

Running head: ACTION for Kids: Involving Families and Youth in Evaluation

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Background and Context

The Office of Behavioral Research and Evaluation (OBRE) at Arkansas State University (ASU) serves as the evaluator for ACTION for Kids (hereafter called ACTION), the first System of Care in Arkansas. Involving family and youth in evaluation has been a new kind of challenge, but it is one that we are starting to meet. We have done this by involving families and youth in what we call the four Es of evaluation: Explaining, Engaging, Empowering, and Employing. The remainder of this paper describes some general strategies OBRE uses that focus on the four Es to accomplish the goal of family and youth involvement.

Program Focus

Systems of Care, almost by definition, call evaluators to attend to family voice and choice. Combining this charge with the demand for evidence-based and outcomes-based practice challenges professional researchers and evaluators to develop long-term, innovative strategies for sustaining evaluation through family and youth involvement. Those strategies will vary with the population of interest. In the case of ACTION, the population served by the system of care is families and youth in the Arkansas Delta, in which tremendous diversity exists in education, income, and virtually every other major demographic characteristic. None of the participants in ACTION have previous involvement in programs in which they were given a voice, a clear sense of ownership, or a sense of what evaluation is all about.

Before focusing on what does work, a little on what does not work is in order. Asking families to come to sessions on evaluation does not work. Various evaluation committees have been formed, but attendance, consistency, and interest are lacking. Thus, we needed to reach the families in an environment in which they were already comfortable. In other words, we decided

that we must go to the families (ENGAGEMENT). We worked on methods and opportunities to involve families in evaluation, and examined the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) involved in visiting with families and youth at monthly family support meetings in which we sought to explain the importance and methods of evaluation activities (EXPLAINING). Family support providers were welcoming of those visits because they showed that OBRE was interested in families.

Family support providers offered suggestions of how to engage family members and youth. First and foremost, we focused on the personal and practical needs of our families. Many ACTION families rely on food stamps for family meals, and they may not use the coupons for basic necessities such as soap, toothpaste, and bath towels. Likewise, most of our families cannot afford personal gifts such as perfume or candles. The evaluation team engages our families in evaluation activities using such items as door prizes and rewards. In addition to door prizes, gift cards to Walmart, McDonalds, and other local businesses are offered for participation. The evaluation team also provides dinner for families and hosts special drawings such as a popular holiday gift basket at Thanksgiving. Once engaged, without feeling threatened, family members have been involved in various activities, such as providing feedback on evaluation activities. For example, we ask families to look over the newsletters we send to stakeholders and tell us how family-friendly they are and how we can improve them. Feedback from the youth is given to the youth coordinator who in turn works with evaluation to develop new activities (e.g., youth wanted more input into our newsletter, which has morphed into the development of a youth newsletter). Giving the families a voice provides both perceived and real EMPOWERMENT. Finally, OBRE invites some of the family members and youth to sit on the

evaluation advisory board and provide input into evaluation planning and activities (EMPOWERMENT).

OBRE employs one family member as a family liaison who helps families understand the importance of evaluation (EMPLOY). Yolanda Jones, the family liaison for OBRE, is the mother of a youth in the ACTION program and is very passionate about her involvement with ACTION and her work at OBRE. She has learned a lot working with the evaluation team and she carries the message of the importance of data everywhere she goes. Yolanda has worked for OBRE for 6 months and performs a number of functions, such as being an interviewer in the longitudinal study, administering surveys to different groups during family nights in the four counties ACTION is currently serving, and providing input into virtually all OBRE activities for ACTION.

Conclusion

Involving families and youth in evaluation is not an easy task. OBRE must address issues of education, transportation, and communication when visiting family nights. Because of the diversity that exists (especially in education, in that, for example, some family members cannot read), strategies such as group discussion and group prizes must be handled with careful consideration of cultural competence. Frequent contact with family support providers, working with a family liaison, and meeting with families on our evaluation advisory board make our approach likely to succeed for any given activity (e.g., talking about evaluation, getting feedback, or administering a survey), and certain to succeed over the long term. Families are becoming knowledgeable about and involved in evaluation to the point that evaluation has a realistic possibility of continuing past the Federal funding period. Already families know more about evaluation and why it is important, families look forward to our visits on family nights,

and families are making our evaluation better. Meeting families where they are and showing them that their feedback really does result in change has created a positive forum for involving youth and families in evaluation. However, there is more work to be done. For example, at the initiation of an OBRE staff member, the prodding of the family liaison, and the recommendation of the evaluation advisory board, OBRE will begin to host some independent Evaluation Nights for families and youth—separate from family nights. Additionally, we are looking into various current technologies (e.g., webcams on netbooks) for communication with less hassle for people (e.g., to attend some meetings, some people invariably end up traveling 100 miles). Thus, evaluation is becoming an expectation for the future. That is the basis for sustainability.