BRIEF | October 2024

Creating Useful and Usable Evaluation Findings

A Relationship-Driven Approach to Evaluation Reporting

Introduction

Evaluation findings can improve services and support for families involved in the child welfare system by providing valuable insights into program implementation and effectiveness. Decisions about how findings are generated and shared have implications for how the findings are used to support meaningful policy and practice improvements. This brief offers guidance on communicating and reporting findings, taking into consideration key partners who are invested in the findings, which ones are most important, and how they are shared.[1] The principles outlined in the brief align with the federal government's focus on advancing civil rights, racial equity, and social justice principles.[2]

A relationship-driven approach to evaluation reporting (see exhibit 1 below) helps evaluators develop products that are both **useful** and **useable** to communities, practitioners, and policymakers. These similar but distinct concepts are important to consider when reporting findings. **Useful** findings help people and communities with a vested interest in the evaluation make informed decisions (e.g., whether to adopt, adapt, or discontinue a practice, intervention, or policy). Useful findings are derived by asking, What information is most helpful? **Useable** findings are shared in a manner, method, or format that is comprehensible, accessible, and applicable to interested people and communities in real-life settings. Usability is measured by user experiences and ability to understand and operationalize findings to make practical, data-driven decisions. Useable findings are derived by asking, How can information best be shared and used?

Usefulness: The perceived benefits, value, practical worth, and relevance of a product as experienced by the user

Usability: The ease with which product information can be understood and used as measured by its use

[1] While intended primarily for child welfare discretionary grant recipients funded by the Children's Bureau within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, this brief may also be of interest and use to broader audiences of child welfare evaluators, practitioners, policy makers, and advocates.
[2] See Executive Order No. 13985 signed by the President on January 20, 2021.

Evaluation Conveners and Collaborators

Two groups—evaluation conveners and evaluation collaborators—should contribute to the development of useful and usable findings.

- **Evaluation conveners** include individuals and groups that are responsible for designing and implementing evaluations but are not typically members of the communities being evaluated. They include project directors, evaluation team members, and funding agencies. Funding agencies may be connected to or external from the communities under study (e.g., a local non-profit organization).
- **Evaluation collaborators** are individuals and groups that help shape the evaluation approach and are invested in findings. They are members of the community in which the intervention of interest is implemented and evaluated. They include community leaders, individuals with lived experience in human service systems, agency staff, and local elected leaders and policy makers. Funders may also be collaborators, depending on their role and degree of involvement in the evaluation.

The terms “conveners” and “collaborators” seek to both acknowledge and mitigate the power differential between evaluators and the people or communities that are interested in evaluation findings. Conveners still organize and play a lead role in the evaluation, but in a collaborative and inclusive manner.

Even in an inclusive partnership between conveners and collaborators, there is an inherent power imbalance in the case of grant-funded evaluations (i.e., funded by federal, state, and nonprofit agencies or foundations). Funders often have substantial influence over the focus, scope, and methods of evaluation. An explicit acknowledgement of this power differential is a first step in addressing the imbalance that affects how collaborators participate in the development and use of findings.

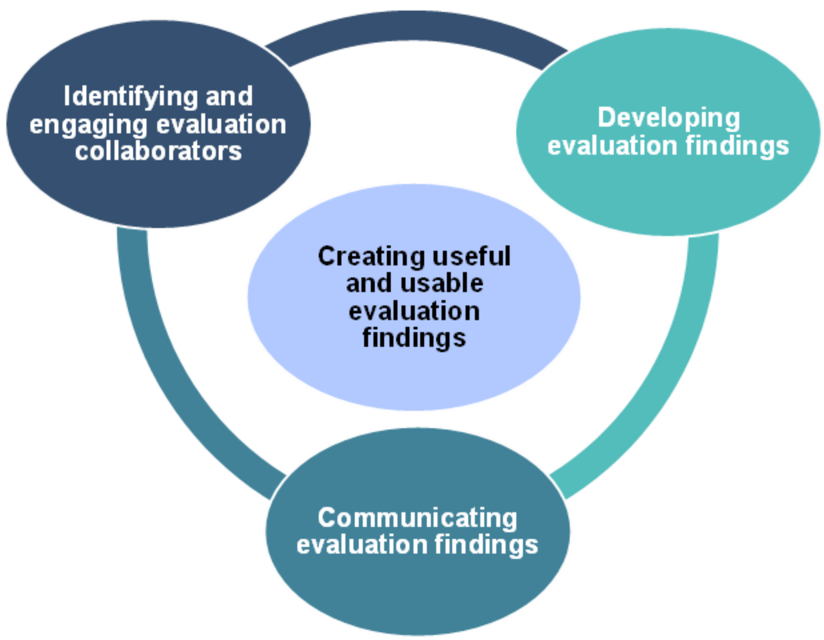
A Relationship-Driven Approach to Evaluation Reporting

An approach to developing and reporting evaluation findings that prioritizes relationships among conveners and collaborators will promote the usefulness and usability of those findings. Collaborative and reciprocal relationships between conveners and collaborators enhance the planning and dissemination processes. Strong relationships make findings more accessible, actionable, and impactful by uplifting and emphasizing the interests and perspectives of collaborators. They also help build understanding of the needs, concerns, and rights of the individuals and communities most affected by the interventions and systems being studied. Considering the priorities of a wide range of collaborators increases the likelihood that findings will be viewed as both valid and valuable.

Reciprocal relationships also reduce the potential for harm by informing how an evaluation is framed. For example, when conveners study disenfranchised communities that have experienced historical trauma, they often focus on deficiencies rather than community resiliency and strengths, which limits understanding of the protective factors that promote community well-being. When conveners and collaborators engage and build trust, they establish a foundation for mutual learning that honors the knowledge and experience the collaborators bring to an evaluation and centers the questions that are most important. The shared generation of knowledge produces findings that highlight community needs and concerns, which in turn increases their usefulness for understanding and improving service programs and systems.

A relationship-driven approach to evaluation reporting is built on three core components: (1) identifying and engaging evaluation collaborators, (2) developing evaluation findings, and (3) communicating findings (see exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Components of a Relationship-Driven Reporting Approach



The remainder of this brief is organized around these components with key recommendations, considerations, examples, and reflection questions provided for each.[3]

[3] This brief uses the evaluation of a new intervention as a point of reference; however, a relationship-driven approach can also be used for the evaluations of an existing or emerging program, practice, or organizational reform effort.

Identifying and Engaging Evaluation Collaborators

Generating meaningful and actionable findings begins by identifying and engaging collaborators. This section outlines key steps and lays the foundation for an evaluation that produces pertinent information for collaborators and other audiences.

Identify audience(s). Begin by considering the various audiences who have an interest in the evaluation. By partnering with collaborators early and frequently, findings can be aligned with their values, intentions, and community vision.

- Think about who will potentially be impacted by the evaluation, such as persons with lived experience and expertise (e.g., families that have been involved in the child welfare or judicial systems), local service providers (e.g., educators, health center employees, shelter staff), community leaders (e.g., judges, parent representatives, municipal officials, church members), and other community members. Bear in mind that communities are composed of individuals with varied perspectives and experiences.
- Consider power differentials within communities that can lead to some voices being heard more clearly and frequently over those with less power and influence. Create opportunities for individuals with less power to engage as true partners with strong and impactful voices.
- Meet collaborators where 'they are at' in terms of their preferred level of involvement. Some collaborators may prefer to be assigned specific roles or topics on which to focus, whereas others may choose to define for themselves what collaboration looks like.

Engage collaborators. Effective collaboration requires meaningful engagement, which occurs through early and frequent contact to establish relationships, buy-in, and trust.

- Create clear communication processes and channels to share feedback during all phases, including design, data collection, and reporting.
- Include collaborators in initial discussions regarding the focus, scope, and design of the evaluation. Conveners and collaborators should work together to refine or add research questions that balance the information needs of conveners with community values and interests. Discuss the selection of data collection methods that will produce findings that reflect the experiences and perspectives of local communities.

- Seek out formal and informal opportunities to connect with and build relationships with collaborators. These interactions will strengthen bonds which can help ensure community interests and priorities are elevated and addressed.
- Create opportunities for collaborators, including those with lived experience and expertise, to build skills in data collection, analysis, and reporting. These include training workshops, skill building exercises, 'on the job' training through direct participation in data collection and analysis, peer learning groups, and pairing collaborators with an evaluation coach or mentor. Over time, conveners will learn which skill and training opportunities collaborators value the most.
- Consider that the nature and level of engagement may vary during distinct stages of the evaluation. Ask collaborators when and how they want to be involved and adapt methods of engagement to these preferences. For example, a small advisory committee could provide initial feedback about the goals and direction of the evaluation, while larger community forums could be hosted to generate insights and recommendations based on evaluation findings.

Create Opportunities to Build Relationships With Collaborators

- Eat locally.
- Attend community events.
- Organize meetings that align with the needs and preferences of community members (e.g., serving certain types of food, scheduling meetings during convenient day and times).
- Consider various meeting formats (e.g., ice breaker sessions, informal drop-in meetings, listening sessions).
- Allow collaborators to set meeting agendas.

- Acknowledge and address the power imbalance between conveners and collaborators. Engagement will not be meaningful when power is not shared, and conveners are responsible for fostering the power shift. Regular self-reflection can help identify which powers, privileges, and/or biases impede authentic engagement and power sharing.

Avoid tokenism. Tokenism is the practice of making perfunctory or symbolic efforts to include members of minority groups to give the appearance of equality in the workplace and other organizational contexts. The effort to include token individuals is often intended to create the impression of social inclusiveness and racial, sexual, or other forms of diversity (Hogg & Vaughan, 2021). Tokenizing community members may signal their involvement in an evaluation is performative and their contributions are not truly valued and incorporated. Conveners should take steps to avoid tokenism.

- Treat collaborators as holistic partners with decision-making power throughout the process rather than as one-time contributors of information to benefit the project.

- Engage individuals with multifaceted ties to the communities and provide them with opportunities to share multiple, relevant perspectives (e.g., person with lived experience, Black mother, Spanish-speaking father).
- Include open-ended questions in data collection tools to understand the nuanced ways in which community members and other collaborators view themselves.

  Ask: How would you describe your racial or ethnic identity? In your own words, explain your connection to child welfare?

Foster reciprocal relationships. Many evaluations include communities experiencing or recovering from systematic oppression and marginalization. Distrust, community disinvestment, and historical exclusion may shape how community members view conveners. These realities need to be recognized to help build trusting relationships. Moreover, evaluations (particularly those conducted by external evaluators) are often transactional, with the information generated primarily benefitting conveners. However, conveners can take steps to ensure collaborators derive meaningful benefits from the evaluation.

- Explain that the benefits for the collaborators might not be equal to the time, knowledge, and emotional labor needed to produce the information. Acknowledge that the primary beneficiaries might be the conveners.
- Offer tangible benefits[4] to collaborators whenever possible, such as shared authorship of resulting publications or opportunities to develop research and other professional skills. Benefits should always reflect the needs and preferences of collaborators rather than of the conveners.

  Ask: What can we do for you in return? We are requesting your time, expertise, and perspective, which helps us professionally and benefits our organization.
- Consider measuring the quality of the relationship between conveners and collaborators to further improve collaboration. Examples of tools to measure collaboration quality include the Collaboration Assessment Tool (CAT) and the Centering Racial Equity in Collaboration Survey (see Additional Resources).

Reflection Questions

- Who are the collaborators in the evaluation? Are all affected racial, ethnic, and other demographic and community groups engaged? Who is not at the table?

[4] Financial or in-kind payment (e.g., stipends, honorariums, gift cards) is not regarded as a benefit but rather as a standard practice to compensate collaborators for time and labor. This brief focuses on efforts to provide collaborators with benefits beyond traditional compensation to promote reciprocity and engagement.

- How much harm or good could be done by engaging (or not engaging) diverse groups of collaborators?
- What knowledge and skills do collaborators need to fully participate in the evaluation?
- What staffing and budget requirements are needed to ensure collaborators can participate fully and meaningfully in the evaluation?
- What reflective practices are in place to help conveners assess and evaluate their roles in the evaluation and relationships with collaborators?
- What methods and practices will be used to engage collaborators?
- Do the collaborators view the benefits as beneficial? If not, what benefits would be viewed as beneficial?
- How are collaborators engaged throughout the evaluation process (e.g., early planning, early implementation, full implementation, final reporting)? Are the multiple perspectives of collaborators included? Do they have a strong understanding of the community(ies) in which an intervention is being evaluated?
- How could the transactional nature of the evaluation affect the relationships among those who are the focus of the evaluation (e.g., conveners, collaborators, communities)?
- How do the conveners' actions and/or words intentionally or unintentionally reinforce the idea that they are the primary holders of knowledge and expertise? How can they share power while meeting established objectives or requirements (e.g., grant timelines, evaluation questions required by a funder)?

Developing Evaluation Findings

Collaborators can and should play a key role in analyzing and interpreting data as it is collected and compiled. Through this process, conveners can learn strategies to meaningfully engage collaborators in making sense of findings, especially those who are members of historically marginalized communities. Collaborators may also acquire valuable technical skills for compiling, describing, and visualizing data. The process of analyzing and interpreting data provides opportunities to examine values and beliefs that could affect which findings are deemed most significant and to engage in self-reflection to recognize and mitigate potential biases.

Acknowledge values and biases. Conveners introduce their own values along with their explicit and implicit biases through all evaluation phases, including the interpretation of findings. Partnering with collaborators can mitigate them by incorporating community-based beliefs, values, and perspectives.

- Develop an awareness of preexisting worldviews and biases. Approach communities with cultural humility. Training, coaching, and other educational activities can be instrumental for learning how to recognize and address biases.
- Address power dynamics and organizational, systemic, and cultural factors to ensure all audiences can understand the findings and their limitations.
- Consider the assumptions and values that all groups bring to the interpretation of findings and how they differ from or align with one another.
- Acknowledge who decides which findings are reported and why. Be transparent about which findings are prioritized and selected.

Jointly formulate research questions. Evaluators, funders, implementing agencies, and community members have different information needs and priorities. The collaborative development of guiding research questions creates a foundation to ensure an evaluation produces information that is relevant to both conveners and collaborators and enhances buy-in to the evaluation process and findings.

- Create opportunities for collaborators and conveners to work together to define research questions.
- Ensure these conversations are facilitated in a way that balances power among funders, agency leadership and staff, community partners, evaluators, and other interested groups.

Collectively interpret findings. While evaluators bring technical skills to the collection and interpretation of data, program staff and participants and other collaborators bring experience and perspectives that foster a richer, more nuanced, and contextualized understanding of findings.

- Invite collaborators to engage in interpretation and sensemaking conversations during the data analysis phase. Sensemaking occurs when collaborators give meaning to, and build a shared understanding of, complex information. This process uncovers hidden patterns, differing perspectives, or new insights and often involves techniques such as storytelling and visual mapping.
- Consider how power is shared among those interpreting the data. How are community voices protected and raised? How might findings impact historically marginalized and excluded communities?
- Recognize that individuals within communities have varied experiences and perspectives and welcome the possibility of different reactions and interpretations of findings.
- Create a plan with strategies for incorporating different interpretations of findings into reports, presentations, and other public-facing materials.

- Report all findings, both promising and less positive or unexpected. To ensure transparency, create intentional space throughout the evaluation process to discuss unintended consequences and findings. Ensure contextual factors (e.g., organizational, political, cultural) in which the findings emerge are acknowledged and explained.
- Bring balance to the interpretation of and judgment about findings; consider how different judgments (i.e., good, bad, neutral) can impact their perceived value and affect whether and how they are accepted, shared, and used.

Consider the role and impact of research methods. Data collection and analysis methods affect how data are interpreted and presented. Collaborators can help translate the technical jargon of social science research (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods) into language and formats that are readily understood by program participants and community members, so they can participate more fully in making sense of and decisions about findings.

- Discuss the pros and cons of various data analysis techniques (e.g., aggregating versus categorizing data) with collaborators.
- Consider how and when data will be collected for continuous quality improvement (CQI) purposes. Involve collaborators in discussions about what data are helpful for assessing implementation progress and fidelity and for making adaptations and improvements throughout the program lifecycle.
- Listen to collaborator insights into the barriers or facilitators of various data collection methods. Use culturally appropriate strategies (e.g., journey mapping, storyboarding) to build more nuanced and richer understandings of findings to create a cohesive and meaningful narrative.

Reflection Questions

- What do collaborators want to learn from the evaluation? Will their questions be answered at the end of the project?
- What and whose story is being told? Whose story is not being told?
- How are collaborators and conveners working together to make findings meaningful? How have collaborator perspectives been integrated into the presentation and discussion of findings?
- How are unanticipated findings explained? How are collaborators involved in providing additional perspectives and context to make sense of unexpected findings?
- How are different or contradictory interpretations of findings being documented?

Communicating Evaluation Findings

Early in the evaluation process, conveners and collaborators should collectively develop a plan to guide the creation and dissemination of reports and other products to ensure the findings are accessible, useful, and actionable. This plan will serve as a roadmap for determining which findings, when, with whom, and for what purpose the findings should be shared.

Articulate dissemination goals. To develop an effective dissemination plan, conveners and collaborators should begin by clarifying what are the goals for sharing findings with the target audiences. Goals might include promoting awareness or buy-in to a program or policy, increasing knowledge, engaging community partners, and promoting program sustainability.

- Reflect on the overarching purpose of the evaluation, including its guiding research questions.
  - If the project is funded through a grant or contract, what are the information and reporting requirements of the funder?
  - If the goal of the evaluation is to inform policy change, what information should be provided to policy makers?
  - If the goal is to develop evidence-based practices, how does this shape the way findings are communicated?
  - If communities want to secure more financial resources to continue an initiative, what information is important to potential funders?
- Engage in a visioning process to determine collective dissemination goals. Select a visioning method that aligns with collaborator values (e.g., storytelling, interactive theater, photo elicitation, community forums) to reach consensus on the overall evaluation objectives and as they relate to dissemination.

  Ask: “What do we want to share? With whom? Why do we want to share this information?”

Identify audience(s). In addition to evaluation funders and collaborators such as program staff, program participants, and community leaders, identify other primary audiences with whom findings should be shared.

- Consider why it is important to reach each audience, what information or messages do you want to convey, and how they might use evaluation information.
- Think about how diverse groups might perceive and react to the findings.

  Ask: Who is invested in the evaluation and its findings? Who will make use of the findings? Who is expecting results? Who has a right to the results?

Select dissemination formats. For each audience, consider the most effective formats in which to convey information clearly and convincingly. Bear in mind that a dissemination format that is effective and compelling for one audience may not be for another. Also consider accessibility when selecting dissemination formats to ensure products are useable by people with visual, hearing, or other accessibility needs.[5]

- Seek input/recommendations from the target audience(s) about dissemination formats that are most accessible and appealing.
- Develop products that will be useful to the community(ies) in which the evaluation was implemented. For example, information about the successes of a community-based program could be highlighted in a video that is shared with community members to promote the program and increase participation.
- Be creative and collaborative in presenting findings. When sharing findings with program participants and community members, consider nontraditional approaches that may resonate and be more accessible. Examples include data walks (Murray et al., 2015) or similar interactive forums for sharing, discussing, and making decisions.

Common Dissemination Formats

- Executive summaries
- Technical reports
- Journal articles
- Fact sheets
- Press releases
- Presentations
- Audio/Video recordings
- Infographics

Identify dissemination channels. Consider both in-person and online channels for disseminating findings to maximize exposure to a broad range of audiences. Common dissemination platforms and venues include websites, social media platforms, professional and academic meetings, press conferences, podcasts, blogs, and local media outlets.

- Seek input from collaborators about the best channels for reaching target audiences. Consider how social media platforms can provide access to a broader audience that might not have been accessible in the past.

Develop a dissemination budget and work plan. A detailed budget and work plan developed in partnership with collaborators can help ensure dissemination activities and products reach the intended audiences and maximize the impact. The plan should specify the estimated costs of staff time, external consultants, and materials; individuals and evaluation partners responsible for implementing dissemination activities; and the timeline for producing and disseminating products.

[5] Products that are developed under federal grants or contracts and disseminated through federally hosted or sponsored platforms (e.g., the Child Welfare Information Gateway) must meet Section 508 accessibility requirements. Visit the federal government Section 508 website for more information.

- In the work plan, build in time to obtain feedback and suggestions from collaborators on sharing findings and developing dissemination products, especially regarding content, language, and use of graphics.
- When creating a dissemination budget, consider ways to reimburse collaborators for time and contributions; reimbursement options include both monetary compensation (e.g., stipends, gift cards) and in-kind compensation (e.g., providing meals and childcare, offering free professional development opportunities).

Reflection Questions

- Who are the intended audiences for evaluation findings?
- Whose needs and preferences are prioritized in decisions about sharing findings?
- Who should disseminate findings to target audiences?
- How might target audience(s) use evaluation findings? Do these uses align with the goals and preferences of funders and other conveners?
- What designs, language, and visuals will be used to communicate findings? Are these formats accessible?
- What dissemination channels or platforms will be most effective for reaching target audiences?
- What ‘story’ is being told through the findings? Is this story perpetuating harm by reinforcing false beliefs or maintaining hierarchies? Who is helping to craft the story’s narrative? Should anyone who isn’t currently involved be a part of the storytelling process?
- What role can target audiences play in building and amplifying dissemination strategies and activities?

Conclusions

The creation of useful and usable findings is a critical competency and the capstone of a successful evaluation. The dissemination of findings represents the culmination of time, effort, and resources to understand and communicate information on the effectiveness of a service, program, or policy. Given this investment, it is important to be thoughtful and intentional about how findings are derived and shared with program staff, program participants, policy makers, community members, and other audiences. This brief serves to prompt thoughtful conversations about sharing findings based on a relationship-driven approach that addresses three key considerations: identifying and engaging collaborators, developing findings, and communicating findings. In applying this approach, remember these important points:

- Consider how to present findings that are both *useful* (i.e., they have meaning and value for target audiences) and *useable* (i.e., they are understandable and can be used to make decisions).
- An authentic partnership between conveners and collaborators is vital for ensuring findings are relevant and useful to the communities in which an intervention is implemented. Conveners should be thoughtful and intentional in identifying and engaging collaborators to ensure their perspectives, experiences, and expertise are integrated into the interpretation of findings and dissemination of products.
- Consider and address power dynamics and biases that may exclude or diminish collaborator voices.
- Begin dissemination planning early into the evaluation process and revisit the plan frequently.

Additional Resources

Below are additional resources that build on the ideas presented in this brief and provide additional information and recommendations for communicating and disseminating evaluation findings.

Advancing Equity Through Research and Evaluation (Chapin Hall, 2022)

Equitable Evaluation Series: Principles of Equitable Communication (ASPE, 2022)

Collaboration Assessment Tool

Considerations for Conducting Evaluation Using a Culturally Responsive and Racial Equity Lens (MPHI, 2021)

Disseminating Results with a Community Focus (Mathematica, 2023)

Evaluation Reporting: A Guide to Help Ensure Use of Evaluation Findings (CDC, 2013)

Evaluating Collaboration for Effectiveness: Conceptualization and Measurement - Lydia I. Marek, Donna-Jean P. Brock, Jyoti Savla, 2015 (sagepub.com)

Centering Racial Equity in Collaboration Survey (2021)

Webinar: Our Tomorrows Project and Using SenseMaker for Child Welfare Planning, Research, and Evaluation Webinar (JBA. 2023)

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