Love is the best gift you can give a child.

WE DID IT OURSELVES

AN EVALUATION GUIDE BOOK

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Chapter 6.
Evaluation Methods:
Answering Your Evaluation Questions

Now that you have evaluation questions for your strategy or strategies and each of your assumptions or short-term outcomes, your collaborative will need to decide how you will answer those questions. You will be finding ways to answer the “Did we do it?” and “Did it happen?” questions. There are many ways, or methods, to answer your evaluation questions. What you need to know, who can provide the answers, and when you should collect the data are some of the things to consider when you decide on the method to use to answer each evaluation question.

Part II of this Guide looks at what you need to do to get the information that will answer your evaluation questions. Collecting the right information from the right people at the right time is essential to learning how your implementation efforts are going and why. This chapter will provide an overview of methods for collecting data to answer your evaluation questions. Specific evaluation methods will be discussed in detail in Chapters 7, 8, and 9.

What are evaluation methods?

Evaluation methods are ways to collect data in order to answer your evaluation questions. You may have already identified the methods you will use to answer the evaluation questions related to your long-term child and family outcomes. These are the data you are collecting for the indicators (see Chapter 3), and they will answer the evaluation questions about long-term child and family outcomes.

What are some examples of ways to collect data?

There are many ways of gathering information to answer your evaluation questions. Some common ways include:

- Written surveys or questionnaires
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Direct observations (including videotaping)
- Knowledge tests
- Other tests or assessments
- Administrative data (such as school attendance records or crime statistics).

Each of these methods for collecting data will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9.

Evaluation methods are generally considered to fall into one of two categories: qualitative methods and quantitative methods.

Quantitative methods allow selected issues to be studied in detail and in depth. Examples of qualitative methods include focus groups, unstructured interviews, and videotapings. Qualitative methods provide the opportunity to study something without having to decide beforehand exactly what type of information will be coded. For example, a qualitative approach to answering a question about why families don’t use community recreation facilities more often might include observations of the current programs, focus groups with parents of young children who haven’t used the recreation facilities, and some questioning of parents who do use the programs. Qualitative methods provide rich information but can be very challenging to analyze because sometimes it is hard to know how to reduce so much information to key findings. If you have conducted focus groups in the past, you might have had this experience.

Quantitative methods involve a set of common measures with structured responses. Examples of quantitative evaluation methods include institutional data, structured interviews, survey questionnaires, tests, checklists for observing behavior, etc. The questions for the interview or questionnaire are worked out ahead of time, so every person is asked the exact same questions. Continuing with the example above, an alternative approach to learning why community recreation programs are not being used would be to do a community survey. A set of survey questions and likely responses would be developed by the evaluator. This survey would be distributed to a large number of people. The advantage of this approach is that it provides information from lots of people. The disadvantage is that the person developing the survey needs to know the questions to ask and the responses people are likely to give to each. Answers to the questions are tallied, and results are presented numerically (“63% of the parents said...”). Quantitative evaluation methods work well if you want to collect information from a large group or population of people. They also produce data that are easier and quicker to analyze.

Can we use qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods?

You can use both qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods. Sometimes a quantitative method will be more appropriate to answer your
evaluation question, and other times a qualitative method will be more appropriate. Sometimes both are appropriate. In general, the choice between qualitative and quantitative evaluations is based on how much you already know about what you are studying, how many people you want to reach, and what kind of data you want. Is it more important to know general information from a lot of people or in-depth information from a few? The type of evaluation method you use will depend on how your collaborative answers these evaluation questions.

Who do we collect data from?

Deciding who to collect information from to answer a particular evaluation question is an important part of developing an evaluation method. You need to decide which people are most able to provide the data that will help you answer your evaluation questions. What you want to know about them or from them depends on your evaluation questions. The group of people you are trying to reach with a particular strategy or activity are your **target population**. It is for this group that the change you seek is critical, and it is they who have the information that will help you answer your questions.

Identify your target population by asking “Who are we trying to reach with this strategy or activity?” The target population for a community-wide information campaign would be the entire community. The target population for a parents’ hot line would be parents. The target population for an immunization program would be all young children 0-5 years old. You will need to collect data from or about your target population to answer your evaluation questions.

Some target populations will be more or less receptive to a particular type of data collection. You will need to consider which approach will be most productive. For example, would the target population of parents of young children be more receptive to a telephone interview, a focus group, or a mail survey?

Small target population: If your target population is small, you can collect data from all or nearly all of them. For example, if your target population is women and children in shelters, you could conceivably collect data from all or nearly all of the residents. Qualitative evaluation methods can be effective with small target populations.

Large target population: If your target population is large, you may need to collect data from only some of them. For example, if your target population is parents of young children, you could collect data from some parents at each elementary school in your community. The group of people you collect data from is referred to as your **sample**. With large target populations, quantitative evaluation methods are most common, although qualitative populations could be used with subsets of a large target population.

When do we collect data?

Since the intent of your strategies and related activities is to effect some type of change in your community or a segment of your community, you want to collect data over time that will show that change has occurred. There are two ways to measure or show this change: repeated measures and retrospective data collection.

With repeated measures, the same data are collected two or more times on some type of schedule. The same data collection method (the same survey, test, interview, etc.) is used repeatedly. The first time the data are collected provides the **baseline**. The baseline is the starting point. We have already discussed the need to collect baseline data on your child and family indicators. If it is completed prior to implementing a strategy, a first-time measure can also be a pretest of attitudes or knowledge.

The same data are subsequently collected with a regular interval of time between collections, such as annually, semiannually, or at the end of a class or the end of a public awareness campaign. The second and subsequent times you use the method to collect data are **interim measures** or **posttests**.

Baseline or pretest data collection is done before a strategy, activity, or intervention is put in place. It tells you about your target population before you try to make any changes. For example, pretest data tell you how much parenting skills knowledge a participant had before taking a parenting class. In another example, baseline or pretest data tell you what percentage of your community knew what constituted grounds for reporting child abuse and neglect before a public awareness campaign to increase reporting of child abuse and neglect was implemented.

Data collection for posttests or interim measures is done at key points during the implementation of the strategy, activity, or intervention, and at the conclusion of it. Comparisons can then be made between the results of the pretest or baseline and the results of the posttest(s) or interim measures to show whether change occurred. If an intervention is short, such as a parenting class, posttesting is done at its conclusion. If the intervention is repeated
with a new group of participants, pre- and posttesting are repeated with them. Comparisons between pre- and posttests of parenting knowledge would indicate whether participants’ knowledge changed.

For longer-term activities, such as a public awareness campaign on child abuse and neglect (what it is and how to report it), subsequent data collection could be done annually or semiannually. The results of the later data collection on the community’s knowledge of what constitutes child abuse and neglect would be compared with the results of the baseline. This comparison would tell you whether the percentage of the community who could correctly identify child abuse and neglect had increased, decreased, or stayed the same.

**Retrospective data** collection is the second way to collect data to show change. Retrospective data are collected after the strategy, activity, or intervention is completed. This method asks respondents to provide current information, as well as information about a previous period of time, and may also ask them to evaluate how much change has occurred between the previous and current points in time. If a strategy, activity, or intervention has been in place for a considerable period of time, retrospective data collection is required. If for some other reason data collection can be done only once, retrospective data collection also is the desirable approach.

**Is our method feasible?**

Some additional considerations need to be taken into account when developing the methods for collecting data: your collaborative’s human and financial resources.

**Human resources.** Will you have the human resources to do the data collection? If you are considering conducting focus groups with potential reporters of child abuse or neglect, the evaluator/facilitator will need to be well trained, sensitive, and observant. If you are considering conducting a structured telephone interview, the interviewers will need to be trained to be objective, and they may need to be from the target group to be trusted or perceived as credible. You will have to determine how many interviewers you need to achieve the number of completed interviews you want within a certain period of time. Depending on your resources, you may want to consider hiring additional help. One collaborative found that hiring students from a local college or university was an affordable way to conduct a door-to-door neighborhood survey.

**Financial resources.** What will be the costs of the methods you have selected? As mentioned in Chapter 4, there is a general rule of thumb that evaluation should require about 10% of the total investment in a project. Some methods are considerably more costly than others. For example, a mail survey costs less to do than an in-home, in-person survey if you have to hire people to do your interviews. The 10% refers to the entire evaluation effort and will need to cover data collection, analysis, and reporting. The abilities to accomplish these activities may be found among your membership, or you may want to hire someone with a certain expertise to assist you.

It is important to select the evaluation method that will provide you with the data you need, given the resources you have available.

**Do we need a method for each evaluation question?**

You will need to identify an evaluation method for each of your implementation and long-term-outcome evaluation questions. The same method can often be used to answer more than one question. For the evaluation questions on implementing your strategy (“Did we do it?”), you will answer the question by documenting the implementation. For the evaluation questions about your long-term outcomes, the methods will be the ones that you are using to collect data on your indicators.
For the strategies you choose to evaluate in depth, each short-term outcome question will need to have a corresponding method for collecting data. For the evaluation question on each short-term outcome (“Did we achieve the first, second, third, etc., short-term outcome?”), you will identify one or more methods to collect data to answer the question.
The following is an example showing methods for the public awareness campaign on child abuse that was introduced in the previous chapters. Keep in mind that this is only an example, and alternative methods are possible and may even be preferable. Each of the data collection methods mentioned is addressed in Chapters 8 and 9.
Measuring the implementation of a strategy
The implementation of a strategy is measured by documenting how, when, where, and by whom the strategy was implemented.

Measuring the first short-term outcome
For the evaluation question related to the first short-term outcome, “Did the public awareness campaign message reach potential reporters of child abuse?”, the evaluation method could be a questionnaire surveying selected target groups within the community every six months.

Type of data collection: The data would be collected with a mail survey questionnaire to provide quantitative data. Specific items on the questionnaire would address more detailed evaluation questions, such as whether the respondent saw billboards, heard public service announcements, read newspaper articles, or read the newsletters.

Target group: Because the target group is so large, that is, the entire community, data collected from a sample of the community would be sufficient. There are some key segments within the community that are of special interest because of their contact with families at risk of child abuse or neglect: health professionals, teachers, parents, neighbors of low-income families, individuals with contact with substance abusers, etc. These segments of the community would be targeted and a representative number of them identified to be surveyed.

Timing of data collection: The data collected the first time are retrospective data. The questionnaire would ask whether the respondent had seen the billboards, public service announcements, or newspaper or newsletter articles in the last six months, and therefore is retrospective in its design. Since one can assume that no one would have seen any of the campaign approaches before their implementation, the level of awareness at the time of the first data collection will measure the change from zero. Subsequent data collection times, every six months, would be repeated measures. They will show changes in awareness compared with previous data collection times.

Measuring the second short-term outcome
For the evaluation question related to the second short-term outcome, “Did the potential reporters understand and remember the message?”, the evaluation method could be additional items on the same mail survey questionnaire.

Type of data collection: The data would be collected with a mail questionnaire to provide quantitative data. Specific items on the questionnaire would address more detailed evaluation questions, such as what constitutes child abuse and neglect, how to report abuse or neglect, whether the respondents feel an obligation to report, whether their attitude toward reporting abuse or neglect has changed, and whether they attribute a change in attitude to seeing or hearing one of the messages of the campaign.

Target group: The same.

Timing of data collection: Data collected semiannually.

Measuring the third short-term outcome
For the evaluation question related to the third short-term outcome, “Did the potential reporters increase their reporting of child abuse?”, the evaluation method would be an item on the questionnaire asking the respondents whether their reporting of child abuse had increased. Child abuse reporting data also should be collected from institutional sources, such as the local child protective services agency or its equivalent. Social workers taking reports could be asked to collect some additional data, such as whether the reporters had seen or heard the public awareness campaign and what target groups they represented.

Type of data collection: Community survey and institutional quantitative data.

Target population: Same for survey. Actual reporters of child abuse/neglect for institutional data collection.

Timing of data collection: Data collected semiannually for the survey. Annual institutional data collection.

Measuring the long-term outcome
For the evaluation question related to the long-term outcome, “Are more children safe in their homes from abuse and neglect?”, the evaluation method would be the data collection method specified in indicators of long-term outcomes. In this case, the indicators were the number of child abuse reports and number of children removed from families—data to be collected from the local protective services agency.
Type of data collection: Administrative quantitative data.

Target population: Children in the community.

Timing of data collection: Collected annually.
The next chapters will explore several methods of collecting data in detail. Chapter 7 helps you identify what evaluation methods work best for which types of evaluation questions. Chapter 8 tells you how to document your hard work so that you can answer your implementation questions. Chapter 9 looks at additional data collection tools, such as interviews and questionnaires, that you may need to use to answer your other evaluation questions. Before deciding on which methods work best to answer your evaluation questions, take the time to read the next three chapters. There is a lot of information presented in these chapters to digest. Remember, the goal of evaluation is to learn about what you are doing, the effect you are having, and how you can improve this for next year: to be a learning community. The reason for thinking carefully about evaluation methods is so that you can collect the best information you can. Your decisions will be only as sound as the information that they are based on.
Chapter 7.
Identifying the Focus of the Evaluation Questions:
A Step on the Way to Selecting Evaluation Methods

As you learned in Chapter 6, after developing a set of evaluation questions, you need to select a method to answer each question. The method is the tool or technique you will use to collect the information needed to answer your evaluation question. You may find that many of your questions can be answered by the same method.

An intermediate step along the way to selecting a method is to identify the general topic areas that you want to learn about. The topic areas are the focus of your evaluation questions. Some methods are better suited than others to address certain topics. Identifying the focus of each of your evaluation questions will point you in the direction of some methods and away from others.

In this chapter, we discuss eight possible topic areas that CPHC collaboratives might be interested in learning about. These topics are:

- Implementation
- Opportunities in the community
- Participation and utilization
- Awareness
- Satisfaction
- Attitudes, norms, and psychological states
- Knowledge
- Behavior.

This set does not represent all possible topics, but we suspect it encompasses the topic areas of most of the evaluation questions that you have developed. Each of these topic areas is described briefly in this chapter, along with a very brief discussion of appropriate methods. These recommendations are summarized in a matrix with accompanying examples. The methods from which you will be choosing include:

- Documentation
- Written surveys
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Tests of knowledge
- Other tests or assessments
- Direct observation
- Administrative data.

Documentation will be discussed in Chapter 8. The remaining methods will be discussed in detail in Chapter 9.

1. Implementation

Evaluation questions about implementation refer to carrying out your strategies and activities. In Chapter 5, we described implementation questions as the “did we do it?” questions. Chapter 5 also contains many examples of implementation questions, that is, questions that ask about the extent to which a strategy or activity was implemented and the resources that were mobilized to do so.

2. Opportunities in the Community

For some of you, evaluation questions about opportunities in the community are the same thing as questions about implementation. Many collaboratives have designed strategies that focus on increasing opportunities in the community (for example, providing more recreation programs, instituting parenting classes, or developing activities that allow parents to spend time with their children and with other parents). For these collaboratives, the strategy and the opportunity are one and the same thing.

Other collaboratives may be implementing strategies in which the opportunity should (but may not) result from the implementation of the strategy. For example, if a collaborative was implementing an economic development strategy, the intended result would be more jobs in the community. The increase in jobs would be the increased opportunity in the community. A second example would be a community that was planning to implement a strategy designed to train more licensed child care providers. The intent of the strategy is to increase opportunities in the community. The number of child care providers and the number of children who can be provided with licensed child care would be the resulting opportunity.

The distinction is important for these collaboratives because it would be foolish for them to assume that the desired opportunities would increase just because the strategy was implemented. In fact, this is an assumption that needs to be tested. The evaluation questions related to opportunities are specific forms of “did the [opportunity] increase?”

Methods to measure increased opportunities in the community include documentation (that is, documenting the result of putting the strategy in place), direct observation (for example, observing families playing in the park after the cleanup activities), and use of administrative data (for example, the number of jobs in the community).
3. Participation and Utilization

Participation refers to attendance at an event, a class, or a program. Utilization generally refers to the use of a service. Both have to do with the number of people who take advantage of a particular resource that is available in the community.

Some collaboratives may have identified resources in the form of programs and services that exist in the community, but for various reasons are not being used as fully as they might be. These collaboratives might be instituting a strategy designed to get people to take fuller advantage of the resources that are present in the community. Collaboratives that are instituting new programs will probably be interested in tracking the extent to which the community in general or a particular segment (for example, Spanish-speaking parents) uses the new resource. Usually, collaboratives will be seeking to increase participation. However, for some services that address negative aspects of community life, such as foster care for children removed from abusive homes, the ultimate goal is a reduction in use.

In addition to tracking the number of people participating, collaboratives may want to know about why more people aren’t participating or why they drop out after they start a program. Answers to questions such as these provide concrete information that can be used to make resources more accessible and more accessed.

Examples of evaluation questions about participation and utilization include:

- How many people participated? Attended? Made use of the service?
- How can participation/utilization be increased?
- What are the barriers to participation?
- Why didn’t more people participate?
- Why are former participants no longer participating?

In general, “how many?” questions are answered by a count. These counts can be obtained through actual head counts, sign-in sheets, attendance checks, or, for events with lots of people, giving tickets to a raffle or a free treat to every attendee. The “how?” and “why?” questions, however, are better answered through surveys, interviews, or focus groups because these techniques provide more qualitative information.

4. Awareness

Evaluation questions about awareness refer to people’s knowledge of a specific event, program, or aspect of community life. Unlike participation, which refers to actually taking part in something, awareness just means the person knows something exists. A collaborative might have evaluation questions about the community’s awareness of a positive aspect of the community (for example, a resource) or a negative aspect (for example, child abuse, drug abuse). Generally, collaboratives will be trying to increase awareness.

Examples of evaluation questions about awareness include:

- How many people were aware of the event? The resource? The class? The campaign?
- How many people in the community are aware of child abuse as a problem in our community?
- How many people are aware of the recreation opportunities in the community?
- How did people become aware of the event?
- Did awareness increase over the year? Half year?
- How can awareness be increased?

Written surveys, interviews, and focus groups are well suited to answer questions about awareness.

5. Satisfaction

Satisfaction questions include the evaluation questions related to how people felt about a specific event or program. This group includes questions about how people felt about something overall as well as what specifically they liked and did not like about it. Assessing satisfaction can provide critical information for evaluating the success of your activities. If people like something, they are more likely to participate, learn, etc. If they do not like it, you need to find out why.

Examples of evaluation questions about satisfaction include:

- How did participants feel about the class, the event, the activity, the program?
- Were participants satisfied with the event, class, resource, etc.?
- What did they like? Why?
- What didn’t they like? Why?
- How could the class, event, activity, program, etc. be improved?
- How many would participate again? Why or why not?

Written surveys, interviews, and focus groups are well suited to address evaluation questions related to satisfaction.
6. Attitudes, Norms, and Psychological States

Collaboratives asking evaluation questions about attitudes, norms, and psychological states are trying to change some aspect of how people think or feel about themselves or about their community. Racial prejudice, for example, is an attitude. Acceptance of drug use or alcohol use are community norms. Belief in corporal punishment as a way to change children’s behavior is an attitude or a belief. Many collaboratives have recognized the stress and isolation of families raising young children. Stress and isolation are dimensions of how people experience life and how they feel. Attitudes are not the same as behavior, although they are often seen as an underlying factor. Someone’s behavior may or may not accurately reflect their attitudes and beliefs.

If you are addressing evaluation questions related to attitudes and psychological states, you might notice that they tend to be “farther removed” from the strategy on the assumption of dominoes chain. They also can be challenging to measure.

Examples of evaluation questions related to attitudes, norms, and psychological states include:

- Has there been a change in how the community thinks about _____ (drinking, drug use, children staying unattended, etc.)?
- Are families less isolated?
- Are families more socially supported?
- Are families experiencing less stress?
- Do more children have improved self-esteem?

Many instruments measuring attitudes or norms have been developed for use in research studies. These instruments tend to have many, sometimes very many, items that get at several dimensions of what is being measured. For example, an instrument called the “Child Abuse Potential Inventory” (CAP) was developed to screen individuals suspected of abuse. The CAP contains 160 items and measures things like distress, loneliness, and unhappiness.

An alternative approach is to measure attitudes through a very small number of items that are part of, for example, a larger community survey. Items could be included such as “I have friends and family I can turn to when I need help with my child” or “I think this community is a safe place to live.” More items give you better measures of attitudes or psychological states, but sometimes it is not practical to administer an entire instrument. It is sometimes more feasible to administer part of an existing survey than to administer the whole thing.

Other ways to assess attitudes and beliefs include focus groups (Do families with young children feel isolated in this community? Why?) and interviews.

7. Knowledge

Knowledge refers to what people know or know how to do. For example, learning that there is a relationship between child abuse and drug abuse is a change in what someone knows. Knowing how to use “time outs” as a technique for dealing with children’s problem behaviors refers to something someone knows how to do. Knowledge is distinct from behavior. People might, and often do, have knowledge that they do not use. A change in knowledge does not guarantee a change in behavior, but it is often a necessary step (and a success that can be celebrated).

Evaluation questions related to changes in knowledge include:

- Do parents know more about how to care for children’s teeth?
- Do more children know how to care for their teeth?
- Do more parents know that reading to young children is important?
- Do parents know more about normal child development?
- Do more parents know about good nutrition?
- Do children show improved school achievement?
- Do more parents have job skills that make them employable?
- Do parents have improved literacy skills?

Changes in what people know can be assessed through items on written surveys such as “Two-year-olds can generally speak in complete sentences. True or False?” Written instruments made up entirely of such items are better described as tests. Your community may be adopting or adapting a program developed elsewhere, such as a packaged curriculum. If that program comes with its own test, it is almost always better to administer the instruments that come with the program. Administrative data, such as school achievement data, can be used to track changes in knowledge among school-aged children.

8. Behavior

The last category of evaluation questions refers to behavior change. Many collaboratives carry out activities in the community that are ultimately designed to change how people—be they parents,
children, adolescents, or community members at large—behave. The change could be an increase in positive behaviors, a decrease in negative behaviors, or both. Behaviors tend to be the focus of dominoes at the end of the assumption dominoes chain. In many cases, the child and family outcomes of your collaborative refer to behavior change.

There are numerous evaluation questions that relate to changes in behavior, for example:
- Are parents providing more nurturing environments for their children?
- Are parents using more positive discipline methods?
- Do parents take their children to the library or the park more often?
- Are parents reading to their children more often?
- Are more parents taking their children for their immunizations on time?
- Do children show improved school attendance?
- Are more parents attending school board meetings?
- Are parents volunteering in schools more?
- Are children watching less TV?
- Are there fewer behavior problems in schools?
- Has there been a decrease in alcohol abuse?
- Are fewer teens sexually active?
- Has there been a decrease in drug use?
- Has there been a decrease in child abuse?
- Are fewer children left unattended before and after school?

Assessing behavior and change in behavior can be difficult because many behaviors are not readily observable (child abuse, drug use). One approach to collecting behavior data is to ask people to report on their own behavior. This can be done through written surveys (“In the past week, how many hours of television has your child watched?”), interviews (“If your child throws a temper tantrum in the grocery store, what would you do?”), or focus groups. The limitation with self-reporting of behavior is that people may not answer honestly or may not recall how often they have done something. Direct observation is an especially strong method for recording behavior, but it can be very costly to carry out and often is not feasible. You may have already identified some ways to measure behavior through completing your community assessment and selecting your indicators. The statistics collected by your police department (arrests), your social service agencies (reported child abuse cases), your school systems (school attendance), and other organizations can be powerful ways to answer evaluation questions about behavior.

**Are some methods better suited than others to particular evaluation topics?**

The answer to this question is a resounding “yes,” and that is why it is important to think about the topic areas in your evaluation questions. The matrix on the next page shows methods that might typically be used to address each of the eight topic areas discussed above. The matrix should be taken as a general guideline. You may have a good reason why you want or need to use a different method. Alternatively, you may come up with a clever application of a method to a topic area that we have not thought of. Don’t let the matrix restrict your creativity.

The techniques listed across the top of the matrix are discussed in Chapters 8 and 9. In using the matrix to help you select a method, as with all other aspects of designing and carrying out your evaluation, you may wish to consult an outside researcher or evaluator.
## METHODS BY TOPIC AREAS MATRIX

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<th>Topic Areas of Evaluation Questions</th>
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The following are examples of methods that correspond to each of the checkmarks in the matrix. The letter in front of each example corresponds to the letter in the box of the matrix.

**Implementation/Resource Mobilization**

a. *Documentation*: Developing a form to document that a strategy was implemented, who was responsible, and who provided the resources (the Rotary Club donated food for an event, a newspaper column was published by the Reporter, etc.).
b. *Direct Observation*: Videotaping families at a community event.

c. *Documentation*: Developing a form to document that a resource or opportunity exists that did not previously (parenting classes, a recreation center).
d. *Direct Observation*: Photographing families using the recreation center, the job resource booth.
e. *Administrative Data*: Obtaining data on the number of high-quality child care slots available from the local child care resource and referral agency, or data on the number of jobs available from the local economic development committee.

**Opportunities in the Community**

c. *Documentation*: Developing a form to document that a resource or opportunity exists that did not previously (parenting classes, a recreation center).
d. *Direct Observation*: Photographing families using the recreation center, the job resource booth.
e. *Administrative Data*: Obtaining data on the number of high-quality child care slots available from the local child care resource and referral agency, or data on the number of jobs available from the local economic development committee.

**Participation/Utilization/How Many?**

f. *Documentation*: Developing a sign-in sheet to track the attendance at parenting classes or a community event. Using the circulation rates of a newspaper to estimate the number of people who read your Family Page.
g. *Direct Observation*: In-person observation of families attending a youth softball game.
h. *Administrative Data*: Acquiring school district data on the number of parents who volunteer at schools. Getting school attendance rates from schools.

**Issues Related to Utilization**

i. *Documentation*: Using enrollment data to determine whether a certain number or type of person did not return to parenting classes after attending the first one.
j. *Written Surveys*: Sending a survey in the mail to the parents who dropped out of the classes, asking why they did not finish the series.
k. *Interviews*: Conducting a telephone interview of parents who dropped out of the classes, asking why they did not finish the series.
l. *Focus Groups*: Bringing a group of people together to talk about reasons why they did not attend an event.

m. *Direct Observation*: Observing and recording how long children stay at the Wednesday night recreation program and what activities they participate in when they are there.

n. *Administrative Data*: Using agency client records to determine which segments of the community are using and not using CHDP clinics.

**Awareness**

o. *Written Surveys*: Sending a mail-in survey to find out whether people have heard of various community resources, like the after-school programs at the recreation center.
p. *Interviews*: Conducting in-person interviews of public officials to find out whether they are aware of the extent of child abuse in the community.
q. *Focus Groups*: Bringing parents together to talk about how much they know about parenting resources in the community and how they found out about them.

**Attitudes/Perceptions/Norms**

r. *Written Surveys*: Mailing an anonymous survey to find out the percentage of households that serve alcohol to minors.
s. *Interviews*: Conducting interviews of kindergarten teachers to find out whether children are more ready to start school this year than previously.
t. *Focus Groups*: Bringing a group of parents together to talk about feelings of isolation and support systems.
u. *Other Tests and Assessments*: Administering the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory to fourth-graders.
v. *Direct Observation*: Observing the decision-making process local policy-makers use in deciding whether to pass ordinances related to the sale of alcohol.
w. *Administrative Data*: Counting ordinances related to community norms around alcohol use.

**Satisfaction**

x. *Written Surveys*: Distributing a written questionnaire that asks about how well the babysitter training was received by the participants.
y. *Interviews*: Conducting interviews of key school staff to find out whether the after-school program is liked by the students.
z. *Focus Groups*: Bringing a group of children together to find out whether they are happy with the programs offered at the new recreation center.

aa. *Other Tests and Assessments*: Administering the published satisfaction survey that came with the published parenting curriculum you implemented.
**Knowledge**

bb. *Written Surveys:* Passing out a short questionnaire to find out whether parents know how to choose high-quality child care.

c. *Interviews:* Conducting a brief phone survey to investigate whether families know more about how to choose high-quality child care.

d. *Tests of Knowledge:* Developing a pre- and posttest to find out whether parents know more about appropriate nutrition after completing the parenting class. Administering the Knowledge of Child Development Inventory (KCDI) to assess parent knowledge.

e. *Administrative Data:* Collecting data from schools on reading achievement, grades.

**Behavior**

ff. *Written Surveys:* Asking a question on a survey about how often parents read with their child.

g. *Interviews:* Conducting a phone survey of school nurses to find out whether there is a decrease in children missing school because of illness.

hh. *Focus Groups:* Bringing a group of children together to find out how much television they typically watch.

ii. *Other Tests and Assessments:* Administering the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment Scale (HOME) to graduates of the parenting program.

jj. *Direct Observation:* Going to the playground to count the number of conflicts between youth. Going to school board meetings to count the number of parents who attend.

kk. *Administrative Data:* Collecting data from schools on disciplinary actions. Collecting data from county agencies on child abuse rates or domestic violence rates or arrests for driving while intoxicated.
Chapter 8.
Documenting Your Strategies and Activities: How to Answer Your Implementation Questions

You’ve identified your evaluation questions; now you’re ready to begin gathering the information to answer them. Most likely, the first set of evaluation questions you have to answer are those related to your strategies and activities. These are your implementation questions, the “did we do it?” questions (e.g., was a parenting class established?; was a Health Fair held?), and the “did we mobilize resources?” questions. This chapter will discuss how to answer your implementation questions through the documentation of activities and strategies.

How will we answer our implementation questions? (“Did we do it?”)

Implementation questions are usually best answered by documenting that the activity or strategy has been put in place or has occurred. (See Chapter 5 for more information on implementation questions.) Having systematic information available to your collaborative about your activities will help with your decision-making. It will help members reflect on whether the activity was a success and how it could be made better if it is to be repeated. This process is what enables you to become a learning community.
What does it mean to document?

To *document* simply means to keep track of what you have done. *Documentation* is a record of events or accomplishments; it is your evidence of what you have done.

**What types of activities will we need to document?**

You should document all of your collaborative’s activities and strategies that are included in your strategic action plan. You will want to document all activities (including those that are in addition to your strategic action plan) that consume a significant amount of time and resources, to make sure that your collaborative gets credit for all its hard work.

**Should we be documenting our strategies or our activities?**

For documentation, you will be focusing on your activities. As we described earlier, strategies are the broad set of related activities designed to target an issue or outcome, while an activity is one component of a strategy; for example, a media campaign is a strategy, and a family page in the newspaper or an announcement on the radio is an activity. It would be very difficult to document most strategies without first documenting each of the activities that are components of the strategies. For our media example, to keep track of a media campaign, you would need to keep track of each part of the campaign: the newspaper article, the radio and TV announcements. Therefore, for documentation, you will be focusing on your activities.

**When should we begin documenting activities and strategies?**

It is important to begin documenting strategies and activities as soon as you begin implementing them. For example, if your strategy is a media campaign, then you need to begin documentation as soon as the first newspaper article is published or radio announcement is aired. As soon as your collaborative begins an activity, you should begin documenting that activity.

**What if we’ve already begun some activities?**

Start documenting these activities now. If possible, you also might want to collect information about past activities. For example, if your collaborative has already begun a media campaign, if possible, collect information on the newspaper articles and the radio and TV announcements that have already occurred. The more time that slips by before you document your activities, the more information you will lose.

**How do you document?**

You can document in various ways. The most common kind of documentation is some form of record keeping. To ensure that you are consistent in the types of information you gather about your activities and strategies, you will often find it helpful to develop a form to use in keeping track of activities. There are many different types of forms that you can use, including logs, diaries, classroom sign-in sheets, registration sheets, etc. The type of form you design depends on the evaluation questions you are asking, which determine the types of information you would like to know.

You might want to document some activities by taking photographs of the activity and creating a picture scrapbook. You might also want to create a scrapbook that includes all of the articles or announcements run in the newspaper.

**How do we design a documentation form?**

The are two steps to designing a documentation form. First, you need to decide what types of information you want to include in your form. Then, once you know what information you want to collect, you need to create a form that lays out the items requesting the information in a way that makes the form easy to complete. If you are trying to include a great deal of information on one form, you might find it helpful to have someone on your collaborative or in your community who has good graphic or visual skills help design the form layout. Some examples of documentation forms are included at the end of this chapter.

**What should we include in a documentation form?**

The contents and format of your documentation form depend on your evaluation questions and the type of activity you are documenting.

There are three types of questions to think about when designing your documentation form:

1. **Answering evaluation questions about implementation**
   You want to document that you implemented your activity. The first set of evaluation questions about most activities includes the general “did we do it?” type of question, as well as several specific questions about “how did we do it?, “when did we do it?”, and “where did we do it?” The information
you need to collect to answer these questions depends on the type of activity you are implementing. The following are some examples of the types of information you might want to document about your activities related to the “did we do it?” questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Examples of Activities</th>
<th>Examples of types of information to consider collecting to answer “did we do it?” questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parenting classes</td>
<td>When classes were given, dates, times&lt;br&gt;Where classes were given&lt;br&gt;Content of the classes&lt;br&gt;Length of the sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper article</td>
<td>Date published&lt;br&gt;Where published&lt;br&gt;Topic&lt;br&gt;Number of newspaper column-inches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio or TV announcement</td>
<td>Date aired&lt;br&gt;Time of day aired&lt;br&gt;Where aired&lt;br&gt;Topic&lt;br&gt;Number of broadcast minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billboards</td>
<td>Date erected/date taken down&lt;br&gt;Where&lt;br&gt;Topic&lt;br&gt;Size of billboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large event (e.g., Health Fair)</td>
<td>Date held&lt;br&gt;Where held&lt;br&gt;Time of day held&lt;br&gt;Number of hours&lt;br&gt;Content or focus of event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting hot line</td>
<td>Hours of operation&lt;br&gt;Date initiated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family center established</td>
<td>Hours of operation&lt;br&gt;Location&lt;br&gt;Types of services/activities available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation program</td>
<td>Hours of operation&lt;br&gt;Locations&lt;br&gt;Types of activities available</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. **Answering evaluation questions about mobilizing resources**

The second set of questions you will want to answer are related to your “what resources did we mobilize to do it?” questions. You will want to collect information about the people, associations, and institutions involved in implementing each activity.

When documenting resources that have been mobilized, you will want to keep track of some of the following types of information:

- Types of groups and individuals involved
  - Individuals, e.g., community volunteers
  - Associations, e.g., Kiwanis clubs
  - Institutions, e.g., Department of Health and Human Services, hospitals
  - Private sector, e.g., business, newspapers
- Amount of time and money spent
- Amount of goods, services, or money donated
- Which individuals (e.g., who volunteered, which staff)
- From which agency.

For example, if you were implementing a Family Day, you would want to keep track of which agencies and associations participated and what businesses or organizations made donations and what they donated.

3. **Answering evaluation questions about participants**

The first two types of questions (about implementation and mobilizing resources) need to be included in all documentation of activities. Documentation for some types of activities naturally lends itself to also answering a third set of questions about participants—community members, children, and families involved in the activity. Evaluation questions about participants are actually questions about short-term outcomes, but the information is often collected through documentation. It is so critical to evaluating your strategies that we are mentioning it here. For example, if your activity is a parenting class, then in addition to including questions about implementation and resources on your form, it would be easy to include questions about the participants, such as who attended the class and which classes they attended, especially if the form is designed to be used as a class sign-in sheet. For other types of activities, it does not make sense to include information about participants on the documentation form, since this type of information would need to be collected in a different way. Using our media campaign example, you would not use the same form to document the publication of a newspaper article as you would to document who read the article, since you would need to use a different method to learn whether someone had read the article.

Some of the questions you might have about children, families, and community members involved with a strategy or activity include:

- How many people participated?
- Who is involved? Characteristics of the children, families, community members involved.
- Are these the people we meant to target? (Who is missing? Are there age groups, ethnic or language groups, or geographic areas that are not represented among those involved in activities? How can we reach them?)

Documenting the characteristics of children, families, and community members involved in your activities can give you valuable information to answer these types of questions. When documenting the characteristics of participants, you might want to consider requesting one or more of the following types of information:

- Birth date
- Ethnicity
- Gender
- Composition of the household
- Ages of those in household
- School status
- Language background of family members
- Geographic areas.

For large events, such as a Health Fair, you might be able to document only the number of people attending.

**How do we decide how much detail to include in our documentation?**

The process of obtaining information takes effort on the part of both those who give it and those who gather it. You need to consider carefully your resources, both for collecting information and for analyzing it. The level of detail of the information you collect depends on what you feel you will need to know to be able to improve your strategies. Having too little information will not allow you to answer your evaluation questions, while too much information can be overwhelming and burdensome. For example, after collecting information about mobilizing community resources, depending on the level of detail of the information, you will either be able to say “three people worked for a few months on this activity” or “it took three volunteers, Bob, Sue, and Mary, 1,000 hours to
implement this activity.” If you plan to do the activity again, it might be helpful to know exactly who was involved and how much time volunteers needed to commit. If this was a one-time activity, less detail might be sufficient. Level of detail is always a tradeoff between burden and the amount of information you need to improve your strategies.

**EXAMPLES FROM REAL LIFE:**
**Documenting Creatively**
The Tahoe/Colonial Collaborative had an inspiration when it came time to document the number of children who came to their annual Health and Safety Faire. Each child who attended received a “stamp card.” On one side of the stamp card was general information such as age, gender, and name. On the other side of the card was the name of each organization that had health or safety information booths for the children. The children were encouraged to visit all of the booths at the fair, interact with the adults, and participate in health-education-oriented activities. Once the children learned the information at the booth, they received a stamp on their card. At first some of the children were shy about interacting with adults, but after a while they became more outgoing and loved getting their cards stamped. After visiting all of the booths, the children could use their stamp card as an admission ticket to the swimming pool. These tickets were saved. Stamp cards for children who did not swim were collected at the Neighborhood Association Table. The stamp cards accomplished a number of important documentation objectives: they documented how many children attended the event, enabled the collaborative to learn the ages and gender of participants, and demonstrated how much the children participated (by documenting how many booths they visited.) The stamp card did not just document participation, it encouraged it!

**Who should be responsible for completing the documentation?**
The answer is the people involved in carrying out the activity, but the nature of their responsibilities will depend on the kind of documentation form you are using. If the information on the form is a type of record keeping (When did we hold the Health Fair? Where? What activities were offered?), then the people who carried out the activity need to complete the documentation form.

If the documentation involves collecting some kind of participant information, for example, a sign-in sheet at the after-school recreation program, the person running the program needs to make sure that the program’s staff have each child sign the sheet daily. When it comes time to analyze the data, the person overseeing the recreation program needs to turn the whole set of sign-in sheets (the documentation) over to whoever will be tallying them.

With record-keeping documentation, the form provides all the data you need. If participants are providing information, then the data need to be analyzed, as discussed later in Chapter 16.

**When should we record the information?**
You need to begin collecting data as soon as you begin implementing an activity. To be useful to you, data about your activities and strategies should be collected in a timely and reliable manner. Information should be recorded while it is still fresh.

**EXAMPLES FROM REAL LIFE:**
**Forgetting to Document**
The Central Valley Healthy Children’s Collaborative diligently created forms to document all of their strategies. They had attendance sheets to document how many people attended Neighborhood Watch meetings, registration forms and sign-in sheets for in-home child care training classes, and documentation forms and sign-in sheets to be completed for several neighborhood cleanups. Collaborative members and their partners put in many hours making these events happen. When it came time to write their annual report to their funder, however, the collaborative’s coordinator realized that no one had been given the specific responsibility to see that the forms were filled out, and, not surprisingly, they were not. While the collaborative members were able to piece together some of the information they had hoped to report, a lot of answers to key evaluation questions, particularly how many people were involved in activities, were lost. Other information, which would have been readily available had the forms been completed as planned, took numerous phone calls and precious hours to track down. The biggest disappointment was not getting to report fully on all the activities they had worked so hard to make happen.

Members of the Central Valley Healthy Children’s Collaborative vowed that next year, this wouldn’t happen again. The committee for each activity assigned specific responsibility for each documentation form and set aside time at committee meetings to make sure that they had received all the completed forms by the expected date.
Worksheet 8: Documentation of Strategies and Activities

1. Write one of your activities, and the strategy it is a part of, in the space below.

   Activity:

   Part of Strategy:

2. Refer back to your evaluation questions for the activity and strategy written above.

   A. What information do you want to collect about the implementation of this activity and strategy (your “did we do it?” and “how did we do it?” questions)?

   B. What information do you want to collect about mobilizing resources (your “what resources did we mobilize to do it?” questions)?

   C. Does documentation for this activity lend itself to also answering questions about participants (the community members, children, and families involved in the activities)?

       ____ Yes        ____ No

       If Yes: What information do you want to collect about the community members, children, and/or families participating in the activity?

   D. Now that you have the information you want to include on your documentation form, use a blank sheet of paper to design a documentation form that will record this information.
### Examples of Documentation Forms

**Agricultural Day Tahoe Elementary**

**Teacher Observation/Documentation Form**

1. Was the “Agricultural Day” event held?  
   - Yes □  
   - No □

2. What was the location?

3. What health information was presented? (Be Specific)

4. How was the event advertised? (List details)

5. Who organized the event? (Names, title, address, phone numbers)

6. How was the event organized? (List details)

7. Did children 5-8 years old participate?  
   - Yes □  
   - No □  
   If yes, how many children participated? ___________________________
Examples of Documentation Forms

KIDS FIRST
Coordinator Activity Evaluation

How many people attended?
Children 0-8 ________ Age 9-17 ________ 18 & over ________

Do you feel that this activity met the needs of the participants?  Yes ☐ No ☐

What went especially well? ____________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

What could be improved for the future? ____________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

Did any children or families drop out of the activity?  Yes ☐ No ☐

If so, why? ____________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

Were activities and information supporting healthy lifestyles available?  Yes ☐ No ☐

What type of information and on what subjects? (Be specific) ____________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

Additional comments: ____________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your time to fill out this evaluation form.
Examples of Documentation Forms

Parenting Class Registration

Name: ______________________________________________________________________________
(first) (last)

Address: ______________________________________________________________________________
(street)
______________________________________________________________________________
(town) (state) (zip)

Phone:: (________) _________- _________________

Class: Mon/Wed Tue/Thurs Sat
(Circle one)

Gender: Male Female
(Circle one)

Does another adult live in your household? Yes ❑ No ❑

If yes, who are the adults who live in your household? (Circle all that apply)
Partner/Spouse Other relative Unrelated adult(s)

Children’s Ages: (Circle ages of your children, choosing the number closest to their actual age. Indicate if twins.)

Under 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18

Ethnicity: ❑ White, not Hispanic ❑ Hispanic/Latino
❑ African-American ❑ Native American
❑ Asian/Pacific Islander ❑ Multiracial
(Check one)

Language: ❑ English ❑ Spanish
(Circle primary spoken language)

Will you be using the on-site child care provided? Yes ❑ No ❑

If yes, for which ages? (Circle all that apply)
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13

Do you need help with transportation to be able to attend? Yes ❑ No ❑

How did you find out about this class? (Circle all that apply)
Newspaper Radio Flyer Referral
Friend Other (specify) ________________________________

For office use only
Number of classes attended:
### Examples of Documentation Forms

**Monday, March 23, 1998**

**Partnership Meeting**

**Anderson Partnership for Healthy Children**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Name is:</th>
<th>I Represent:</th>
<th>My Phone Number is:</th>
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<tbody>
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</table>
# Examples of Documentation Forms

## AOK Family Center

### ACTIVITY LOG

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Time:</th>
<th>Agency/Organization:</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of Instructors:</th>
<th>No. of Participants:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td># Children: #Parents: #Volunteers:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group: (Circle one)</th>
<th>Activity:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children 0 - 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth 13 - 18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Signature:

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Time:</th>
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Signature:

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<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
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</table>

Signature:
Chapter 9.
Tools for Data Collection:
Getting the Information You Need to Answer Your Evaluation Questions

In Chapter 6, we mention a number of ways you can collect the data you need to answer your evaluation questions. Chapter 8 discusses documentation to answer your implementation questions, which is one type of data collection technique. In this chapter, we will:

- Provide more information about other data collection techniques.
- Discuss when and how to use these data collection techniques.
- Provide tips on using each technique to help you collect high-quality data.

The data collection tools discussed in this chapter are written surveys, interviews, focus groups, tests of knowledge, other tests or assessments, direct observation, and administrative data.

Written Surveys or Questionnaires

What is a written survey? A written survey or questionnaire is a set of written questions used to obtain information in a systematic way from individuals or groups. Written surveys can be distributed to potential respondents in a variety of ways: sent through the mail, personally delivered to people’s homes, or handed out to a group gathered together for some purpose. Written surveys are usually self-administered, meaning that respondents read the instructions and write their answers to questions themselves.

Open- vs. closed-ended questions. Written surveys may contain open-ended or closed-ended questions, or some of both, depending on the kind of information (e.g., qualitative or quantitative) you are trying to collect. (See Chapter 6 for a discussion of qualitative and quantitative information.) Open-ended questions allow respondents to express their answers and opinions in their own words and provide qualitative data. They allow you to explore an issue in more depth and detail, which can mean responses are more challenging to summarize. Below are examples of open-ended questions:

- What do you think is the biggest concern for parents of young children today?
- How well do the health care resources (e.g., doctors, dentists, clinics, and hospitals) in our community meet your family’s needs?

Closed-ended questions are questions that are answered with a specific set of answers, such as “Yes/No” or “Agree/Disagree,” providing you with data that can be more easily quantified. Because the answers are standardized, meaning that each respondent chooses from the same set of answers, responses are easier to count and analyze for a large number of respondents. Because it is easier to survey a large number of people, you can apply your findings more confidently to your target population. Here are examples of some closed-ended questions:

- Overall, how would you rate your child’s health? Would you say your child’s health is Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, or Poor?
- Does your child have a regular doctor or source of health care? (Yes or No)

When should you use a written survey? Written surveys are especially good tools to measure attitudes, perceptions, awareness, and satisfaction. They can also be tailored to measure participation, knowledge, and behavior change, but other techniques may give you more valid measures of these areas.

The primary advantages of written surveys are that they are relatively inexpensive and quick. For these reasons, evaluators often select written surveys to collect data when they need to collect information from a large number of people. (Sampling and respondents will be discussed further in Chapter 10.)

Written surveys are better suited to collecting quantitative data through closed-ended questions, especially when you are surveying a large number of people, because answers to closed-ended questions require less time to analyze. A written survey, then, is a good tool to collect information about a subject that you already know a good deal about: you know what the most important questions are to ask and have a fairly good idea of what kinds of responses to expect.

Written surveys may also provide advantages in dealing with especially sensitive issues, such as drug use, because they can offer complete anonymity.

What are the limitations of written surveys? Like any data collection technique where you do not observe your subject directly, written surveys have the weakness of being somewhat artificial. A respondent’s answers to a questionnaire may not be accurate, for a number of reasons. The respondent may not remember correctly or may tell you what he or she thinks you want to hear. When studying behavior change, for example, your data are likely to be more accurate if you were able to observe the behaviors you are interested in.
directly. For a number of reasons, however, it is not always feasible to observe what you are interested in learning about. It would be difficult to camp out in someone’s home to observe what they eat or whether or not they brush their teeth.

One important limitation of written surveys is that they require respondents to be able to read and write in the language in which the survey is written. A written survey would not be an appropriate method to find out what preschoolers learned about nutrition since three- and four-year-olds can’t usually read and write.

Written surveys may be less effective when trying to study complicated topics because they don’t allow the opportunity to clarify what you mean. Interviews would be a better technique because they provide the opportunity to clear up misunderstandings and ask follow-up questions when needed.

Tips for Surveys
The wording of questions is critical. It is important that respondents understand what you are asking and interpret questions in the same way. Here are guidelines for writing good questions:

- Questions should be clear and written in language that is easy for respondents to understand.
- Questions should also be neutral, not leading. For example, “Do you agree or disagree with the statement ‘I feel safe walking alone at night in my neighborhood’” is a neutral question. The question, “You agree with the statement, ‘I feel safe walking alone at night in my neighborhood, don’t you?” leads the respondent toward an affirmative response.
- Avoid items that actually contain more than one question, so-called double-barreled questions. The question “Did you read the Family Page in the newspaper on Friday and what did you think of it?” is a double-barreled question. Instead, ask, “Did you read the Family Page in the newspaper on Friday?” and as a separate question, “If yes, what did you think of it?”
- Avoid negative questions (e.g., “Did you not know about the parenting resources in our community?”)

It is an excellent idea to pilot test your questions before using them to collect your data. Have a few people complete the questionnaire, then talk with them about what they were thinking when they answered each question. This way you will know if any questions are confusing and whether your response categories for closed-ended questions are appropriate and complete.

To get the benefit of the perspectives of everyone in your community, you will want to translate your survey into the languages most frequently used in your community. Have one person translate your survey and another translate it back into English as a way to check that the translated questions retain their original meaning.

Anything you can do to make the job of completing and returning the survey easier will improve your evaluation by increasing the number of people who respond. (For more about response rates, see Chapter 10.) Make your survey as short as possible. (This means, don’t ask questions that you don’t plan to take the time to analyze and make use of the information you learn.) If it takes too much time, people won’t fill it out. Minimize the number of open-ended questions. They take a long time for the respondent to answer and for the evaluator to analyze.

The layout should be uncluttered and visually appealing. Make directions clear and easy to understand. When asking closed-ended questions, make sure the respondents can easily select their intended response. Tell your respondents how many choices to make and how to mark them; circling their chosen response is generally clearest. For open-ended questions, provide enough space for respondents to write their answers.

When a written survey is to be returned by mail, send it with a cover letter that lets people know the purpose of your survey and why their answers are important. Provided you have the resources to do so, including a self-addressed stamped envelope will increase the number of completed surveys you get back. Send out follow-up mailings two to three weeks later, and again two to three weeks after that, to maximize your response rate. The first follow-up might be a reminder postcard; the second could include another copy of your survey.

As with many data collection techniques, assuring and maintaining confidentiality is your ethical responsibility and demonstrates the integrity of your organization. Respondents are more likely to participate and answer honestly when they believe their confidence is respected.
Examples of Survey Questions

The examples below are intended to be asked of people with school-age children. These questions are examples of closed-ended questions.

Have you attended a parent-teacher conference in the last year? (Circle One)
1. Yes   2. No   3. Don’t know

Did you volunteer in your child’s classroom in the last year? (Circle One)
1. Yes   2. No   3. Don’t know

If yes, how many hours on average did you volunteer each month? (Circle One)
1. Less than five hours
2. Five to ten hours
3. More than ten hours
4. Don’t know

Beside each of the statements below, please indicate whether you Strongly Agree (SA); Agree (A); Disagree (D); or Strongly Disagree (SD) by circling one of the four choices below.

1. My community is a good place to live.
   SA  A  D  SD

2. My community is a good place to raise children.
   SA  A  D  SD

3. It is safe for children to play in my neighborhood park.
   SA  A  D  SD

EXAMPLES FROM REAL LIFE:
A School-Based Survey on Head Lice

Because head lice had reached epidemic levels in their small, rural community, members of the Children’s Health Alliance of Oroville (CHAO) had chosen to make the prevention and treatment of head lice in the local elementary school district one of their targeted outcomes. An educational pamphlet, “Helpful Hints for Prevention, Elimination and Control of Head Lice,” had been mailed to all families in August with their Back-to-School packet. To assess the impact of this educational effort, CHAO had contracted with a private evaluation firm to conduct a community survey in cooperation with the CHAO health task force. Together, they developed a survey (see Appendix D, Examples of Data Collection Instruments) to be administered to all classes in the school district where head lice were most common (grades K-2) and two randomly selected classrooms in grades 3-5. The school nurse distributed the survey to children to bring home to their parents. Parents were asked to return only one survey per household. As each survey was returned, teachers marked the child’s name on their class list. Two weeks later, this list was used to follow up with families who had not returned their survey. Of the 640 surveys distributed, 487 (76%) were returned.

The contracted evaluation firm analyzed the survey data. One-half of the survey respondents reported learning something new from the “Hints” brochure. Parents who had read the brochure were twice as likely to arrest the lice problem in the first two weeks as those who had not read the brochure and to use effective lice-abatement tactics such as laundering and vacuuming, and, ultimately were much more successful at eliminating head lice the first time around. These results provided concrete evidence that CHAO should continue and expand this health education strategy as one way to combat head lice.
Interviews

What is an interview? In an interview, trained interviewers ask questions orally and record the respondent’s answers. Interviews can be conducted with one respondent or with a group of respondents, face-to-face or by telephone. Interviews can be exploratory, using a set of general, open-ended questions as a guide or highly structured, using a set of standardized questions asked in exactly the same way of each respondent. Responses to questions can be recorded in writing or audiotaped or videotaped with the respondent’s permission.

When should you use an interview? Interviews are an especially good tool for assessing attitudes and perceptions, satisfaction, awareness, and issues related to participation. In some cases, they can also be used to obtain information about knowledge and behavior.

Interviews generally allow for topics to be explored in more depth than questionnaires because they provide the opportunity to ask follow-up questions tailored to each response. Interviews can be more effective in dealing with complicated issues and in decreasing the number of “don’t knows” and “no answers” because they provide the opportunity to ask questions another way.

Interviews typically achieve a higher response rate than mailed questionnaires. It is generally harder to say no to a person who politely requests to ask you some questions than to ignore a questionnaire you receive in the mail or that is handed to you. This may be a consideration when you want to achieve a high response rate, when, for example, the number of people you are sampling is small.

Telephone interviews sometimes provide some advantages over face-to-face interviews. They can save you money and time when the alternative is spending a lot of time driving to people’s offices or homes. Respondents may also be more honest over the phone than in-person about sensitive issues. In addition, you won’t need to be concerned that the interviewer’s appearance or facial expressions will influence the respondents’ answers.

What are the limitations of interviews? Just as with written surveys, interviews share the weakness of being somewhat artificial. Even more so than with written surveys, people may be inclined to tell you what they think you want to hear.

Interviews usually require a bigger investment of time and money than written surveys and therefore are usually better suited when a smaller number of respondents is sufficient. When interpreting interview data from a small number of respondents, care should be taken not to overgeneralize your findings. If you only interview 2 people out of 100 who attended a workshop on appropriate discipline techniques for toddlers, you would not be able to assume that the views of these 2 people represented the views of the larger group.

If you choose to interview respondents by telephone, you may need to make alternative arrangements for individuals who are hearing impaired or do not have phones in their homes.

Tips for Interviews

Before you begin the interview, tell the respondent the purpose of the interview and why the information he or she can provide is important. As with written surveys, questions should be clearly worded in language appropriate to your target population. Ask one question at a time. Avoid leading and negative questions. Pretesting your interview questions can prevent costly mistakes later on.

To get the benefit of the perspectives of everyone in your community, you will want to translate your interview questions into the languages most frequently used in your community. Have one person translate your questions and another translate them back into English, to be sure that the translated questions retain their original meaning.

It is very important for the interviewer to be familiar with the order and wording of questions. If necessary, rephrase questions to help respondents understand their meaning and ask follow-up questions to gain complete answers. This technique is called probing. The important thing to remember when probing is not to suggest answers or lead respondents to answer a certain way. Sometimes it is necessary to reread a question and this is sufficient to clear up misunderstandings. Examples of good, neutral probes are:

- “What do you mean?”
- “Why is that?”
- “Tell me more about...”
- “Mmmm...” or “Uh huh” and pausing to indicate that you would like more information.

The interviewer should be friendly and respectful but keep his or her comments about the respondent’s answers neutral. It is extremely important that interviewers be perceived as neutral in order to receive genuine responses. Reassure respondents that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions and encourage them to respond on the basis of their experience and
knowledge. In general, respondents may be more likely to participate and to give the most honest answers when they perceive the interviewer to be most like themselves.

When respondents’ answers are going to be systematically tallied and compared, it is important to follow the question wording and question order exactly, including follow-up questions, and to record responses exactly as they are given. Interviewers should be trained on the importance of these points and given specific instructions when respondents don’t understand the meaning of questions or give incomplete answers. If more than one person will be conducting the interviews, it is an excellent idea to have a training session to discuss these issues to assure consistency. Complete interviews in blue or black ink so they will copy well.

As with many data collection techniques, assuring and maintaining confidentiality is your ethical responsibility and demonstrates the integrity of your organization. Respondents are more likely to participate and answer honestly when they believe their confidence is respected.

Examples of Interview Questions
Here are some examples of open-ended interview questions:

- What are the most important things you looked for when selecting child care for your child?
- What do you think of your current child care arrangement?
- What things would you like to change about your current child care arrangement?

Here are some example of closed-ended interview questions:

- Have you ever taken your child to an emergency room? (Yes/No)
- About how many times has the child been to the emergency room?
- Is your child covered by health insurance? (Yes/No)
- How long has it been since your child’s teeth were checked by a dentist or dental hygienist?

Focus Groups

What is a focus group? A focus group is an interview with a small group of people on a specific topic. Focus groups typically include 6 to 10 members for a conversation of up to two hours. A facilitator guides the conversation using a small set of predetermined questions. A focus group can be audiotaped, or a member of the evaluation team can be assigned to take careful notes. What distinguishes a focus group from a group interview is that respondents converse with each other.

A key feature of focus groups is that the interview takes place in a social setting. In the real world, people’s opinions and decisions are influenced by the people around them. Focus groups provide an interview format in which respondents consider the views of other participants while expressing their own ideas and opinions.

When should you use a focus group? Focus groups are particularly good tools for collecting information about people’s attitudes and perceptions, community norms, and issues related to participation in and satisfaction with an activity or event. Focus groups provide information that is highly qualitative in nature. They are more appropriate when you want to examine a few questions about a specific issue in depth.

One use of focus groups is to ask a group of participants about what they liked and disliked about an activity or program and to ask for suggested improvements. Focus groups can also be used to gather data on people’s attitudes and perceptions about a particular subject.

Another use of a focus group is to invite key informants to participate. Key informants are people who are especially knowledgeable and articulate and whose perspectives and perceptions are extremely valuable to understanding what is happening in the organizations or communities they represent. They may fill an official position, such as being the director of a social services agency, or they may have a lot of experience with a particular issue, say, being a long-term resident of a housing project. You may have used focus groups with key informants in conducting your community assessment or developing your Strategic Action Plan.
EXAMPLES FROM REAL LIFE:
Door-to-Door Interviews in an Urban Neighborhood

Members of the Children First - Flats Network, an active collaborative in an ethnically diverse, low-income urban neighborhood, were particularly dismayed by one statistic published by their local county health department: 40% of women living in the zip code of which their neighborhood was a part received very late (beginning in the third trimester) prenatal care or none at all. To design a strategy to deal with this problem, Children First decided they needed more information about the experiences and perceptions of women in their neighborhood who had recently given birth.

Fortunately for the Children First - Flats Network, one of the collaborative’s members was a nursing student at the local state university and needed to do a research project as a graduation requirement. The collaborative teamed with a group of six nursing students to conduct a door-to-door interview of women who had children age three or younger. In-person interviews were chosen as a method for several reasons: the collaborative did not have a comprehensive list of personal addresses and phone numbers of neighborhood residents; many households did not have phones; and the team felt that, because of the amount of trust Children First had earned in the neighborhood, they might gain more interviews by requesting them in person.

With the assistance of a professor at the university, the students developed a set of interview questions. This was an especially delicate task because there were many sensitive issues related to delayed prenatal care (domestic violence, substance abuse, illegal immigration status) that the team wanted to explore. A friend of one of the nursing students translated the protocol into Spanish. (Forty-five percent of neighborhood residents were Latino.) The interview questions were pilot-tested in both English and Spanish with friends of collaborative members who had young children and, as a result, were modified slightly for clarity. The collaborative coordinator found members who were willing to conduct interviews in Spanish.

One Saturday morning, 10 interviewers divided the neighborhood blocks evenly among themselves and set off to interview as many women with children age three or younger as possible. Interviewers tried to hit as many streets and apartment buildings as they could and not to conduct all of their interviews in one place. By the end of the morning, 35 interviews were completed. Some of the students who were not neighborhood residents initially had been nervous about going into the community by themselves. After one day in the field, they now were much more comfortable requesting interviews on their own. The interviewers returned one weekend evening and the following Saturday morning to cover parts of their territory they had missed and call again at residences where people had not been at home. When they were done, 82 interviews were completed.

After the data were analyzed, one finding was particularly striking: the Children First - Flats Network members found that only 25% of the women interviewed received prenatal care after the start of their second trimester and only 2% first received care in their third trimester. Why was this statistic so different from the one from the County Health Department: e.g., that 40% of the women in the zip code did not receive prenatal care until their third trimester, if at all? There were several possible explanations:

- The Children First interviews were done in 1998; the county data were from 1995.
- The number of women obtaining early prenatal care could have improved dramatically between 1995 and 1998.
- The Children First survey included only those blocks within their neighborhood, not the entire zip code. The rates of late prenatal care may have been considerably higher in other parts of the zip code.
- The respondents did not answer the question accurately, either because they did not recall accurately or because they wanted to present a more socially acceptable answer.
- The interview sample was not representative of the neighborhood.
- The statistic from the county health department was incorrect.

After careful consideration, the team agreed that their sample was not significantly biased in any way. The ethnic breakdown of their sample closely mirrored that of their neighborhood generally. Given that this was a retrospective study, it is possible that many women did not recall precisely when they had entered care, but the difference in the two figures was so large that this alone did not seem likely to explain the difference. Ultimately, the members of the Children First - Flats Network concluded that inadequate prenatal care was not as urgent a problem for their community as they had originally believed. Instead, the collaborative decided to dedicate their energy to other issues in their community, such as keeping their children safe from violence and crime, that more clearly needed attention.
The main advantage of focus groups is that they are a very efficient way of collecting rich information from several people in a short time. The group dynamics often guide the discussion to the most important issues, and a consensus or divergence of opinions is easy to observe. Another plus is that focus groups are often fun for participants.

What are the limitations of focus groups? A primary limitation of focus groups is that only a few questions, usually no more than 10, can be covered during a single focus group, since all participants should be given an opportunity to express their opinion on a given topic. Focus groups typically last about 2 hours.

Participants may be reluctant to share views or experiences with the group that they think may be perceived as unpopular or deviant. Because the responses to the questions are often lengthy and complex, an in-depth analysis of focus group data can be time-consuming. However, the main thrust of the conversation is often easy to follow.

Tips for Focus Groups

The person who directs or facilitates the group should be skilled in handling group dynamics. The facilitator’s job is to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to express his or her views and that a few participants do not dominate the discussion. The facilitator should be familiar with the names and backgrounds of the participants before the start of the focus group. It is a good idea to have participants introduce themselves and say a few words about who they are and why they believe they are there. If you are doing more than one focus group, group together those people who are most alike on the issues being discussed. For example, put the agency staff in one focus group and those who receive services in another.

Limit the number of questions you plan to cover to no more than 10. Because you won’t be able to cover a lot of different topics in the allotted time, be sure that your questions ask what you most want to know. You may wish to order your questions so that those you are most interested in come earlier in case you don’t have time to cover all your questions.

Good focus group questions will be open-ended, requiring participants to frame their responses using their own words. Again, the wording of questions is critical. Questions should be clear and easy for participants to understand. They should also be neutral, not leading. Unlike written surveys, however, focus groups do provide the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings if they develop and to probe for more specific responses when desired. The important thing to remember when probing is not to suggest answers or prompt participants to respond in a particular way. Examples of good, neutral probes are:
- “What do you mean?”
- “Why is that?”
- “Tell us more about...”
- “Mmmm...” or “Uh huh” and pausing to indicate that you would like more information.

Participants may feel more comfortable expressing themselves honestly if they do not know the facilitator or other participants. However, this may not always be desirable or feasible, when, for example, you are interviewing participants in a small project or program or conducting a focus group with key community leaders.

Free food and child care often increase participation.

Examples of Focus Group Questions

These questions are intended for community members:
- Do you believe you know more about child abuse and neglect than you did a year ago?
- What have you learned?
- How did you learn it?
- How big a problem do you think child abuse is in this community?
- Why do you think parents physically abuse their children?
- Would you report one of your neighbors if you thought child abuse was occurring in the family?
EXAMPLES FROM REAL LIFE:
Using Focus Groups to Evaluate Nonparticipation

One of the outcomes the Western Yolo Collaborative for Healthy Children and Families identified was for children to be ready to start school. Esparto, one of two communities in the collaborative, was a small, rural community with a large population of monolingual Latino residents. One of the short-term outcomes for Esparto was for Spanish-speaking mothers to be more involved with their children. The collaborative had established two programs for mothers and children two to five years old two mornings a week. A local church donated a room that could be dedicated to the program. The program was coordinated by a volunteer mom and staffed by the parents themselves. A friendly outreach campaign was put into place to try to attract Spanish-speaking families, including an open house for parents and children to come and try out the activities to which only a few people came.

In spite of the collaborative’s efforts to reach out to Latino families, no Spanish-speaking families enrolled. To figure out why, the Western Yolo Collaborative organized a focus group. Focus group participants were recruited from Spanish-speaking mothers at the local elementary school who also had preschool-age children, local child care and preschool aides who worked in the migrant summer preschool, and the Migrant Parent Student Association. The focus group was conducted by a representative of the local community action agency who was bilingual. From the focus group discussion, the collaborative learned that Spanish-speaking parents of preschoolers received the information and felt they would be welcome in the program. Participants identified the language barrier and not cultural or racial barriers as the primary reason they chose not to be involved. The struggle to understand and to be understood created rather than reduced stress for these parents. It just wasn’t that much fun. Interpreters, they believed, would be too cumbersome.

On the basis of this information, the Western Yolo Collaborative for Healthy Children and Families is now considering implementing a preschool program specifically for Spanish-speaking families.
Tests of Knowledge

What is a knowledge test? A knowledge test is a test of what an individual knows or has learned about a subject or subjects. Usually, a respondent writes answers to a set of written questions, but knowledge tests can also be administered orally, much like an interview. Questions can be open or closed-ended. Often, tests contain closed-ended questions for subjects that have one correct answer (e.g., true or false or multiple choice.)

What distinguishes a knowledge test is that it contains numerous items for a particular subject, such as infant care, much as a math test would give several different multiplication problems to solve to determine how proficient a student is at multiplication. You can also include a few knowledge questions (e.g., “Should you put an infant to sleep on his stomach or his back?”) as part of a written survey or interview.

When should you use a knowledge test? If one of the outcomes your collaborative hopes to achieve is to educate a target population about a particular issue, such as increasing parents’ knowledge of child development, you may wish to consider using a knowledge test.

You can construct a knowledge test yourself or find one that has already been written. You can get an already written test from three sources: the curriculum materials you are using for a particular class or program, a state or school district that administers an area-wide assessment, or a test publisher or researcher. The most important criterion for using any knowledge test is whether or not the items contained on the test reflect the most important facts you want people to know.

What are the limitations of knowledge tests? It is important to recognize that increasing knowledge is not the same as changing behavior. Increasing knowledge about child development does not necessarily make people better parents, although it may be one important step (represented by one of your assumption dominoes) to doing so.

Another limitation is the test itself. The test needs to be an appropriate measure of what you want to measure, and not of something else. If you want to know how many second-graders read at the second-grade level and your test measures whether they read at a first-grade level, the information you collect will not provide the answer to your question. If the test contains questions that are poorly worded and confusing, you will not know whether the person taking the test truly didn’t know the answer or just didn’t understand the question.

Tips for Administering Knowledge Tests

If possible, use a test that has already been constructed and tested by an expert. Make sure the test you choose reflects the content of the material that you want people to have learned. When implementing a published curriculum, use the test that goes with that curriculum if one is available. It will be the best measure of the information covered in the course.

If you are constructing your own test, determine the most salient facts or ideas that you hope will be learned and write items to test that knowledge. Develop some draft test questions and ask someone else to read over your questions to make sure they are clear. Put your test through a trial run with an appropriate person.

EXAMPLES FROM REAL LIFE: Assessing Caregiver Knowledge of Child Development

The Children’s Collaborative of Tahoe Truckee had a vision: All families in its beautiful resort community would have access to high-quality early childhood care and education that ensure their children’s growth and development. To accomplish this, the Children’s Collaborative of Tahoe Truckee worked to provide caregiver training and education through community classes and activities. Collaborative members aided the community college in recruiting a qualified instructor to teach Early Childhood Education (ECE) classes. The newly hired instructor taught three ECE classes, “Introduction to Human Development,” “Introduction to Early Childhood Education,” and “Child, Family and Community.”

To measure whether students’ knowledge of child development increased, the collaborative used a pre- and posttest method. Each class completed a pretest of their knowledge of course subject matter in the first week of class; the same test was administered to students at the end of the semester as a posttest. By comparing the results of the two tests, the collaborative demonstrated that knowledge of the child development material increased by an average of 20% for individuals enrolled in the classes. Of the 42 students enrolled in the classes, 25 (60%) worked in preschool and child care centers, and 16 (38%) were parents of children under 8 years of age. The Children’s Collaborative of Tahoe Truckee continues to recruit more qualified ECE instructors so that more caregivers can benefit from classes such as these.
EXAMPLES FROM REAL LIFE:
Using a Published Instrument
to Assess School Readiness

After lengthy discussions and careful consideration of existing statistics, the members of the
Children’s Collaborative of Tahoe Truckee decided that school readiness was the outcome they most
wanted to affect. Because the Tahoe Truckee Unified School District did not assess pre-kindergarten
children for school readiness, the collaborative needed to find their own measure to determine
whether their strategies were successful in better preparing children for kindergarten. They decided
to find a published instrument with a proven track record at measuring school readiness, a complex
concept.

After months of researching different instruments and getting advice from an evaluation
consultant, the collaborative chose the American Guidance Service (AGS) Early Screening Profiles.
The AGS examines whether children are socially, physically, and cognitively ready for school. As part
of the screening test, children are asked to complete tasks that measure their cognitive, language,
and gross and fine motor skills. In addition, parents complete a detailed questionnaire about their
child’s health and social and self-help skills, and teachers answer questions about whether the child
comes to school rested, fed, clean, and on time.

After finding the instrument they wanted to use, the collaborative had to go before the school
board to get the district’s approval to screen a random sample of children from all five elementary
schools in the district. (For more on how Tahoe Truckee identified respondents, see Chapter 10.)
Parent permission to screen the children also had to be obtained.

A local kindergarten teacher who had experience administering the AGS trained 15 classroom
aides on giving the test. Eighty children were tested in one week during the last week of September.
The test was administered in a quiet, nonthreatening setting and took about 20 minutes. All of the
tests were individually hand scored by the test administrators. These raw data were sent to an
evaluation consultant to be entered and analyzed with computer software. The analysis of the data
was delayed because the test administrators had not been instructed to fill out a summary form for
each child. Challenges in getting parents to return questionnaires also delayed the results.

When the Children’s Collaborative of Tahoe Truckee initiated this process, members had
expected it to take three to four months. It ended up taking almost a year and extraordinary
dedication and effort from the collaborative’s kindergarten screening coordinator. Things did go
much more smoothly the second year, but the task still required many hours on the part of the
screening coordinator and other collaborative members. In the end, however, the effort proved
worthwhile. Sixty-nine percent of kindergartners scored high average to significantly above average,
compared with 56% of kindergartners tested the year before. The collaborative members
understood that one year was too soon to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of their
school readiness strategies, but the results were certainly encouraging.
Other Tests and Assessments

What is a published instrument? A published instrument is a data collection tool that has already been written and tested by someone else. Published instruments exist to assess many hard-to-measure concepts, such as family functioning and child abuse potential. These types of instruments are often called assessments. Because the concepts measured by assessments are complex, we recommend that you use a published measure that has been carefully tested to make sure it is a valid measure of what it intends to measure, rather than attempting to create your own. There are also many published instruments to test knowledge of a particular subject. (See discussion on tests of knowledge, above.)

Published instruments can be pen and pencil instruments that respondents complete by themselves or observational codes used by professionals to observe client behavior, home environments, and parent-child interactions.

When should you use a published instrument? Published instruments are very good tools for measuring attitudes, perceptions, and knowledge. They can also be used to collect information about satisfaction and behavior. They are particularly good at evaluating complex concepts like social support or stress.

The advantages of a published instrument is that someone else has already developed the instrument and you don’t have to. Chances are that a published instrument has been carefully tested so that it measures what it claims to measure and has already been used in other studies.

What are the limitations of published instruments? Published instruments may be lengthy and require you to collect more information than you want.

Another limitation is that you may not be able to find an instrument that looks at precisely what you are interested in learning about.

Some instruments require that the person using it have a particular background or receive training in how to use the instrument.

Finally, many published instruments cost money. You may find an instrument that is right for you, but you may not be able to afford it.

Tips for Using a Published Instrument

When choosing a published instrument, factors you should consider include:

- Whether the instrument is appropriate to the values, attitudes, and knowledge areas of your program.
- Whether it is appropriate to the cultures, reading levels, and language of your target population.
- The skills and effort required to collect data with the instrument and whether special training is required.
- Whether the instrument is a valid and reliable measure of what you are interested in measuring.
- The cost of the instrument.

Follow the author’s instructions carefully when administering the instrument and scoring the results.

Direct Observation

What is direct observation? In direct observation, a data collector observes events firsthand in their natural setting or captures them on videotape. In some instances, data collectors can participate in the event being studied. In others, they will act as an onlooker. Direct observation may involve taking detailed “field notes” describing what is being observed. This technique is what we refer to as qualitative observation. Direct observation may also involve the coding or counting of behaviors or occurrences. We refer to this technique as structured observation.

When should you use observation? Direct observation is the best technique to study people’s actual behavior. Other methods, such as written surveys and interviews, can be used to study what people report about their behavior, but that is not the same as studying the actual behavior itself. Direct observation can be used as a documentation tool to collect detailed descriptions of activities, counts of participants, and descriptions of their characteristics. It can also be used to collect information on community opportunities and norms.

The primary strength of direct observation is that you are studying actual events and not someone’s memory, perception, or opinion of them. By observing events directly, you can learn about things people would be unwilling to talk about, do not recall, or are unaware of when asked in an interview or on a questionnaire.

When using qualitative observation, the observer takes field notes to describe an event thoroughly and thoughtfully. Qualitative observation might be used to describe a community park before and after a collaborative implements efforts to make it a safe place for children.

Structured observation is performed to count specific behaviors or occurrences and produces
data that are more objective and easier to analyze. This method could be used to study conflict resolution in school playgrounds by counting aggressive and conciliatory behaviors of children.

**What are the limitations of observation?** The value of the information collected through qualitative observations depends on the objectivity and skill of the observer. The observer should have an idea of what kinds of things to look for and note. Sometimes what does not take place is as important as what does. Good observation work is not as easy as it sounds.

When the information collected is highly qualitative, the analysis of information can be challenging. It can be hard to know how to reduce detailed descriptions to key findings. An important caution when using direct observation is not to overgeneralize when discussing your findings. The events you observed may represent a small portion of what actually took place in the setting or community at large.

Structured observation requires having categories of target behaviors ahead of time, so you need to know a good deal about the topic you are studying and what you want to count. When you are studying conflict resolution at the school playground, exactly which behaviors would be considered aggressive? You need to be specific. Will you count hitting and pushing but not cutting in line?

Many of the most interesting behaviors the collaboratives are trying to affect cannot be easily observed. It is not easy to observe how often parents read to their children, how often children brush their teeth, or how often teens are sexually active. Some behaviors can be observed, however, either in houses or in public places. Some studies set up artificial situations to observe. For example, a mother will be asked to play with her child for 10 minutes while an observer codes the types of interaction between mother and child.

**Tips for Observation**

When using direct observation to collect qualitative data, it is important to take detailed notes while in the field or to record your observations as soon afterward as possible. Notes should be highly descriptive. Use quotations and capture participants’ perspectives in their own words. Be clear on distinguishing your own interpretations from your observations.

When conducting structured observations using more than one data collector, care needs to be taken to make sure that all data collectors are categorizing their observations in the same way. You will need to use a published form or develop a form to help observers record the behaviors they see and the frequency with which the behaviors occur within a given period of time. It is often a good idea to have a training session for data collectors to make sure they understand exactly what you are asking them to do. There are accepted procedures for structured observation that you should use if you are considering this technique. For more information, consult the resources listed at the end of the chapter.

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**EXAMPLES FROM REAL LIFE:**

**Direct Observation in an Urban Neighborhood**

The Neighbors United Collaborative, a collaborative in an urban neighborhood working hard to rid its neighborhood of crime, wanted its children to be safe on the streets and in the parks. The number of children seen playing in the park over a period of time was selected as an indicator for this outcome. To measure this indicator, the collaborative asked neighborhood Block House representatives to observe whether more or fewer children played at the local park.

When it came time to write the annual evaluation report, collaborative members realized that they had only anecdotal evidence that more children were playing outside in the park. Because they had not developed a systematic way to record how many children were playing in the park and when, they did not have any concrete numbers to prove their point. For the next year, Block House representatives were asked to count the number of children playing in the park at 3 pm on the first Wednesday of every month and to record these numbers in a log book.

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**Administrative Data Sources**

**What are administrative data sources?** Administrative data sources are resources for obtaining data that are already being collected. This category includes existing data being compiled by institutions, such as government agencies, health care organizations, businesses, and schools, as well as data collected by individuals.

**When should you use administrative data sources?** You may have a lot of experience using existing data sources for community assessments, community profiles, or funding applications. Using existing data sources is an excellent idea whenever it will save you a considerable effort of...
time and money. Often you could not possibly collect the data yourself. You could not replicate the U.S. Census, nor would you want to. So long as someone else is already doing a good job of collecting information that you are interested in, why reinvent the wheel?

Existing statistics are often very illuminating when they supplement data that you are collecting through other techniques. They can provide a bigger context when used to illustrate the conditions and trends in your neighborhood, community, and beyond.

What are the limitations of using administrative data? First and foremost, you are limited to what information already exists. The available data may not measure exactly what you are interested in, or you may not be able to break it out into the categories you want to examine. You may have had this experience when trying to apply countywide statistics to your neighborhood or community. Another problem is that the information you need exists but may not be available to you because the data are considered to be confidential. Another consideration is that you have no control over the quality of the data that are being collected.

Tips for Using Administrative Data

Although you don’t have to collect the data yourself, you will need to identify and contact someone who has the data you want. This can be easy, or you may need to make numerous phone calls before finding the person who can give you the information you need. (Persistence pays off when trying to obtain data from large government agencies and other bureaucracies.) The good news is that once you know where to go to get the data, you will know where to go the next time you want to update them, so it will get easier.

The best way to get administrative data is to use the contacts available on or through your collaborative. If you want data on crime and you have a collaborative member with connections to the police department, ask that person to get the numbers. If you want school data, ask the member from the school system.

If you have no connection to the agency whose data you want, call the agency and describe what you need. Persist until you get through to someone who can help you get the data or knows someone else you should try. Your local library can also be a helpful source of information, so give the librarians a call.

Know what to ask for. Figure out what you want as specifically as possible before you make the call, but be prepared to modify what you want on the basis of what is available. For example, if you want child abuse and neglect reports for 1999 and the agency has only data for 1998, get the data for 1998. If you want data on domestic violence calls to the police involving families with young children but the police don’t record the ages of children, take the data for domestic violence calls in general. If you have only a vague idea of what you want, talking to an agency person about the data may help clarify what you need.

If you are not sure exactly what data you want, ask for whatever the agency has related to your topic. For example, if you are not sure whether you want births to teens or births to unmarried teens, take both and go home and think about what is most useful.

Always try to get data for past years, so you can look at historical trends. As we discussed in Chapter 3 and will discuss later, you need to put year-to-year change in a historical context to see whether it is meaningful or not. It is important to understand how data from agencies are collected and compiled so that you can assess their quality and identify exactly what is being measured and how.

If you know what you want, you may be able to get it even if it is not readily available or someone says the agency doesn’t have it. Be aware that there is a difference between what the agency has readily available and what it could give you if the data were analyzed differently. For example, the Child Protective Services agency for the county may say it has data on child abuse and neglect only for the county when you ask for data for your specific town. The agency may, however, have the child’s address in its database, which means they could produce the numbers for your community.

Getting data for other than what the agency has readily available will not be easy—which is why it is very helpful if the collaborative has a connection with the agency. It might be easy for the agency to run its data in a slightly different way, or it might require a massive amount of reprogramming. Often, the agency people who use the data are not sufficiently familiar with the database to know what other kinds of data could or could not be produced. If the right person will give the right direction to the programmer who works with the database, you might be able to get what you want.
Your collaborative might have to work hard to get the data you want in the form you want it. If the data are an important indicator, it could be well worth the effort. If the agency doesn’t readily have and can’t get the number that your collaborative wants, you won’t have administrative by data available. You will need to collect your own data by using a different method (such as questionnaires, interviews, tests, and assessments) if your collaborative believes it is important enough to justify the effort.

Your local reference librarian is an excellent resource in helping you to identify existing data sources. The Internet can provide you with a host of sources of information about children and families. You can probably access the Internet at your local library if you can’t access it at home.

**Possible Sources of Administrative Data**

- Testing officer, state or local education agency.
- State Child Care Resource and Referral Network and local child care resource and referral agencies.
- State library and local libraries.
- State and county departments of health.
- State and county departments of social services.
- Police and sheriff departments.

**EXAMPLES FROM REAL LIFE:**

**Putting Administrative Data to Work**

The boundaries of the Hagginwood Community Collaborative’s target area are the same as those of the Hagginwood Elementary School in northern Sacramento. Fortunately for Hagginwood, they are able to measure their child outcomes by examining administrative data collected by the school. For example, the collaborative is tracking the number of discipline citations at Hagginwood Elementary as an indicator of child self-esteem, the attendance rate as an indicator of child health, and grades for “social development and work habits” as a measure of children’s social skills. By working closely with school administrators, Hagginwood Collaborative members were able to find existing data that helped track the outcomes they had decided were important for children and families in their community.

**Resources/References**

- The ERIC® Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation
  1129 Shriver Laboratory
  College of Library and Information Services
  University of Maryland, College Park
  College Park, MD 20742
  (800) 464-3742
  Web address: ericae.net
- Buros Institute of Mental Measurements
  University of Nebraska-Lincoln
  Bancroft Hall
  Lincoln, NE 68588-0348
  402-472-6203
  Web address: www.unl.edu/buros