge of family and treatment challenges may be outdated (Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007). It is not reasonable to expect all families to be highly involved in evaluation. However, it is still important to have the opportunity available for families. In addition, some of the less complex approaches for involving families should be offered to ALL families, e.g. providing information and feedback on assessments and explaining data to families.

Some suggestions have been made to alleviate work/family balance challenges for family evaluators. For instance, having flexible employment arrangements

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<sup>1</sup> note: although this training is cited in multiple publications, Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007; Schutte, Jivanjee, Robinson, & Koroloff, 2003, and after contacting the National Federation of Families for Children's Mental Health with no response, I was unable to locate information about this training directly. Therefore, I am unsure if it still exists

and meeting schedules. Another strategy would be providing cell phones and laptops for family evaluators and allowing them to work from home, when appropriate (Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007).

**Rapport with Participants.** With proper training, families may be especially helpful with collecting data in venues like interviews focus groups. Since they may relate to the situations of the participants, they may be more empathetic and understanding of their responses and may make participants more comfortable (Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007). In addition, family members may be able to provide important context to the evaluation team on cultural practices that may be important for conducting evaluation (Slaton, 2004). On the other hand, empathy with families may also stress family evaluators, so supervisors and group meetings should be prepared to offer support for family evaluators when needed (Jivanjee & Robinson, 2007).

**Power/Influence Differential.** One of the biggest challenges in creating successful collaborations between family members and researchers are issues of power (Slaton, 2004; Pullmann, 2009). This is especially challenging when evaluation decisions and mandates are made from a top down perspective (where it is difficult to have a more grass roots style evaluation). Teams must decide how decisions are made on issues like the outcomes of interest, the research questions, and the methods of evaluation. If power is shared, these questions will be answered collaboratively by the team. It is important that family evaluators are incorporated in an authentic way so that the family members are not exploited or tokenized (Pullman, 2009).

**Objectivity.** In some cases, if a particular family is deeply involved in an intervention or program, it may not be appropriate to have them involved in the evaluation of that intervention or program. In some cases, the evaluation would benefit from a more objective evaluator. For instance, in one study, family members both contributed data to a study and participated in the analysis of the data (their responses included). This process is not recommended because some family evaluators were not able to separate their own experience/impressions from the data as a whole (Schutte, Jivanjee, Robinson, & Koroloff, 2003).

**Funding for Family Evaluators.** Compensation and funding for family evaluators is an important consideration. Most researchers recommend that family evaluators be hired as salary employees or consultants, and advise against volunteer positions (Slaton, 2004; Pullmann, 2009; Schutte, Jivanjee, Robinson, & Koroloff, 2003).

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