



# DATA TRENDS: #7

Summaries of research on mental health services for children and adolescents and their families



## Development of an Outcome Evaluation

Source: Beck, S.A., Meadowcroft, P., Mason, M., & Kiely, E.S. (1998). Multiagency outcome evaluation of children's services: A case study. *Evaluation of Children's Services*, 25(2), 163-176.

For researchers working on multi-agency evaluations of collaborative children's mental health programs, developing meaningful, useful, and balanced outcome indicators can be a daunting process. Based on years of experience developing a statewide electronic outcome monitoring system, the authors of this article provide excellent suggestions for other researchers. This article is a rich resource for evaluators, children's service managers, and clinical directors who wish to develop an outcome monitoring system.

The outcome measurement system was created with the support of 60 state agencies, 31 of which committed staff time and resources to the effort. The development of the monitoring system, "SumOne for Kids," was guided by five basic principles: (1) To involve individuals in design and development who would eventually use the system; (2) To build on existing products; (3) To base the system on a self-evaluation model; (4) To build a system that included descriptive consumer information, descriptive service information, and measures of outcomes, and; (5) To emphasize functional outcomes rather than process or clinical outcomes. *Functional outcomes* reflect the ability of the individual to lead a productive life and include such indicators as school attendance, employment, friendships, etc. *Clinical outcomes* represent psychological changes, signs, or symptoms or disorders. *Process outcomes* describe how services are delivered, including such indicators as length of out-of-home stay and number of therapy sessions. SumOne for Kids emphasized functional outcomes because they are comparable across agencies and provide easily understandable data.

To develop outcome indicators, the researchers used social validation techniques. By polling key stakeholders, or the people who are most affected by the service (child clients, parents of child clients, agency board members, school board members, community agency workers, etc.), the authors discovered what they considered to be the most important issues. To ensure buy-in, agency administrators also rated the most important issues. The outcomes generated from these two surveys were consolidated into five major areas: 1. *Productivity* (school attendance, graduation); 2. *Antisocial activity* (drug and alcohol use); 3. *Living environment* (stability and restrictiveness); 4. *Protection from harm* (frequency of injury or abuse); and 5. *Client satisfaction*.

### Lessons learned from the SumOne project:

1. Involve stakeholders in all aspects of measurement;
2. Build a strong commitment to the lengthy development process;
3. Measure a few things well, keep it simple, and build on what others are doing;
4. Design a system for agency self-evaluation;
5. Select outcomes that are socially significant and understandable;
6. Use rigorous testing, but be flexible;
7. Work toward multiagency adoption of outcome measures.

The lessons learned while developing these outcomes are listed in the box above. These suggestions are enormously valuable to any researcher or professional who is developing community outcome indicators for multi-agency evaluation.

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