FACT SHEET

FOR YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES AND PROGRAMS

LAYING THE RIGHT FOUNDATIONS: PROGRAM EVALUATION

AT A GLANCE

This short guide will take you through the first steps of planning an evaluation. It will help you to think through what the purpose of your evaluation is, what type of evaluation you need, and what questions to ask.

WHAT IS PROGRAM EVALUATION?

Program evaluation is the systematic process used to make judgments about the value or merit of a program in relation to its appropriateness for the setting or community, its effectiveness and its efficiency. Evaluation findings can be used to inform decisions about future programming or how to improve a program.(1)

WHY EVALUATE?

A well-conducted evaluation can help:

- Identify the approaches to youth mental health care that work well and those that don't.
- Understand whether and how programs support equity, accessibility, and culturally-responsive care.
- Understand why programs have been successful or not.
- Understand how programs can be improved.
- Provide evidence for funders and commissioners to make important decisions about programs.

EVALUATION ACROSS THE PROGRAM LIFECYCLE

Evidence suggests that it can take two to four years to successfully implement a program and achieve the intended outcomes.(2,3) It is important to consider the evaluation approach when designing new programs and services, including what is evaluated and how (i.e. key performance indicators and targets). Different types of evaluation are also appropriate at different times during a program's lifecycle, and this should ideally be planned for as early as possible.

Even before the program begins, a **needs assessment** can be used to inform the program's design. Once the program is up and running, the three most commonly-used evaluation types are **process**, **outcome**, and **economic** evaluation.

INITIAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Before a program is designed or established, it is important for a needs assessment to take place. An initial needs assessment analyses the perceived "want" or "need" among the target population. It can also be used to explore potential barriers and enablers to implementation, including factors such as expertise and resourcing. This is particularly helpful when decisions are being made about establishing new interventions or programs.(4)

PROCESS EVALUATION

When a program is implemented well, it is more likely to achieve its intended outcomes. A process evaluation assesses the quality of a program during its implementation and delivery and provides important insights into things such as:(5)

- How closely the delivery is matching the original design.
- How well the program is reaching the target population.
- The volume of service being delivered.
- Whether any external or environmental factors are affecting the program's delivery.

These details can provide valuable insights into how the program can be improved and are particularly useful in the early stages of the program's life.(6,7)

OUTCOME EVALUATION

Once the program is more established, an outcome evaluation can assess how effective the program has been in achieving its objectives. Most notably, it can examine how, to what extent, and under what circumstances the program has had benefit to its users (e.g. young people, families, workforces).(6)

ECONOMIC EVALUATION

Economic evaluation assesses the efficiency of the program by comparing costs and benefits. This can also include measuring the "avoided costs". These are the costs to the service, or community more broadly, that are avoided as a result of the program being delivered. Economic evaluation requires reliable outcome data, so would usually follow an outcome evaluation.(6,8)

Table 1: Evaluation types compared

	NEEDS ASSESSMENT*	PROCESS EVALUATION	OUTCOME EVALUATION	ECONOMIC EVALUATION
When to use	Before a program is established or during delivery	Once the program delivery begins	Once the program is well established (2-4 years)	Once the program is well established and producing reliable outcome data (2-4 years)
Focus Areas	• Assesses community needs and how to measure when these are met. • Describes barriers and enablers to implementing something new. • Assesses whether current programs are still meeting needs.	• Assesses quality of program delivery. • Describes the implementation process. • Explains how program outcomes are achieved. • Assesses the degree to which implementation was as intended.	• Assesses degree to which program objectives have been achieved. • Measures changes in young people's health and social outcomes. • Identifies whether some groups of young people benefit more than others.	• Measures economic costs and benefits of the program. • Assesses how efficiently resources have been used.
Potential uses	• Informs decisions about resourcing. • Informs what programs are established or continued.	• Informs program improvements. • Informs decisions about the program's continuation. • Informs program replication.	• Informs decisions about the program's continuation or expansion. • Informs changes to program design.	• Informs decisions about future programs when there are multiple options. • Identifies where the program can be made more efficient.

*A needs assessment can also be repeated during the delivery of the service / program to assess whether it is still adequate and relevant to respond to the demonstrated need.

SCOPING THE EVALUATION

Initial scoping of your program evaluation is essential. Scoping informs the evaluation's design including how it will be conducted and how the findings will be reported, so it is important to give it careful consideration. The following five steps will help you to scope your own evaluation:

- **Step 1:** describe the purpose of the evaluation.
- **Step 2:** identify stakeholders.
- **Step 3:** identify key questions.
- **Step 4:** describe the program.
- **Step 5:** determine available resources.

You might return to some steps multiple times as you work through the details of your evaluation.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Evaluation activities must be conducted in a way that is ethical. The Australian National Health and Medical Research Council provides guidance on ethical considerations in evaluation activities, which include considerations related to consent, risk of harm, privacy, relevant legislation, professional and national standards, and whether ethical review is needed.(9) Some evaluation activities need to be reviewed by a Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). A trigger for considering an ethical review is if data analysis involves minority groups, which might include LGBTQIA+ communities or First Nations communities. Likewise, evaluation involving children and young people can raise particular ethical concerns. These are related to their capacity to provide informed consent to participate in evaluation and possible coercion to take part by adults including evaluators, parents or others. Where any of the triggers for ethical review apply, the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research must be followed.(10) Your organisation should provide guidance on when an ethical review might be required, or an alternative review process where appropriate.

STEP 1: DESCRIBE THE PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

What is the reason the evaluation is being planned?
How will the evaluation findings be used?
What decisions will they influence?
Who will make the decisions?
When will they need to make them?

Being clear about why the program is being evaluated is essential to ensuring that the evaluation generates useful information. Describe the evaluation's purpose(s) in a few sentences, including how findings will be used. Consider whether your evaluation could be used to assess if program delivery is equitable or could be made more equitable in terms of who benefits.

If you need some ideas, referring to the common evaluation types can be a useful place to start. Often, evaluations will have more than one purpose and will address a combination of process and outcome questions. You will need to decide which evaluation types and purposes are most appropriate for your program's context. Return to your evaluation purpose as you work through the following steps to ensure it is still relevant and feasible.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS

Who needs to be involved in the evaluation?

Involving stakeholders in the development of the program and throughout the evaluation process will improve the quality of the evaluation and the usefulness of its findings.(6)

List all the people who have an interest in or could be affected by the evaluation's findings. This may include program funders, program managers and staff, young people and families, the local community, and partner organisations. Consider what their role in the evaluation is and the level of their engagement. Depending on the type of evaluation, you may need to consider a steering or governance group to guide the evaluation.

Consider how you will involve young people and families with lived experience in your evaluation. Their involvement is integral, as it will help to ensure that the evaluation approach is appropriate and that the findings can be used to improve the acceptability, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the program.(6) Young people and family members can be involved in a range of ways, including designing overarching evaluation questions, data collection approaches, interpreting findings, and reporting results. Attention should also be given to identifying and engaging people from specific populations, or with particular lived experiences, who may be impacted by the evaluation and how its findings are to be used. Consider equity and accessibility in terms of who is involved, who has the power to make decisions about the evaluation and

whether information about the evaluation process and outcomes can be accessed and understood by different stakeholders.(11) This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, multicultural communities, and people who identify as LGBTQIA+.(12)

See **Supporting Youth Partnerships** for more information about involving young people, family members and communities in evaluation.

INVOLVING FIRST NATIONS COMMUNITIES

Evaluation of programs designed for or used by First Nations young people and families can be a powerful way to support self-determination. Best practice is for evaluation to be designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.(11) However, non-Indigenous evaluators are often involved. Non-Indigenous evaluators who need to plan or undertake an evaluation of a program accessed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their families can find useful tools, resources and examples through the **Australian Institute for Family Studies**.(13) For example, the **Evaluation Framework to Improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health**, developed for the Lowitja Institute,(14) offers guidance on best practices and examples of program evaluations. Data sovereignty, whereby Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have both leadership and ownership of evaluation data, is critical to self-determination and requires clear governance and access processes. The **Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data** provides a key for Australian government agencies.

STEP 3: IDENTIFY KEY QUESTIONS

What information is needed to inform decisions about the program?

The evaluation's key questions are the overarching questions that the evaluation attempts to answer. They guide the collection and analysis of data, and how the findings are reported.

The questions should be shaped by the evaluation's type and purpose, and through discussion with key stakeholders. To generate some initial ideas, ask key stakeholders to make a list of 10 things they want to know to make the program better. No evaluation can examine every important area of a program, so decisions will need to be made about which questions to prioritise. Aim to set just three to five key evaluation questions. It is better to answer fewer questions with higher quality data, than to answer more questions with lower quality data.

ASKING THE 'RIGHT' QUESTIONS.

It can be helpful to apply the following criteria to your questions to determine their appropriateness:(15)

- **Useful:** are the questions useful in providing the information needed to assess the program's progress, effectiveness, or value?
- **Practical:** can the scope of the questions be accommodated by the available resources?
- **Agreed:** are the questions endorsed by key stakeholders?

Table 2: Generic evaluation questions

PROCESS EVALUATION QUESTIONS	OUTCOME EVALUATION QUESTIONS	ECONOMIC EVALUATION QUESTIONS
• To what extent has the program been implemented as planned? • To what extent has the program reached the target group? • How satisfied are young people and families with the program?	• To what extent has the program achieved its intended outcomes? • Which young people have benefited from the program, how, and under what circumstances? • To what extent can the changes be attributed to the program?	• Can resources be allocated more efficiently? • How cost-effective is the program compared to alternatives?

STEP 4: DESCRIBE THE PROGRAM

What is the program?
What is the background to its development?
How long has it been operating?
What needs does it address?
What does it do to address these needs?
What are the desired outcomes?
What elements of the program are to be evaluated?

Describing the program gives an evaluator (who may have no prior knowledge of the program) important contextual information, which will be used to inform decisions about the evaluation's planning and design.

DEVELOP A LOGIC MODEL

In addition to a written description, it can be helpful to include a logic model. Ideally a logic model should be developed as part of the initial process of designing a program, to guide how and why it is delivered. If a logic model does not already exist, one can be developed retrospectively, to use as a foundation to identify the various program elements and which of these will be included in the evaluation.

The logic model illustrates how the program is intended to work by connecting its resources, activities, and outcomes.(16) This helps the evaluation by:

- Identifying the different elements of the program and the evaluation's focus areas.
- Identifying any assumptions or external factors that may impact the program's success.
- Describing when and where evaluation data should be collected.
- Engaging stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of the program and its outcomes.

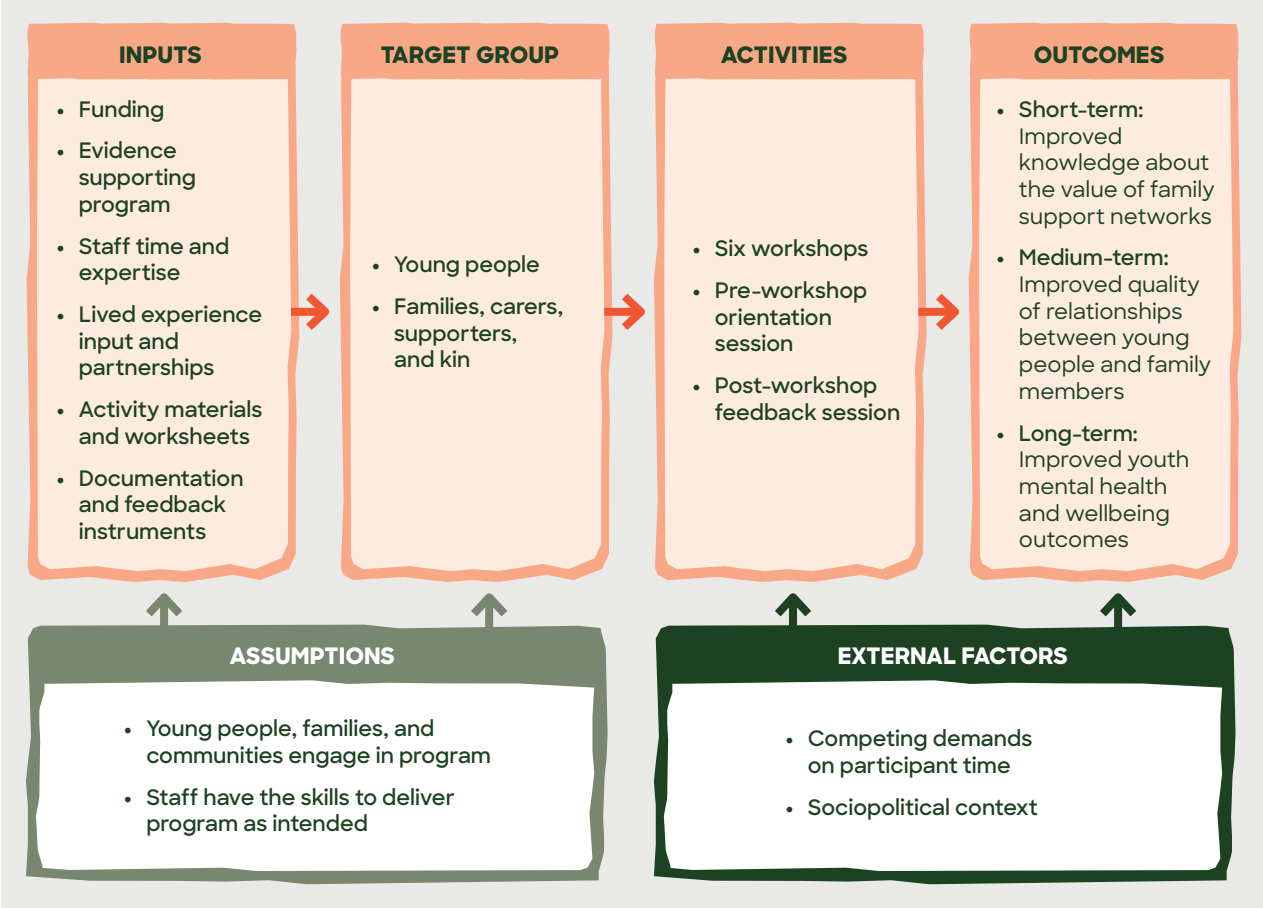

Figure 1: Example Logic Model: Youth and family connection program

Logic models vary in format and complexity, but including even a simple model will help to focus the key evaluation questions. A simple model could include:

Inputs: What resources does the program use? What is the evidence that supports the program?

Target group: Who does the program help? What are the needs of this group?

Activities: What does the program do to help the target group? What are the interventions and services that make up the program?

Outcomes: How is the target group supposed to benefit from the activities? What changes should they experience?

Assumptions: What conditions or underlying beliefs are considered true and necessary for the program to succeed? Consider how and why activities of the program will lead to the desired outcomes.

External factors: Consider what external contextual factors (for example, social, political, cultural, economic and environmental) may affect the intended outcomes of the program?

Articulating both assumptions and external factors in the logic model enables evaluators and stakeholders to consider the conditions that may influence whether a program achieves its intended impacts, and how these might be assessed as part of an evaluation.





STEP 5: DETERMINE AVAILABLE RESOURCES

What resources can the evaluation use?
How much time is there to complete the evaluation?

An evaluation is always constrained by a budget, and the availability of staff, time, evaluation participants, and data. Articulating what resources are available will help inform decisions about the evaluation's design and scope.

Return to your evaluation purpose and questions as you think through your resourcing constraints. Consider which questions are most important to answer and how your available resources may shape what is feasible.

BUDGET

What budget is available? Allocating approximately five-15 per cent of the total program budget to evaluation is advisable, but not always possible. The evaluation's cost will depend on its scope, use of internal or external evaluators, the rigour of the methods used and the amount of additional data that must be collected.

STAFF

What staff are available? Do they have the required skills to manage and conduct, or participate in, the evaluation?

EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS

Are the evaluation participants available to participate in the evaluation for the proposed duration and scheduled timing?

TIME

When do program decisions related to the evaluation, or its findings, have to be made?

EXISTING DATA

What program data is currently collected? What is the quality of this data? It is preferable to make use of routinely collected monitoring data in an evaluation. The more good quality data currently available, the less an evaluator will have to collect any new data. This highlights the importance of considering evaluation during the initial program design and development phase.

NEXT STEPS

Once you have worked through scoping the evaluation brief, you will be in a good position to move onto designing the evaluation. This includes defining your research methods, what data you want to collect and how you're going to analyse that data.

For an example of how to do this, see **Orygen's Monitoring and Evaluation Planning Tool.**

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USEFUL RESOURCES

- The Australian Evaluation Society. https://www.aes.asn.au/
- Better Evaluation. https://www.betterevaluation.org/
- Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing. National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Evaluation Framework. https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/national-mental-health-and-suicide-prevention-evaluation-framework?language=en
- Australian Institute of Family Studies. Planning an evaluation. https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/planning-evaluation
- Australian Institute of Family Studies. How to develop program logic for planning and evaluation. https://aifs.gov.au/resources/practice-guides/how-develop-program-logic-planning-and-evaluation
- Prevention United. An Introduction to Evaluating Mental Health Promotion Initiatives. https://nest.greenant.net/s/64iFsnn7LD33z67?dir=/&editing=false&openfile=true

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Orygen acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to their Country, which continue to be important to First Nations people living today

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