Love is the best gift you can give a child.
Chapter 4.
Assumptions: The Connections between Strategies and Outcomes

You’ve written your outcome statements and you’ve identified your indicators. What’s next?

The next evaluation step is to develop an evaluation design. Before you can do that, however, you need to have selected the strategies you will be working on. To prepare for the evaluation design and as part of the development of strategies, you will need to think about your assumptions.

In the most technical terms, you will need to develop a conceptual framework or theory as to how your strategies will affect the outcomes you have selected. In designing strategies, you are putting forth hypotheses (theories) as to what will work in the community. In less technical terms (but exactly the same idea), you need to think about the assumptions or guesses you are making about what will and will not work in your community. As you begin planning the strategies you will put into place to affect your outcomes, you will be making a number of guesses or assumptions about what will and will not work to address your issues and achieve your outcomes. These are not “wild guesses” but guesses based on your research into what has been learned about some strategies in other communities. (See the “Understanding the Barriers to Success through Research” Tip Sheet in the Community Development Guide Book.)

Even so, the application of a best-practice strategy to your community is still an experiment until you learn that it actually works in your community.

This chapter will introduce the concept of assumptions and present a technique, “assumption dominoes,” to help you identify the assumptions you will be testing when you implement your strategies.

What is an assumption?

An assumption is a guess about the way the world works. The strategies you will be implementing are linked to your outcomes by one or more assumptions.

In everyday life we make lots of assumptions:

- We assume that if we eat well, we will stay healthy.
- We assume that if we take medication for a headache, the pain will go away.
- We assume that it is (or is not) safe for our children to go to the park alone.
- We assume that if we listen to the weather forecast, we will know how to dress for the day.

Your assumptions about the way the world works are based on past knowledge and experience. You couldn’t make it through a day if you didn’t have some sense of order and predictability. Over all the years you’ve been around, you have built up a pretty solid sense of the way the world works.

Your sense and your fellow collaborative members’ sense of the way the world works in your community will be brought to bear when you proceed through issue analysis as part of your strategic planning process. When you look for the underlying causes to your issue, you will be looking for what is known and what is assumed. Out of this process, you will come up with strategies to address the issue—again based on what has been learned by others and your understanding of the way the world works in your community. Every one of the issues—and certainly every one of the child and family outcomes—identified by collaboratives has to do with changing human behavior in some way. Everyone involved in identifying strategies will be making assumptions or taking guesses about what will work to change behavior.

Why are assumptions important?

Your evaluation design will be built around the assumptions that connect your child and family outcomes to your strategies, so it will be very important to identify what those assumptions are. When you implement your strategies, you are going to be testing those assumptions.

How do assumptions relate causes to strategies?

Let’s look at how this might play out in a community. If the issue is access to health care, the collaborative is likely to have a discussion about why this is a problem and what can be done about it. The group may decide this is an issue because:

- There aren’t enough local doctors, or
- There are enough doctors but not enough who will taken Medicaid-eligible patients, or
- The doctors are there but the folks who need them don’t have transportation, or
- The doctors are not respectful of diverse cultures, so many of the people in the community won’t go to them.

In trying to understand your issue, you will put forth hypotheses (guesses or assumptions) about what is behind the issue. These assumptions are very, very important because they will drive the strategies you will come up with. Look at the four assumptions above as they relate to the outcome...
“Children will be healthy”:
- Children aren’t healthy because there aren’t enough doctors.
- Children aren’t healthy because there are lots of poor children and the doctors won’t see them.
- Children aren’t healthy because there is no transportation to get them to the doctors.
- Children aren’t healthy because their families are uncomfortable going to the doctors we have.

Notice that these are very different assumptions about the way the world works. A collaborative is likely to come up with very different strategies to address the problem, depending on which of these assumptions the members think is operating.

What happens if assumptions are wrong?
Assumptions are guesses about how things are connected. Note that any of the assumptions in the example above could be wrong. What’s likely to happen if the collaborative bases its strategy on the wrong assumption? It’s not likely to make much of a difference in the health of children.

How do assumptions connect strategies to child and family outcomes?
Let’s take an example. Members of the Healthy Children’s Collaborative have selected child abuse as their issue. Their outcomes are “Children will be safe from abuse and neglect in their homes” and “Families will be safe and nurturing for their children.” In looking at the causes for child abuse in their community, they have identified a lack of family-centered recreational activities as one of the factors contributing to child abuse. They decide that one strategy they will try to decrease child abuse in their community will be to develop more recreational opportunities for families.

What’s the assumption? That there is a connection between recreational activities and child abuse.

What happens if their assumption is correct? When the collaborative provides recreational opportunities for families, the incidence of child abuse will go down.

What happens if their assumption is wrong? The collaborative won’t do much—at least not with this strategy—toward achieving the outcome of “Children will be safe from abuse and neglect in their homes.”

Often there is not just one but a series of assumptions that links a child or family outcome to a strategy.

How do we identify our assumptions?
Assumption dominoes
One way you can connect your strategies to your outcomes is through a technique we call “assumption dominoes.” The objective is to identify everything that needs to happen if the strategy is to affect the outcome.

Use the following example to describe the assumption dominoes process to the collaborative or subgroup of your collaborative assigned the task of identifying underlying assumptions.

Step 1: Write down a strategy and the child outcome it is expected to affect on separate pieces of paper. Place these at opposite ends of a large sheet of paper (use Post-It paper or place pieces on “sticky” paper).
Step 2: Ask “What has to happen first if this strategy is to affect this outcome?” Write this on a piece of paper. Put this paper next to the strategy. If you see points that require clarification (for example, “which families?”), include them too.

**STRATEGY:** Provide family-centered recreational activities.  
**Families** will use them (which families?).  
**CHILD OUTCOME:** Children will be safe in their homes.

Step 3: Ask “What has to happen next if this strategy is to affect this outcome?” Write this on a piece of paper. Put it next to the first step.

**STRATEGY:** Provide family-centered recreational activities.  
**Families** will use them (which families?).  
**Families** will experience less stress.  
**CHILD OUTCOME:** Children will be safe in their homes.

Step 4: Continue this process until all the links between the strategy and outcome are specified. The number of steps between your strategy and child outcome will vary, depending on the strategy. Stop when your answer to the “what happens next” question is a change in the child outcome.

**STRATEGY:** Provide family-centered recreational activities.  
**Families** will use them (which families?).  
**Families** will experience less stress.  
**Families** will provide safe environments for their children.  
**CHILD OUTCOME:** Children will be safe in their homes.
This is the chain of dominoes, with each domino linked to the ones before and after it. For the strategy to be effective, that is, for the strategy to bring about the outcome, every single step in that assumption chain has to be correct. Just like a chain of dominoes that fall over one on the other, if you pull one out, you’ve broken the chain and the chain reaction. For example, if recreation activities are offered but families don’t attend or utilize them, the link between providing recreational activities and affecting the safety of children in their homes is broken.

What’s another example?

Let’s look at another possible strategy for child abuse: parenting classes.

In looking for causal factors, the community has decided that one of the factors underlying child abuse is that parents lack knowledge about appropriate child behavior. Many parents don’t know that it is normal for two-year-olds to throw temper tantrums, and they don’t know what to do about it when they do. The community decides to institute parenting classes.

What are the assumptions about underlying causes?

- Child abuse is caused by a lack of parenting knowledge.
- Parenting classes are a way to successfully address that problem.

What has to happen for those parenting classes to reduce child abuse? What are the assumptions that must be correct for this strategy to work?
When you set about to design your strategies, you will be making many assumptions about what will and will not work with regard to the child outcome you have identified in your community. **Make your assumptions explicit. Identify them. List them. Discuss them.**

**How do the assumptions relate to the evaluation design?**

Identifying and discussing the assumptions behind your strategy will allow you to run a “logic check” among your collaborative members on whether those assumptions make sense and whether the strategy is based on sound assumptions and is likely to have an effect. You are also laying the groundwork for your evaluation design, which will involve asking questions and collecting data to test the accuracy of each of the assumptions.

When we get to talking about evaluation design, we will help you figure out how to test each of these assumptions. You will want to test each of them because then, if something breaks down in the chain of assumptions, you’ll be able to pinpoint where the assumptions went wrong and decide what to do about it. The evaluation data will allow you to monitor whether there are any breaks in the assumption chain, and thus modify your strategy to increase your likelihood of success. For example, you may find that parents are not attending the parenting classes because they are held too close to dinner time. Enrollment increases when you schedule classes at a later time. By making this change in your strategy, you are able to improve your chances of achieving your child outcome.

**What are short-term vs. long-term outcomes?**

The dominoes between the strategy and the outcome are intermediate outcomes or **short-term outcomes** that need to happen before the **long-term outcome** can be achieved. The child outcomes at the end of the previous examples (e.g., “Children will be safe from abuse and neglect in their homes”) are the long-term outcomes. The short-term outcomes are parents attending the classes or using the recreational activities, and increasing their knowledge or experiencing less stress.

**How are assumptions connected to the three layers of outcomes?**

Now go back to the nested circles of community, family, and child outcomes. The strategies you are developing will generally involve trying to put something in place in the community: a program, a service, a resource, something that wasn’t in the community before. In many instances, this new resource will be expected to change something about all or some families in the community. This change in turn will bring about some kind of change in a health or wellness outcome for children. As we said in Chapter 2, what happens to families affects the health of children, and what happens or exists in communities has a direct effect on how well families are able to raise children. The health of communities, families, and children are linked together. As you go about developing your strategies, identify each of the dominoes that link the strategy or community outcome to a change in families (a family outcome) and how that change will link to a change in children (the child outcome).

When should we be checking our assumptions? You will need to be talking about assumptions from the time you begin planning what strategy to implement until the time you have completed your work on that particular strategy. Assumptions will be part of your **issue analysis** and identification of **underlying causes**. (See discussion in Phase II: Asset-Based Community Planning of the *We Did It Ourselves: A Guide Book to Improve the Well-Being of Children Through Community Development.*) As you begin to formulate strategies, you’ll need to look carefully at the assumptions you are making—and possibly even reject some strategies if the collaborative sees the assumptions as unreasonable. Later, the evaluation data you collect will provide information about the validity of your assumptions.

Assumptions aren’t a stage the collaborative passes through. You’ll need to identify them early and revisit them as often as necessary. A learning organization continually revises its assumptions on the basis of new knowledge.
EXAMPLES FROM REAL LIFE:
Learning by Evaluating Your Assumptions

Modoc Collaborative - Families Matter adopted a “Train-the-Trainer” strategy. This strategy was designed to train parents to become parent mentors after receiving intensive training in parenting workshops. The assumption dominoes for this strategy were as follows:

1. Parent mentors will be trained by the parenting specialist.
2. Parent mentors will learn new skills.
3. Parent mentors will present workshops in various locations and at various times.
4. Parents will develop knowledge of positive parenting skills, child development, and the knowledge of what effect substances have on the unborn child and the family.
5. Parents will use these new skills and provide a positive environment for their children.

Because the newly trained parent mentors were volunteers, the collaborative expected that the mentors would have a different and perhaps more effective approach than agency staff in reaching people who were not seeking parenting classes at the Family Center. Once these volunteers completed the 12-week course, the collaborative expected that the newly trained mentors would use the new skills they had learned to present workshops to other parents. These parents would develop and use positive parenting skills.

By evaluating their assumptions about this strategy, the Modoc Collaborative learned that the Train-the-Trainer activity was not working the way they had expected. Although mentors received training and learned the new skills as predicted in their first two assumptions, none of the parent mentors had been able to use these skills in providing workshops for other parents (the third short-term outcome). With this break in the assumption chain, it was clear to the collaborative that they would not reach their other expected outcomes for this activity, that more parents would learn and use positive parenting skills. Consequently, the Modoc Collaborative re-examined the Train-the-Trainer strategy and their expectations for this program.

Collaborative members realized that they had not anticipated the positive impact the program would have on the parent “mentors” who had received the intensive training, in terms of both their growth as individuals and their ability to take on other important roles within their community. Although various obstacles had prevented the program graduates from teaching parenting workshops, they had become involved in other collaborative areas, such as becoming Court Appointed Special Advocate volunteers. The collaborative decided to change the name used to describe the graduates of the training program from “parent mentors” to “parent advocates,” which they felt better described the role these parents now played. The collaborative invited representatives from the county welfare-to-work program to be involved in helping to develop the training program and to refer welfare-to-work participants to the program. Modoc’s short-term outcomes were changed from teaching parenting workshops to empowering parents as individuals and advocates through intensive parenting workshops.
Worksheet 4: Assumption Dominoes

Purpose: To help identify the assumptions that link strategies and outcomes.
Write the strategy on a piece of paper and the outcome on another piece of paper. Place the strategy on the far left and the outcome on the far right on sticky paper. Work from the strategy by asking the question: “What would we expect to happen if this strategy were put in place?” Write the answer on a piece of paper and place it next to the strategy. Now repeat the question: “What would we expect to happen if this occurs?” Identify each step of the chain until the answer to the question is a change in the outcome.

When the chain has been completed, look it over to decide whether the strategy selected is logically linked to the outcome. If not, revise the strategy and begin again with assumption dominoes.