



Within Our Reach

Child Safety Forward Resources

A National Initiative to Reduce Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities and Injuries Through a Collaborative, Community-Based Approach

During the first planning year of the [Child Safety Forward initiative](#), the technical assistance team developed a series of resource briefs on topics most relevant to the demonstration sites.

These topics were identified through a needs assessment and conversations with the sites about their interests, and these briefs helped to inform strategies chosen by the sites for the two-year implementation period.

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Within Our Reach

Child Safety Forward Resource: Development Evaluation and Rapid Testing

About Developmental Evaluation

Developmental evaluation (DE) is “grounded in systems thinking and supports innovation by collecting and analyzing real-time data in ways that lead to informed and ongoing decision-making as part of the design, development, and implementation process.”

Developmental evaluation does not replace other forms of evaluation. It should be used when a strong evidence-base for a solution does not exist or when a new solution is needed. There are five primary purposes or uses for DE:

- Testing a current project, program, strategy, policy, or initiative in a new context
- Adapting effective principles or programs to be more responsive to a new setting
- Developing a rapid response to a sudden change or crisis
- Preparing an intervention or practice to go to scale
- Understanding how systems change is unfolding, and how it may need to be adapted

According to the Developmental Evaluation Diagnostic Checklist, keys to good DE include:

- Preparing the conditions to succeed and making sure the situation is appropriate for DE
- Ensuring decision-makers and those supporting their decisions have the adaptive capacity for innovation and risk
- Embracing learning and evaluation

If the situation is appropriate, but the team is not “ready,” that does not mean that DE is not the best choice. Rather, it may mean there are steps to be taken to get the team ready. Even if the conditions are right, DE requires a different type of evaluator. Characteristics to look for in an evaluator include team work, high tolerance for ambiguity, adaptivity, high quality facilitation, and capacity to use a wide range of methods and approaches.

Center Equity in Developmental Evaluation

It is important to realize that there is a continuum of participatory methods and beliefs in evaluation. DE is no different. By its nature, it credits multiple forms of evidence and draws on a variety of methods and approaches that tend towards participatory and inclusive practices. However, how equity gets centered in the evaluation is still very much a function of how explicit equity appears within the work of an initiative.

Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment and the Equitable Evaluation Initiative are both resources calling attention to the role of equity in evaluation. There is much more room within evaluation than history has allowed for parents and community to play an active part in evaluation design, implementation, and use.

Practicing Developmental Evaluation

The role of an evaluator in DE is to inform the collaborative process by asking evaluative questions, to apply evaluation data and logic to testing of approaches and quality improvement, and to facilitate data driven decision-making. The team member in the evaluator role is accountable to the following:

- Nurturing a healthy environment for DE
- Guiding the learning agenda
- Facilitating Rapid Testing

Nurturing a Healthy Environment for DE

DE occurs in complex settings. It is the evaluator's role to detect and support opportunities for learning and adaption. [*Art of the Nudge*](#) covers five practices of critical importance to good DE, including:

1. Practicing servant leadership;
2. Sensing program energy;
3. Supporting common spaces;
4. Untying knots iteratively; and
5. Attending to structure.

The Learning Agenda

A learning agenda is a set of prioritized research questions and activities that guide rapid testing and decision-making practices. The [learning agenda](#) should be developed through a fully engaged process and reflect the following:

- Learning questions. What are the most important gaps in knowledge identified by the team that could inform the work?
- Learning activities. What are the best methods and approaches to answer the learning questions?
- Learning products. What deliverables need to be generated from the learning to communicate the evidence to key stakeholders and inform decision-making and design in the near term?

Rapid Testing

DE relies on real-time data collection to accelerate innovation and understand better how to get from intended strategy to realized strategy. Rapid testing emphasizes using small scale experiments and assumption testing to address a design or implementation challenge or to test a new practice or idea and determine whether to adopt and scale the idea, revise the idea based on what you learn, or drop the idea and try something new.



Using Rapid Cycle Evaluation to Inform Policy Decision- Making (Video)

Social Current's [Change in Mind Institute](#) provides [many examples](#) of how rapid testing can be applied at different scales (program, organization, systems, and policy). They identified four types of rapid experimentation:

- **Probes.** Preliminary forms of experimentation to help innovators gain a better understanding of the surrounding systems or challenges and surface possible ideas that may be worth testing.
- **Prototypes.** Small-scale experiments that develop and test ideas to know whether it is worth investing in bringing the idea to the field for more testing.
- **Pilot projects.** Systematic testing of ideas in the field to stabilize a model's design and prepare for a more rigorous pre-post experimental design.
- **Action learning.** Iterative approach to assessing a problem or opportunity by planning a response, acting, or implementing the plan, reflecting on the results, and repeating until progress gets made; this approach is the [Plan-Do-Study-Act](#) (PDSA) cycle.

Different methods and approaches (some that look traditional and some not) get used across the different types of rapid experimentation. For low-risk/low-stake experimentation, the burden of proof may not be as high. In those situations, evaluators tend toward quick and “lightweight” feedback methods. In high-risk/high-stake situations, a more rigorous design may be needed. A tool like an [After-Action-Review](#) would be a cost effective tool in a low-risk situation versus [RAPID Outcome Assessment](#) which might require more time and resources. [Better Evaluation](#) provides many different approaches that align well with DE along a spectrum of rigor.

Other Resources

[What does developmental evaluation look like?](#) (Mack, April 2013)

[Three Examples of Using Developmental Evaluation to Address Uncertainty from a Systems Perspective](#)

[Smart Decision-Making](#) (Stanford Social Innovation Review, Spring 2020)

[Use of Rapid Evaluation Methods to Improve Performance](#)

[Evaluating Prototypes](#)

[Learning Agendas: The Five Most Important Things You Need to Know](#)

This product was supported by cooperative agreement number 2019-V3-GX-K005, The OVC FY 2019 Reducing Child Fatalities and Recurring Child Injuries Caused by Crime Victimization demonstration initiative.



Within Our Reach

Child Safety Forward Resource: Equitable Evaluation

“Equity is the absence of avoidable or remediable differences among groups of people, whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or geographically.”

- World Health Organization (WHO)

“**Deep equity** means working toward outcomes in ways that **model dignity, justice, and love** without re-creating harm in our **structures, strategies, and working relationships.**”

- ChangeElemental (formerly MAG)

About Equity

The definitions of equity put forth by the WHO and ChangeElemental together demonstrate that equity needs to be understood as both a means and an end. It shows that equity is not about making everything the same but rather that all people should feel valued and experience a just and fair world. To achieve equity does not mean just creating new policies, programs, and strategies but undoing the harmful ones that have been intentionally and systemically created over time.

In the U.S., repeated evidence shows that Black, Indigenous, and/or people of color (BIPOC); low-income; rural; and other socially-marginalized groups experience disparate outcomes in health, education, and overall well-being. For Child Safety Forward to influence a child and family well-being system where child protection agencies, community partners, neighbors, and families share a responsibility to ensure children thrive, its collaboratives will need to adopt deep equity at policy, practice, and systems levels.

Ensuring Equity and Inclusion in Our Work

The Child Safety Forward: Ensuring Equity and Inclusion in Our Work convening fostered discussions about what equitable, community-led plans operating in a **safety culture** might look like. Several principles surfaced through this discussion:

- Learning and understanding at a better level the many lived experiences of those interacting with systems
- Allowing these perspectives and voices to lead the planning and change process
- Creating trusting and trustworthy spaces to engage multiple perspectives
- Developing shared understandings of racial justice within and across systems
- Starting change from within the system and holding it accountable to the change
- Sitting with our own discomfort and pushing past fear

Centering Equity in Evaluation

Equity in evaluation requires a shift in how learning and accountability are viewed and practiced. Evaluation is currently rooted in defining, describing, and analyzing the world based on a history informed by the values and experiences of white, western culture. As a result, many of the policies, practices, and interventions seen as effective within the child welfare system were produced through incomplete evidence. This does not mean we must start over. Rather, it suggests the need to use equitable evaluation to adapt and redesign policies, resources, and supports with stronger evidence that reflect the assets and needs of those experiencing the most disparate outcomes.

The [Equitable Evaluation Initiative](#) (EEI) is trying to reimagine evaluation practice. The EEI framework draws on three principles of evaluative practice that challenge the notion that numbers matter more than words and experiences, and that evaluation and research methods are purely objective and unbiased. EEI embraces the idea that rigor and values can co-exist. This shift positions evaluation not as a tool for telling us whether we are “right” or “wrong” but as a tool for facilitating equity and change.

How to Bring Equity into Evaluation Practice

The collective impact approach is a systems approach that has the potential to advance equity. A recent study funded by the Collective Impact Forum looked across collective impact efforts at the role of equity in practice and impact.¹ The study focused on three dimensions of equity that can be measured in any collaborative effort:

- **Capacity to implement an equity approach**, defined as explicit articulation of equity as its lens; capacity and readiness to engage communities, develop leaders, and shift power; a shared definition and approach to equity across partners; and credibility with and trust of local communities.
- **Action intended to increase equity**, including the use of locally relevant and disaggregated data to identify priorities and areas for intervention, prioritization of strategies and solutions that address disparities and build on community assets and resources, and analysis of structural inequities that drive disparities, when making decisions on design, implementation, and support of programs, policies, and practices.
- **Meaningful inclusion of populations** to the extent that leaders, implementers, and influencers are representative of the entire community intended to benefit from the initiative, the community is meaningfully engaged, and empowered, and non-joiners and traditionally disenfranchised groups have full access to participation.

Three Principles of Equitable Evaluation

- Evaluation should be in the service of equity
- Evaluation can and should answer questions about how culture, decisions, and strategies affect different populations and drivers of inequity
- Evaluation should be designed and implemented in line with values underlying equity: multiculturally valid and oriented toward participant ownership

¹ [When Collective Impact Has an Impact](#) (2018). Spark Policy Institute and ORS Impact.

This same study identified that collectives adopting [community organizing approaches](#) to ensure voice and access to decision-making power were stronger in equity work, particularly meaningful inclusion.

It is critical as we strive for equity, as a means and an end, that community not just inform the learning and accountability structure but lead it. This will ensure their voices are part of deciding what changes need to be made and how.

Child Safety Forward demonstration sites can adopt this frame by:

- **Making equity explicit in the theory of change and implementation plan.** Clearly articulate a shared understanding of equity, specific mechanisms for advancing equity, and a set of measures for holding the collaboration accountable to equity.
- **Adopt reflective practice on equity as policy.** At all points of developing strategy and evaluation, pause to reflect on opportunities to challenge old assumptions about learning and accountability.² Questions to ask when making decisions about strategy include:
 - What values and intentions does this decision advance and are we being transparent about those decisions?
 - Who is most affected by this decision? Are their voices at the table? If not, how do we bring them to the table? Are there multiple realities that exist, and do we understand those realities?
 - What evidence did we use to make this decision? Are there other forms of evidence we dismissed as less credible? Why?
 - What will happen when the process is over? Who will move the work forward?
- **Use assumption checking and inquiry frameworks before setting strategy.** [Root cause](#) analysis can be used to ensure that strategy does not focus too closely on a single factor solution leading to incomplete results. [Appreciative Inquiry](#) and [Power Analysis](#) also support deep equity planning.
- **Give up some of your power as an evaluator.** It is important for the people who are affected by the decisions to be at the table and have their experiences valued. However, to achieve true equity in evaluation, community must lead, not inform, the evaluation. [Community-led, participatory evaluation](#) approaches, not just methods, offers the opportunity for community to ask questions about the world around them and take informed action based on their learnings. Evaluation, when used this way, is in and of itself a powerful tool for change.
- **Experiment with other tools beyond focus groups, surveys, and standardized assessments to gather evidence.** There are many rigorous qualitative tools for gathering data and evidence that are more inclusive and culturally affirming including tools like [storytelling](#), [Outcome Harvesting](#), [Most Significant Change](#), and [Photovoice](#). For more conventional methods, including surveys, focus groups, etc., involve community in the design and adaptation of the tool before implementation.
- **Make equity part of the analysis for policy and practice reviews.** To do this, the collaboration will need to lay out a framework for defining a shared understanding of equity that will be visible in the work. As part of the policy and practice, tools like [Institutional Analysis](#) can help pinpoint opportunities to adjust, adapt or create policies that are more equitable. Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families offers one [framework](#) for how it positioned equity in its auditing process.

² Adapted from the Opportunity Spectrum: Possible Points of EE Framework Interplay. Equitable Evaluation Initiative (2020)

- **Adopt an anti-racist identity into personal professional identity.** While doing work at the organizational level is critical, individuals also need to grow in their understanding of their own relationship with race and where they sit within our racist system. There are many places to begin this journey. Chicago Beyond offers an [antiracist toolkit](#) for individuals to think about where they might start this process.

Other Resources and Examples

- [upEND](#) is a new movement of the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work to bring an end to the current child welfare system as we know it through new anti-racist structures and practices.
- [Why Am I Always Being Researched](#) is a guidebook for understanding how evidence gets made and how to include an equity approach in research.
- [Doing evaluation differently](#) looks at evaluation as a tool for community-building work.
- [Racial Equity Tools](#) is a one-stop shop with tools, research, tips, curricula, and ideas for people who want to increase their own understanding and to help those working toward justice.
- [Race Forward](#) is an online hub for research, tools, and information on advancing racial justice.
- [Building Movement Project](#) houses several resources on activating leadership, aligning organization principles and practices through constituent engagement and movement building.
- [Better Evaluation](#) offers several methodologies that welcome community inclusion in all phases of implementation.



Within Our Reach

Child Safety Forward Resource: Focus Groups

About Focus Groups

A focus group is a highly structured discussion among a small group of people designed to gain insight into their experience with and perspectives on a defined area of interest. Focus groups are especially useful in the social sector for planning and improvement. In Child Safety Forward, focus groups can be a powerful tool for:

- Developing partnerships with parents, youth, and community.
- Providing critical insights around sensitive or nuanced topics not easily captured through a survey.
- Providing insight into power dynamics, decision-making and language use within a group.
- Adding context and expanding on insights captured in surveys.
- Testing assumptions about ideas and strategies to refine implementation.
- Adding context, meaning and value to population data.
- Generating new hypotheses to be tested.
- Setting and assessing outcomes.
- Informing quality improvement efforts.

Centering Equity in Focus Groups

Focus groups are a widely recognized method for facilitating conversations with community. They should be implemented consistent with [culturally responsive](#) evaluation practices including:

- An asset-based model.
- Safe space that facilitates genuine sharing of experience, and privacy for information shared.
- Awareness and appreciation of social identities throughout the process.
- Reflexivity about your own personal story and agenda that
- Reliance on [storytelling](#) to expand and enhance the co-creation of knowledge.

Reflective Questions for Conducting Culturally Responsive Focus Groups (Rodriquez, Schwartz & Lahman et al., 2011)

1. What are participants' social and cultural identities?
2. How do participants' social and cultural identities inform their unique communication and/or relationship characteristics that are important for me to acknowledge within this research?
3. What are the naturally occurring environments participants already share?
4. How can I create and/or join a context that feels comfortable and affirming to participants?
5. How do I best acknowledge my own social and cultural identities and minimize the distance between myself and participants?
6. How do I best elicit the rich information these participants can share about their storied lives that in turn will make the research story most rich and representative of their experience?

Leading Effective Focus Groups

A focus group is not a question and answer session, a brainstorming session, a [listening session](#), or forum. While all of these are useful methodologies and share some common elements, focus groups differ in that they:

- Are limited in size (7 to 10 people) to allow for depth and nuance to surface.
- Require strong leadership or facilitation; and the time and resources to do it well.
- Are highly structured around a specific topic or small number of related topics.
- Are carefully constructed including who is in the room and how the space supports open and honest sharing of opinions and ideas.

There are three major phases to the focus group method:

1. Design,
2. Implementation, and
3. Learning.

Designing a Focus Group

Designing a focus group should take careful consideration and follow these recommendations:

- **Clarify Purpose.** Focus groups are not good for “fishing” for ideas or information. Know exactly how you plan to use the data you gather before going into the focus group. Surveys are a good tool for gathering information about **what** is happening. Focus groups can help inform **why and how** something is happening. A listening session may be a good alternative for gathering information on needs and priorities while focus groups can inform whether the solutions you propose are viable from a community perspective.
- **Find the Right Facilitator and Co-Facilitator.** Focus groups are vulnerable spaces. It is not a good idea for the facilitator to be highly invested in the outcome. Some skills and attributes of a good focus group facilitator include neutrality on content, demographically representing participants, warm and inviting communicator, great listener, skilled in recognizing and drawing out verbal and non-verbal responses and displays an understanding of group management.
- **Develop the Discussion Guide.** Work with your facilitator to develop the discussion guide. There should be a small number of open-ended questions with prompts to solicit more detailed responses. It is most helpful to start with general questions and work your way to the specific. It is important to balance this with the amount of time you need to ensure all important questions get answered. There are generally three types of questions in a focus group protocol:
 1. **Engagement Questions:** Getting the group comfortable with each other and the topic,
 2. **Exploration Questions:** The meat of the discussion,
 3. **Exit Questions:** Questions to ensure nothing gets missed.
- **Plan Your Group.** Keep in mind focus groups are small and should never be more than 12 people. Build in enough time so that each participant has 10 minutes to speak. The goal is to ensure that people are comfortable with each other. Creating the right dynamics is dependent upon the topic and how it plays out at the intersections of people’s identities (race, gender, power, age, etc.) We know that in focus groups, homogeneity tends to maximize disclosure.

Implementing Your Focus Group

If the planning work is done intentionally, implementing a focus group is relatively easy. The space needs to be set up to support sharing of perspectives and ideas in a group setting. It is important that participants can see each other's names. They should also feel relaxed and at ease. Food or fidget toys help.

Even if you are not affiliated with a research institution, it is a good idea to have participants complete a [consent form](#) before participating in the focus group. At the beginning of the focus group, clarify the purpose and intent of the focus group, and share the ground rules. In a group setting you cannot truly guarantee anonymity or confidentiality, so these ground rules serve as a social contract among participants. However, as researcher, make it clear how you will report the information and whether you will maintain anonymity in your reporting.

The tools you use to document the discussion at the focus group can greatly enhance or inhibit your ability to use the data. Key points and direct quotes can be captured on flip charts or white boards. These are visible to the whole group and provide an important accountability check on the conversation. It is suggested that you have two facilitators for each focus group; one who can be an active listener, and maintain eye contact with the participants, and the other who can take notes. The co-facilitator taking notes should use a log to capture changes in speakers' tone, and other non-verbal communication. It is recommended to record focus groups even if you choose not to transcribe them.

To close out your focus group, thank your participants. If you are providing any incentives for participation, give information about how they will receive those incentives and what your plans are for using the results. It is also recommended that if you are talking about traumatic or sensitive topics that you have resources available for participants to debrief their focus group experience if needed.

Analysis and Reporting^{1,2}

Focus groups typically generate a lot of data. There is often a desire to quantify data and report out on the frequency with which statements were heard. However, focus groups cannot answer questions about how most people feel or think about a topic or tell you the saliency of an idea so do not try and quantify your focus group data. Focus group data when analyzed systematically is powerful and credible.

Although not necessary it is helpful to transcribe focus group data. The quality of your recording equipment can help facilitate this process more cost effectively. Virtual focus groups may be easier to transcribe than focus groups conducted in-person because voices tend to be clearer.

Sample Ground Rules for Focus Groups

Want You to Do the Talking.

- We would like everyone to participate.
- I may call on you if I have not heard from you in a while.

There Are No Right or Wrong Answers.

- All person's experiences and opinions are important.
- Speak up whether you agree or disagree.
- We want to hear a wide range of opinions.

What Is Said in This Room Stays Here.

- We want folks to feel comfortable sharing when sensitive issues come up.

We Will Be Tape Recording the Group.

- Ask permission to record.
- We want to capture everything you have to say but will stop recording if you don't want something documented.
- We don't identify anyone by name in our report. You will remain anonymous.

[From Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group](#)

[Temi](#) is an online transcription services that is relatively cost efficient and produces transcripts with link to audio to aid in cleaning up the transcripts.

The references in this section along with [Guidelines for Conducting a Focus Group](#) provide good tips for processing your data in excel and thinking about how to organize and categorize your data.

Some [questions](#) to ask when summarizing your results include:

- What are the main ideas that emerged from all of your focus groups?
- What participant quotes summarize the key ideas perfectly?
- What were the most common responses?
- Were the responses different among sub-groups of participants (e.g., by gender, age, etc.)?
- Were there any responses that were often mentioned together?
- How can future focus groups, surveys, or research expand on your findings?
- How might these findings be used to improve programs, services, policies, etc.?

Do not wait until your focus groups are finished to think about how you will share your results and with whom. This question should be asked in the planning phase so that you can get the proper permissions and supports from participants to share findings in powerful ways. Most focus groups result in a formal written report and executive summary that outlines the purpose, the methods, and the findings. Also consider sharing the data through social media posts aligned with campaigns, community events or public radio programs, and with permission, using quotes to supplement infographics.

Findings should be presented in a manner that honors and respects the experiences and contributions of your participants. Findings should not generalize or essentialize an entire community of people or even similar groups of people.

¹ Onwuegbuzie AJ, Dickinson WB, Leech NL, Zoran AG. [A Qualitative Framework for Collecting and Analyzing Data in Focus Group Research](#). International Journal of Qualitative Methods. September 2009:1-21. doi:10.1177/160940690900800301

² Stewart (2006) [Analyzing Focus Group Data](#) (Chapter 7).

Other Resources

Community Toolbox: [Conducting Focus Groups](#)

[Doing Field Work During a Pandemic](#)

[The Power of Stories: Enriching Program Research and Reporting](#)

Simon, Judith Sharken (1999). [The Wilder Nonprofit Field to Conducting Successful Focus Groups](#). Amherst H. Wilder Foundation.

[UCLA Center for Health Policy Research: Section 2 Focus Groups](#)

[Trauma Informed Evaluation: Tip Sheet for Collecting Information](#) (Oct 2016). Wilder Research.

This product was supported by cooperative agreement number 2019-V3-GX-K005, The OVC FY 2019 Reducing Child Fatalities and Recurring Child Injuries Caused by Crime Victimization demonstration initiative.



Child Safety Forward Resource: Implementation Science

About Implementation Science

Implementation Science (IS) is concerned with the design and implementation of sustainable solutions aimed at improving conditions for certain groups or populations. Most simply put, Implementation Science is the study of what makes a program or practice succeed or fail. More formally, IS is “the scientific study of methods to promote the systematic uptake of research findings and other evidence-based practices (EBPs) into routine practice, and, hence, to improve the quality and effectiveness of [health] services.”¹

IS relies on constant evaluation and mechanisms that support continuous quality improvement and dissemination to:

- Strengthen your theory of change by moving from ideal to real.
- Understand what drives strategy or program implementation to ensure strategies achieve intended outcomes.
- Bridge “science to service” to accelerate scaling of EBPs.
- Translate strategies or programs into practice guidance for better strategy execution.
- Ensure sustainability of solutions.

Centering Equity in Implementation Science

[Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), [William T. Grant Foundation](#), and the [National Implementation Research Network](#) (NIRN) hosted researchers to discuss racial and ethnic equity and inclusion in IS and practice. They provided the following [guidance](#):

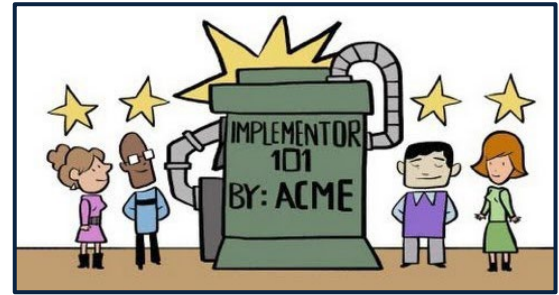
- Learn from and with the community by placing community members, their values, and their perspectives at the heart of research.
- Shift institutional incentives to promote equity by:
 - Identifying metrics of success that prioritize strong community relationships and community-driven solutions;
 - Using language and labels about residents that are affirming;
 - Building mechanisms to engage and fairly compensate community members for contributing their expertise.

¹ Eccles MP, Mittman BS. Welcome to implementation science. *Implementation Sci.* 2006;1:1. doi: 10.1186/1748-5908-1-

Implementation Science in Practice

Three key principles serve as the foundation for the practice of IS²:

- Knowledge and awareness of what it takes to change behavior is necessary to developing and evaluating implementation strategy; knowing why the behavior is not changing is critical.
- Direct input from transdisciplinary teams that include individuals or communities.
- Flexibility and non-linear approaches allow for proper attention to real-world settings and context.



Important to IS is the distinction between **effectiveness** and **efficacy**. Effectiveness describes the outcomes of implementation within a real-world context while efficacy describes how well the intervention worked in an optimal setting. IS is at the forefront of innovation and emphasizes effectiveness. This example from the [Institute for Healthcare Innovation](#) provides a comprehensive review of IS in action.

There are a broad range of [theories, models and frameworks](#) that fall under the IS umbrella.³

Foundational concepts that underpin IS fall in five categories (see Figure 1).

Application of these frameworks is intended to bolster design and planning, implementation process and evaluation. What distinguishes IS models is their use and application – here are some examples:⁴

- **Process models** describe or guide the process of translating research into practice or advancing implementation of evidence-based interventions.
- **Research-to-practice theories** explain how new knowledge comes to be understood and applied in alignment with social cognitive theory.
- **Determinant frameworks** are models for evaluating success or understanding what the necessary factors and influences are to get at implementation outcomes.

A feedback loop is created, cycling the action phases

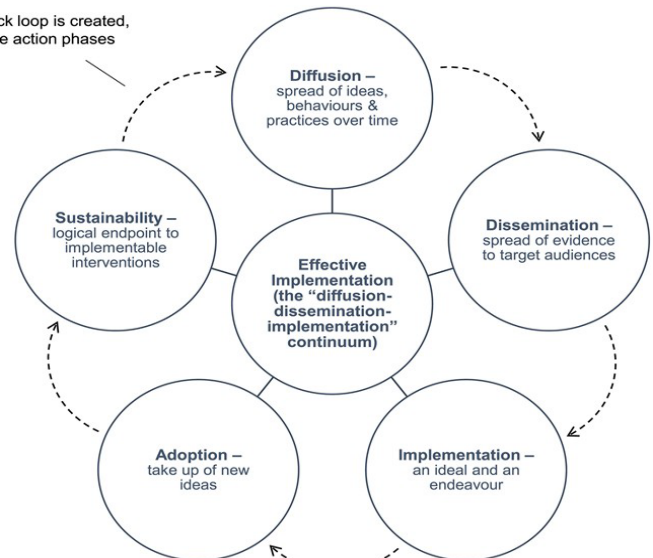


Figure 1: Foundational Concepts of IS⁴

² Handley MA, Gorukanti A, Cattamanchi A [Strategies for implementing implementation science: a methodological overview](#) *Emergency Medicine Journal* 2016;**33**:660-664.

³ Additional models can be found here: <https://www.fic.nih.gov/About/center-global-health-studies/neuroscience-implementation-toolkit/Pages/methodologies-frameworks.aspx>

⁴ Rapport, F. et al. (March, 2017) [The struggle of translating science into action: Foundational concepts of implementation science](#).

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DOI) explains how and why people adopt new ideas, practices, or tools (i.e., innovations). This is the focus of IS—to find the best solutions and get people to change their behavior. DOI suggests that there are some people who are “at the ready” to adopt change very early while others may put up a lot of resistance. DOI suggests that knowing the characteristics of different types of adopters, how they appear in the population you want to adopt the change and the factors that influence adoption will help determine how you can best scale and sustain the solution.

Good and credible communication channels (well framed narratives delivered by respected champions of the effort) combined with iterative small tests of the change can be used to advance adopters along the stages of readiness up to full adoption.⁵ The decision to adopt usually falls along four or five stages of readiness:

- Awareness,
- Contemplation,
- Testing or trying it out,
- Continued use.

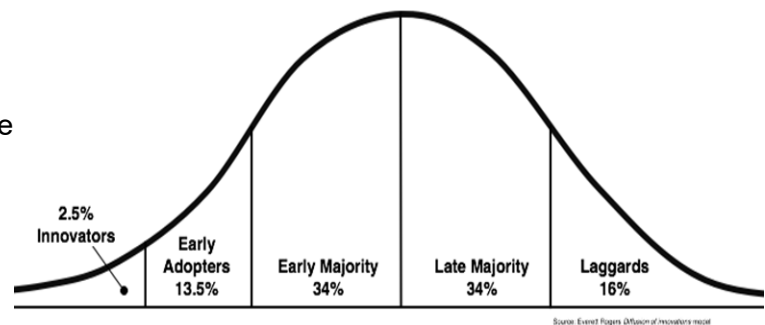


Figure 2: Rogers Diffusion of Innovation Theory

DOI distinguishes among five types of adopters and five factors that when established, influence different types of adopters. The tipping point for adoption generally falls once the early adopters are on board.

Transdisciplinary Research⁶

IS is dependent upon a transdisciplinary team approach to the design and testing of innovations. Transdisciplinary research is not simply leveraging the expertise of a multisector team to address a common problem using an existing framework. Rather it is when each sector brings elements from the underlying frameworks in their field to define a new idea, theory, or method for solving the problem. Transdisciplinary teams work with users of the innovation in an integrated and collaborative fashion.

Other Resources

Annie E. Casey Foundation: [What is Implementation Science?](#)

[Considering Culture: Building the Best Evidence-Based Practices for Children of Color](#)

Chapin Hall: [Blueprint for Practice](#)

Child Welfare Information Gateway: [Implementing Evidence-Based Practice](#)

Easterling, D., & Metz, A. (2016). [Getting Real with Strategy: Insights from Implementation Science.](#)

NIH Fogart International Center: [Implementation Science Toolkit](#)

University of Washington Department of Global Health: [Implementation Science Focus Area](#)

⁵ Dr. Leif Singer. [On the diffusion of Innovation: How New Ideas Spread.](#)

⁶ Dankwa-Mullan, Irene et al. “Moving toward paradigm-shifting research in health disparities through translational, transformational, and transdisciplinary approaches.” American journal of public health vol. 100 Suppl 1, (2010): S19- 24. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2009.189167.

This product was supported by cooperative agreement number 2019-V3-GX-K005, The OVC FY 2019 Reducing Child Fatalities and Recurring Child Injuries Caused by Crime Victimization demonstration initiative.



Within Our Reach

Child Safety Forward Resource: Conducting a Community Needs Assessment

About Needs Assessments

A needs assessment is a structured process for identifying gaps between what is and what should be. A needs assessment can also include discovery of assets that can be further leveraged for change.

Individuals, groups, communities, and systems have needs and assets around knowledge, practice, skills, relationships, and resources. The purpose of a needs assessment for Child Safety Forward is to better understand the needs and assets that influence child safety and, based on that analysis, support the development of an action plan for implementation (the Child Safety Forward implementation stage theory of change).

Centering Equity in Needs Assessment

Needs assessments, when guided by equitable principles, contribute to more equitable, community-led change efforts. Before conducting a needs assessment, take the time to develop a shared understanding of equity to guide this work.¹

Issues core to centering equity include²:

- Which voices are at the table throughout all phases of the work.
- Valuing and crediting multiple forms of knowledge, expertise, and evidence.
- Participant ownership over knowledge, data, and expertise.
- Acknowledgement of the non-neutrality of the status quo and how historical and current decisions and conditions influence strategy.

Conducting a Needs Assessment

The [Community Assessment Toolbox](#) is an accessible and comprehensive resource on all phases of a needs assessment. The [Handbook for Participatory Community Assessments](#) is an example of how Alameda County Public Health Department conducted a participatory needs assessment.

¹The National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity published an equity driven guide: [Equity and the Perkins V Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment](#).

²[Chicago Beyond](#) has published two resources exploring how community organizations, researchers, and funders address unintended bias in research. Its original [guidebook](#) and an adapted guidebook in response to [COVID-19](#).

Potential Strategy Pitfalls

A needs assessment is about getting enough of the right data about the current situation to inform action, but not so much that acting feels overwhelming. The frame for a needs assessment should align with the initiative vision (the Child Safety Forward planning year theory of change).

The team conducting the needs assessment should include representation from the same groups that inform the needs assessment. Questions to answer:

- What and whose needs are we looking to understand?
- What data is already available and what data will we need?
- What methods will we use to gather the information?
- Who will collect it?
- How will we analyze it?
- Who will use the information and how?

Data Collection

Well done needs assessments use more than one method of data collection and gather data from multiple perspectives. They also combine quantitative and qualitative data, which is often collected in the field.³

One approach is to use an iterative process of data collection and analysis where data gathered by one method is used to facilitate data collection through another method. For example, administer a survey, analyze and visualize the data, then convene stakeholders for a [data walk](#) or focus group to develop a shared understanding of what the data means.

Several activities in the planning phase present opportunities for building a comprehensive community needs assessment.

These include:

- 5-year retrospective reviews of child abuse and neglect fatalities.
- Identification of risk and protective factors.
- Policy and practice reviews (see [Institutional Analysis](#) for an example of this type of review)

The Child Safety Forward technical assistance team has specific tools to support data collection and organizing of the data for these activities. It is important to include this data in your engagement of community and project partners to develop a comprehensive story of the needs and assets available to inform a theory of change and strategic plan.

Common Tools for Collecting Data:

- Surveys
- Focus groups
- Fatality reviews
- [SSIT](#)
- Interviews (include [Bellwether Interviews](#) in your methodology - may point to policy and system change opportunities)
- Community report cards and public data sets
- Listening sessions and public Forums
- Observation
- Asset mapping

Most of these tools are captured in the [Community Assessment Toolbox](#).

³[Doing Fieldwork in a Pandemic](#). Recently, a document to capture ways to do field data collection during a pandemic was crowd-sourced and made available on-line. Many of the data collection methods used in needs assessments are in this document.

Organizing and Using Data

Data needs to be organized in a way that helps inform strategic action. There are several analytic tools and frameworks to make the data digestible for decision making. These tools involve bringing multiple perspectives to the table. Like data collection, using more than one analytic lens will lead to a more comprehensive strategy.

Asset Mapping: This approach spatially organizes information about a community's strengths and resources. The Child Safety Forward Safety Science Training introduced the [ASCII Map](#) as an approach for organizing and thinking about systems. While not asset mapping, [Predict-Align-Prevent](#) is geospatial modeling of risk and protective factors that can inform a needs assessment. [Small Area Analysis](#) can also be used to set strategic priorities.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis: A SWOT analysis is useful when trying to understand the needs and assets of organizations, neighborhoods, or systems. A SWOT analysis helps identify leverage points and potential barriers along the way.

Political, Economic, Social-Cultural, Technological, Legal and Environmental (PESTLE) Analysis: Similar to a SWOT analysis, it is used frequently in strategic planning in the private sector. It is helpful to use a PESTLE analysis in conjunction with a SWOT to get a full picture of how context may impact strategy.

Force Field Analysis: This is a decision-making tool to help balance the need to address forces that impede change and reinforce those that encourage it. There are several [examples](#) of force field analysis to help think about how it might be applied in the Child Safety Forward context.

Other Resources and Examples

- [Community How to Guide on Needs Assessment and Strategic Planning](#)
- [Community Needs Assessment and Data-Supported Decision Making: Keys to Building Responsive and Effective Health Centers](#)



Within Our Reach

Child Safety Forward Resource: Parent and Community Engagement

About Parent and Community Engagement

Depending on your field and depending on your role in Child Safety Forward, the way you practice community engagement may vary. The basis for community engagement is that anyone directly impacted by an issue should have a say in decision-making around that issue. Like equity, community engagement can be viewed as both a process and an outcome. It can be a powerful vehicle for bringing about change.

Parent engagement is community engagement focused on the specific subgroup. Parents are key to keeping their children safe and resilient. While parents have historically been placed in antagonistic roles in child welfare systems, within Child Safety Forward, it is critical that parents are positioned as strong partners and leaders in our efforts.

Parent and community engagement create opportunities for:

- Creating more effective solutions.
- Building awareness, knowledge, and skills in problem-solving around complex issues.
- Empowering groups and building greater social cohesion and resilience in communities.
- Increasing trust of community organizations and governance.

“Engaging with parents in planning and evaluation processes is essential to meeting the needs of their families in any given community.”

- Timothy Phipps, Birth Parent National Network Father (Oregon)

“Community engagement is people working collaboratively, through inspired action and learning, to create and realize bold visions for their common future.”

- Tamarack Institute

Readiness for Parent Partnerships

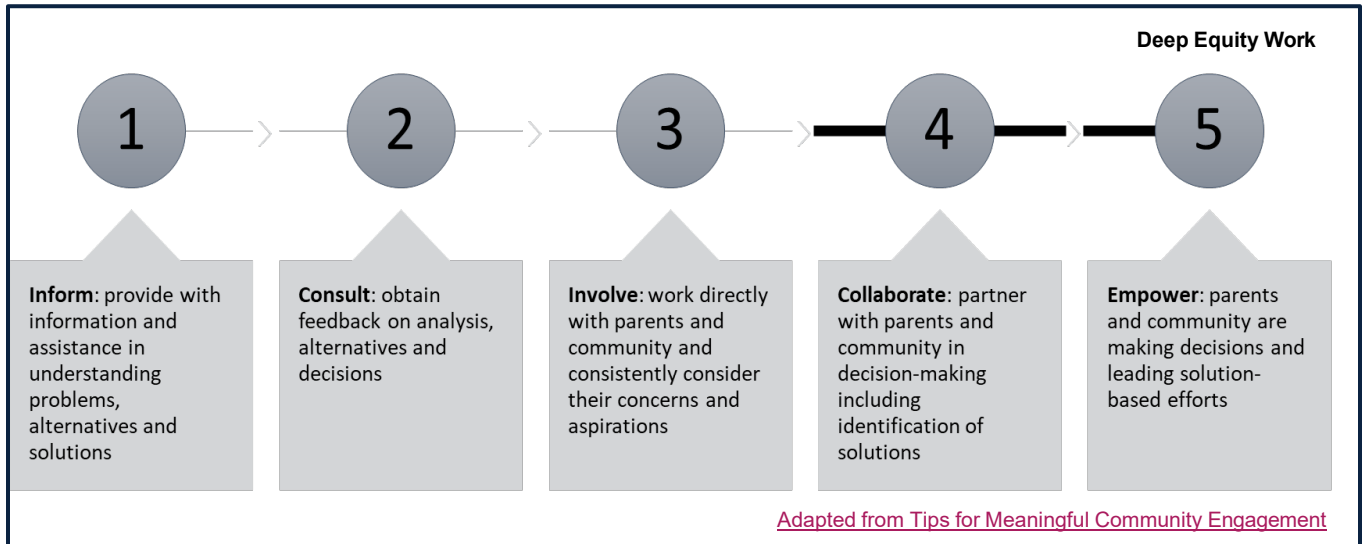
The Children’s Trust Fund Alliance led a Child Safety Forward convening about starting and maintaining genuine parent partnerships. Key readiness factors for parent partnerships include:

- Resources to bring people together.
- Deep knowledge and understanding of who can participate and how they can best participate.
- Messaging that is inclusive and inviting.
- Connections with parents and influential members of the community.
- Clear contacts within the initiative for parents to connect with and provide mentorship.
- Attitudinal readiness across staff; willingness to challenge prior assumptions and beliefs about parents and community.
- Clear guidance on the roles and responsibilities of parent partners.
- Accessible information about the initiative.

Centering Equity in Parent and Community Engagement

Figure 1 below puts forward a broad [spectrum of engagement](#). Deep equity is the work that happens when we move beyond involving parents and community in meaningful ways (stage 3) toward collaboration and empowerment (stages 4 and 5). While attending to parent and community engagement practices, it is critical to swiftly correct disparities and mitigate power differences.

Figure 1: Community Engagement Spectrum



Parent and Community Engagement in Evaluation Practice

There are three core considerations for making parent and community engagement work as a condition of collaboration and evaluation. No community or parent engagement effort is successful absent these considerations:

- **Decision-Making:** This appears prominently in the community engagement spectrum. Fundamentally, if we are only listening but not sharing leadership, resources and decision-making with parents and community, we will not achieve long-term change.
- **Relationship Development:** To meaningfully engage, there needs to be genuine trust with and across all partners. It is not the responsibility of community to overcome issues of historical mistrust of institutions, but rather the responsibility of institutions to demonstrate they are trustworthy. This is done, in part by putting your trust in parents and community.
- **Capacity Building:** To actively participate and engage, it is necessary to build awareness and knowledge of the issues and the skills necessary to act in partnership. Capacity-building comes in the form of communications, tools, resources, training, and infrastructure to support meaningful engagement.

Community-Based Participatory Research

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is the most widely recognized set of practices for the inclusion of non-academics in the research and evaluation process. [CBPR](#) is “a collaborative process that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change to improve community health and eliminate health disparities.” These same principles can also be used to guide community-led strategy that can intersect well with rapid testing and evaluation.

[Community-based Participatory Research: A Strategy for Building Healthy Communities and Promoting Health Through Policy Change](#) is a resource guide published by PolicyLink to ensure that CBPR reaches its full potential. There are 11 active principles for CBPR. Here is what a few of the key principles mean for evaluation practice:

- **Principle 1: Recognize Community as a Unit of Identity.** Community is the starting point for the work. In the case of parents, the identity is their role as parents. Elevate the importance of that identity in the work and in your evaluation. Leverage that identity to help them connect with the accountability and learning aspects of evaluation.
- **Principle 2: Build on Strengths and Resources within the Community.** As insiders, parents can provide unique perspectives on how to implement the evaluation with the greatest buy-in. Position parents as researchers not as research informants. Ensure that parents, not just data partners, sit on the evaluation team in compensated roles. In doing so, you not only get better data, but build transferable capacities and skill sets in the community and make important connections to the organizations in which parents interact or in which they may be employed.
- **Principle 3: Foster Co-Learning and Capacity among All Partners.** Evaluation is both specialized and intuitive. Everyone in the partnership can benefit from capacity building in evaluation. Put intentionality behind evaluation discussions including the methods and approaches and the decisions behind them.
- **Principle 7: Involve Systems Development Using a Cyclical and Iterative Process.** Practice agile project management, which means conduct the research in incremental, and sometimes intensive, steps and share findings episodically rather than at the end. Be open to revisiting the evaluation design and methods as often as necessary to ensure all partners involved understand and buy into the approach.
- **Principle 11: Work to Ensure Research Rigor and Validity but also Seek to “Broaden the Bandwidth of Validity” with Respect to Research Relevance.** Work with parents and community to ensure that the questions being asked are relevant and that parents can take what is learned and apply it. Use multiple methods in all evaluations that include systematically collected and analyzed qualitative data and emergent learning tools that privilege experience as credible and valid sources of data. Do not base the success of your initiative on metrics alone.

Other Resources

The Children's Trust Fund Alliance offers a suite of resources to help share and celebrate [parent voice](#) including the Alliance Resiliency Project, conversation guides, protective factors social media campaign resources, and a webinar series. For access to numerous publications written by and with parents, visit the Children's Trust Fund Alliance [website](#).

[International Public Participation Models 1960-2020](#). This resource provides an overview of 60 public participation models from around the world.

[Community Engagement: A key strategy for improving outcomes in Australian families](#). This paper provides a case study of community engagement in practice. Although it looks specifically at the Australian social service delivery system, many of the core concepts are reflected in the U.S. context.



Within Our Reach

Child Safety Forward Resource: Partnerships and Collaborations

About Partnerships and Collaborations

A key prevention strategy underpinning Child Safety Forward is building strong and effective community collaboratives that include the voice of parents and families. Partnerships are known by many different names including collaboratives, community networks, collective impact, affiliates, networks of networks, and coalitions. Every partnership has its own framework, but they all represent a group of individuals or organizations working together toward a common goal. Even though working through and with partnerships has become the norm to addressing social problems, they are hard to set up and even harder to sustain.

Centering Equity in Partnerships and Collaborations

It will come as no surprise that equity needs to be an intentional and explicit mandate of a collaborative if changes are to be meaningful and sustainable. Collaborations demonstrate capacity for equity in three different ways:

- **Equity as a goal** or the result that is driving the collaborative (e.g., culture of equity, health equity, racial equity).
- **Equity to guide analysis** which includes using root causes to understand complex issues facing the community (e.g., disaggregating data to identify disparities in outcomes by race and other factors)
- **Equity as power** or critical examination across the collective as to how goals are set, how resources are distributed, how agendas are shaped, and how key policies and practices are determined.¹

In successful collaborations it is critical that there is a shared understanding of equity and what it means for the work. The Child Safety Forward Initiative held a convening on collective impact in August 2020 with a focus on equity. It might be helpful to re-engage your collaborative partners in a dialogue on how to bring a structured approach to cross-sector partnerships that is centered on equitable systems change.

Child Safety Forward Potential Partners

- Government agencies
- Victim advocates
- Law enforcement
- Child protective services
- Parents, families, and community members
- Community, cultural, and faith-based groups
- Health care providers
- Mental health professionals
- Prosecutors
- Citizen review panels
- Schools or school districts
- Medical examiner’s offices
- Child death review teams
- Other state, tribal, and local entities
- Other allied professionals

Successful Partnerships

Child Safety Forward is providing technical assistance on building and sustaining a [collective impact approach](#) as one pathway forward. Collective impact was chosen in part because it was highlighted by the federal Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities as a promising model for addressing child maltreatment fatalities. It is a structured approach for bringing together individuals and organizations from different sectors, who are often working in isolation from one another, toward a common goal. There are well-established tools and resources to help communities set-up and strengthen their collective impact approach.

While the conditions of collective impact are clear, other frameworks exist to guide community partnerships. What distinguishes these frameworks is how they approach the following:

- **Shape and Function.** Collaborations are organized around a purpose. It is important to understand how members plug into that purpose and how priorities are influenced and shift.
- **Membership.** Collaborations have many partners who need to be able to enter and exit the network. As a result, it is important to understand how partners are connected and what each partner is doing.
- **Structure and capabilities.** The success of a collaboration depends on the degree to which it organizes itself to produce unique capacities that would not exist without the collaboration. It is important to define how decisions and activities occur and get made.
- **Cadence.** Collaborations need to agree on the pace of progress and how it will be measured in the present and over time.

Evaluating Partnerships

Key to collaborations and collective impact is evaluation and continuous learning. Very few collaboratives pause to understand the health and functioning of the collaborative in advancing outcomes. Ongoing evaluation of the collaborative can do the following:

- Identify early wins in progress that can keep partners at the table and provide openings for new partners to get involved in the collaboration.
- Signal potential problems before they become barriers to moving forward.
- Help partners re-engage and identify with their commitment to moving the work forward together.
- Provide evidentiary support for the value-add of collaborative work and its potential to accelerate durable change at systems and population levels.

The [Guide to Network Evaluation](#) recommends focusing evaluation on three pillars:

- **Connectivity.** Understanding how partners within a network or collaboration are connected can help position the collaboration for shared learning and action. Connectivity covers two dimensions: 1) membership or “the who” and 2) structure or how the relationship flows.
- **Health.** This is the collaboration’s ability to engage, sustain, and adapt as needed. It is defined by three dimensions: 1) resources, 2) infrastructure, and 3) joint value creation.
- **Results.** The purpose of the network is to advance change. Results include the immediate results stemming from the work of the collaborative and the ultimate impact.

Most partnership assessments address these three pillars in some fashion.

¹ [Advancing the Measurement of Collective Community Capacity to Address Adverse Childhood Experiences and Resilience](#)

Sustaining Strategic Partnerships

Sustaining collaborative action efforts is about more than just programming. It is about continuous engagement of the right partners at the right time to influence systems and accelerate community change. Collaborations pop up in our communities all the time, many of them focused on reaching similar results. This phenomenon is, in part, because funding most often supports coalition setup, but not its sustainability. If we are to achieve the Child Safety Forward vision, the partnerships and collaborations put in place today will need to work together for many years to come. As your community is building its sustainability plan, it is critical to think about how and in what form the initial collaboration should remain. Two additional resources for thinking about sustainability are [Sustaining Collective Impact Efforts](#) and the [Community Collaborative Life Stages](#) framework.

Partnerships and Collaborations Assessment Tools

There are a lot of tools available to assess collaboration. Many of these tools can be self-administered or you can opt-in to an online administration where the site will host your assessment. The type of assessment or learning tool you use should reflect the organizing framework and principles for your collaboration and what you need to do with the information (i.e., benchmark performance, diagnosis challenges, establish effectiveness of the model).

Listed here are some of the most common tools.

- [Source4Networks](#), has a free platform and set of diagnostic tools for networks along with the [network health scorecard tool](#) for self-administration.
- [*Wilder Collaboration Factors](#) Inventory is a widely recognized standardized collaboration assessment. There is an online platform, or you can download and self-administer.
- [Partnership Assessment Tool for Health](#) was designed for health care partnerships but is easily adapted for collaboratives working on broad social and public health issues.
- [*Coalition Assessment Tool](#) is available for self-administration through the Washington State Health Care Authority.
- [*Collaborative Effectiveness Assessment Activity](#) helps identify strengths and areas for growth available through the Prevention Institute.
- The [Partnership Assessment Tool \(PAT\)](#) is a tool used in international context designed for research teams. It may contain elements and ways of approaching partnership assessments that can be adapted to your work.
- [*Community Capacity Assessment](#) was developed for implementation of Triple P and comes with a facilitation guide.
- Collective Impact Tools by Tamarack Institute and Collective Impact Forum
 - [Readiness for Collective Impact](#)
 - [Collective Impact Self-Assessment and Planning Tool](#)
 - [Cross-Sector Partnership Assessment](#)

In addition to widely accessible tools, there are a handful of tools that you can buy into, benchmark your collaboration, and also receive consultative support.

- [PARTNER](#) is a paid platform for measuring and tracking complex networks of relationships. It includes networking mapping tools.
- [Collective Community Capacity Survey](#) was developed out of an initiative to address adverse childhood experiences and resilience. It is a paid tool. If you are interested in exploring this tool further, Social Current can connect you with its authors.

*Denotes tools used to inform the Collective Community Capacity Survey.

This product was supported by cooperative agreement number 2019-V3-GX-K005, The OVC FY 2019 Reducing Child Fatalities and Recurring Child Injuries Caused by Crime Victimization demonstration initiative.



Within Our Reach

Child Safety Forward Resource: Theory of Change

About Theory of Change

A [theory of change](#) is an ideal tool for understanding complex issues, finding new solutions to problems, and helping organizations think beyond what they do now. The final product is a visual representation of how an intervention brings about intended results. While a logic model shows a neat and tidy picture of a program, a theory of change captures the messiness and complexity of achieving long-term, sustainable change.

There are many formats for a theory of change, but they all share some general features:

- Underlying assumptions about change.
- Contextual factors outside of the control of the intervention.
- Pathways and conditions that lead to change (within and outside of the intervention).

Child Safety Forward will not prescribe a single program or intervention, but rather will facilitate a longer-term change process to create a child and family well-being system where child protection agencies, community partners, neighbors and families share a responsibility to ensure children thrive. This larger vision makes theory of change the right tool to help communities align implementation plans and evaluation with their community's change story.

Centering Equity in Strategic Planning

Many initiatives fall short of explicitly naming equity in their theory of change. Sometimes this happens because an initiative does not have a shared definition of equity and sometimes it is because there is an underlying belief that change strategies should be designed to maximize benefit to the most people. Child Safety Forward is starting from a different assumption—that by making the change that benefits the most vulnerable and those most negatively impacted by the system -- all will benefit.

This assumption means that Child Safety Forward theories of change need to address the conditions in systems that reproduce inequity and ignore differences among people. Making equity explicit in the theory of change will first fall on how your community goes about building its theory of change and implementation plan (see *Child Safety Forward Resource Equitable Evaluation*). Secondly, it will fall on how your community articulates pathways of change that produce equitable outcomes and undo conditions that have held inequities in place.

Potential Strategy Pitfalls

The process for building a theory of change can be used to strengthen partnerships and buy-in. A theory of change should not be developed in isolation from the community. Keep in mind that the theory of change visual is a primary communication tool of the community change narrative and therefore needs to be owned by everyone.

The side bar outlines the steps for creating a theory of change. The first two steps were completed in the planning year. To establish a solid implementation plan and evaluation framework all the steps are important. While a theory of change is a precursor to strategy development, it is also an iterative tool and should be adapted according to what is being learned from the Child Safety Forward data collection activities and rapid testing of strategy.

Set the Vision

Often a collaborative planning change effort starts with defining the goals, strategies, and actions the collaborative is going to take and then shifts to thinking about the outcomes the strategies can produce. The result of this process is often a business-as-usual approach that keeps communities stuck in their current state. Theory of change works in the reverse—no strategy gets decided until the change (“result”) that is needed is clearly defined. Starting with the end in mind leaves more room for voice in the process and leads to a broader range of strategies than may have been tried in the past. Some refer to this result as a vision statement.

A vision statement in a theory of change needs to be plausible and observable (i.e., evidence can be gathered to show the change occurred). A theory of change will likely have an overall vision that captures who will experience the change and how the change will look, feel, and be experienced by the who. When reading a vision statement, people should feel the power and importance of what will be accomplished. An overarching vision is important to guide the work. It is also helpful for each partner or stakeholder involved in advancing the vision to vision for themselves and/or the system or organization they represent how their own organization will experience this change. Ultimately vision statements ground all the work.

It can be hard to vision a future change that looks very different from the status quo. Two exercises that are good for visioning:

- **Create an Epitaph for the Initiative.** Ask the group to think about what legacy this initiative will leave behind and work together to make that legacy statement as concise as possible (try to limit to 15-20 words).
- **Design a Magazine Article or Album Title for the Initiative.** The title of the article or album should capture the overall vision. The sub-headlines or tracks are the vision of change for each of the partners.

Types of Strategies

1. Identify a long-term goal (“vision”).
2. Conduct “backwards mapping” to identify the conditions and preconditions (“outcomes”) necessary to achieve that goal.
3. Identify the interventions (“strategies”) that the initiative will perform to create these preconditions.
4. Develop indicators for each condition that will be used to assess the impact of the interventions.
5. Write a narrative and develop a visual that can be used to summarize the various moving parts and pathways in the theory of change.

What is this thing called ‘Theory of Change’?

Backwards Mapping of the Changed Condition

Once the vision is agreed upon and clear, it is time to identify the underlying conditions that need to change for the vision to be a lasting reality. Some of these conditions might be hard, tangible changes (e.g., access to resources to support basic needs, quality childcare, centralized ownership of data by community, etc.) and others will be less tangible (e.g., strengthening of informal supports, changed narrative about parenting, etc.). Some of these conditions will be within the purview of the current initiative, some will be future-oriented, and some may be conditions that the initiative has limited or no influence over.

Conditions get mapped backwards from the result to help establish hypotheses about cause and effect. A change in one condition may be necessary in order to create a change in another condition. Sometimes, people call these “preconditions.” [A Five Why's](#) analysis is one of the best tools for thinking about cause and effect and the pathway of change. [Systems Mapping](#) is another tool for theory of change development. Changed conditions tend to fall within four categories¹:

- **Impact:** Change in lives of individuals or populations within a geographical area or ecosystem
- **Influence:** Wide range of system-level changes within organizations or networks
- **Leverage:** Changes to available resources and investments
- **Learning:** Activities that advance field- or system-level knowledge

Strategies and Mechanisms for Change

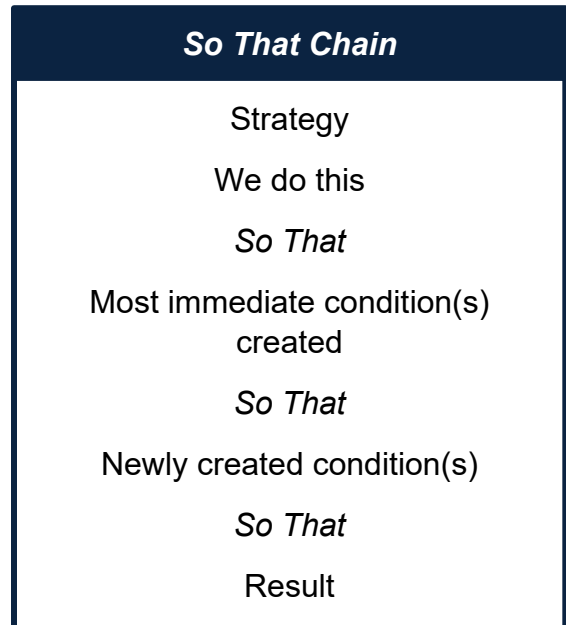
Now that the changes are defined, it is time to think about strategy to activate change. The strategy should be chosen based on need. It is important to link these strategies directly to conditions of change. Strategies describe how the changes will come about. They are not specific programs or interventions, but programming may be a strategy within a theory of change. Strategies will be elaborated upon in your implementation plans.

Indicators

Indicators align the theory of change with measurement of implementation and effectiveness. Indicators are not usually included in a visualization of the theory of change, but it is an important step. Ideally, every condition will be accompanied by at least one indicator to measure success.

The [Center for Theory of Change](#) defines indicators as having the following four parts:

- Who is Changing? (Population)
- How many do we expect will succeed? (Target)
- How much is good enough? (Threshold)
- By when does this outcome need to happen? (Timeline)



¹ The [I2L2 Framework](#) provides same outcome statements related to these categories.

Narrate and Visualize

A theory of change makes explicit assumptions about change work. First, summarize your theory of change and include the assumptions and evidence that sit behind the conditions you want to change and your choice of strategies. Then translate the story into a meaningful visual. A visual will help people connect with the change you want to make and better understand how the change will come about. Although it may start linear, your theory of change may not stay that way. Keep in mind that not all needed changes are within the control of your initiative. The use of a visualization helps communicate where your initiative will make its contribution and where contributions from others may be needed. Tools to help visualize your theory of change include.

- **Graphic Facilitation:** can be used during theory of change planning to move directly from conversation to visualization about change.
- **Mind Mapping:** captures connections between thoughts and ideas. Pen and paper are great but there are also many free on-line mind mapping tools.
- Graphic design tools like Microsoft [SmartArt](#) and [Canva](#) make it easy to create visual models that depict your theory of change.

It is likely that your change story will be similar to another group's change story. If you are having trouble visualizing your theory of change do not hesitate to look at other theories of change for elements that communicate similar ideas. Groups working with youth often engage them as artists in helping visualize the theory of change. It can also be helpful to look at models from different fields. Many of the resources below share [examples](#) of theories of change.

Other Resources and Examples

- Norman, C (2014). [The Finger Pointing to the Moon.](#)
- US AID Learning Lab: [What is this thing called "Theory of Change"](#)
- Forti, M. (2012). [Six Theory of Change Pitfalls to Avoid.](#)
- [Keystone Accountability Theory of Change](#)
- [Center for Theory of Change](#)

This product was supported by cooperative agreement number 2019-V3-GX-K005, The OVC FY 2019 Reducing Child Fatalities and Recurring Child Injuries Caused by Crime Victimization demonstration initiative.



Within Our Reach

Child Safety Forward Resource: Strategy

About Strategic Learning

Strategic learning is about absorbing and using information to articulate the relationship between a set of prioritized strategies and outcomes. The two tools Child Safety Forward sites are using to support good strategic learning are:

- The data collection activities that are part of their needs assessments, retrospective fatality reviews, policies, and practices audits
- The theory of change for both the planning and implementation phases

These tools are foundational for any type of strategic learning or planning. The Child Safety Forward Implementation plan is what brings all of this together and makes it actionable.

The purpose of this resource is to guide a shift in thinking from “What are the critical changes needed to support resilient families and keep children safe in their homes?” to “How might we support these critical changes taking place?” It also offers guidance for prioritizing strategies and developing solid implementation plans.

Centering Equity in Strategic Planning

Keeping in mind that equity is both a means and an end, strategy should not only be accountable to equitable outcomes but should be guided by equity practices in its development. Questions to ask as part of strategic learning and implementation¹ include:

- How can we ensure that the voice of those most impacted by our plans are at the table?
- Whose voice is missing and how do we ensure it's included?
- What kinds of knowledge, expertise, and evidence are driving our plan?
- To what extent do our strategies address the underlying issues?
- What are we choosing not to address and why?
- How can we seek traditional and nontraditional ideas about what strategy looks like?
- Are our choice strategies culturally responsive?
- Do we have strategies that look at dismantling systems of oppression as equally as they do building opportunities for inclusion, equity, and justice?
- Do our strategies look inward at change, not just outward?

¹ Adapted from the Opportunity Spectrum: Possible Points of EE Framework Interplay. Equitable Evaluation Initiative (2020)

Potential Strategy Pitfalls

There are several mistakes people make when setting strategy:

- **Mistaking Goals or Outcomes for Strategy.** Goals and outcomes, when obtained, are intended to be permanent and sustained. Your strategy, on the other hand, is a game plan for the current timeframe that will put you in the best position to reach that goal. It often takes multiple strategies to achieve goals or outcomes.
- **Looking for the “Perfect” Strategy.** While it is important to know where you are headed, rigid strategies rarely respond well to changing contexts. It is important to be flexible and adaptable when it comes to strategy. This is where real-time information is so critical.
- **Shutting the Door to Innovation and Change.** The most effective strategy results from varied input from a diverse group of thinkers and in an environment in which debate and critical thinking are welcome.

Types of Strategies

Types of strategies needed to move complex systems efforts forward include:

- Building public will
- Community organizing
- Power shifting
- Capacity building
- Communication
- Knowledge
- Networking
- Policy and advocacy
- Programmatic
- Sustainability
- Resourcing

Building a Successful Strategy

To avoid these pitfalls and develop good strategy, you need an adequate diagnosis of the problem (your data collection activities) and a clear direction (theory of change). Based on those, you then move to actions that are grounded (i.e., they are feasible and sufficient).

To build a successful strategy you will need to:

- **Get Focused.** Good strategy requires focus. It is impossible to do everything, especially within the time frame of a funded project or an initiative. The theory of change helps keep an eye on the end game over the long-term. Strategy gets into the moment and helps coordinate our actions and resources the best we can. Be sure to define the time frame for your strategy cycle.
- **Explore.** It is important to think through the possibilities. Adequately diagnosing the current system and how you would like it to change will help. Also, plan to bring multiple minds, disciplines, and sectors to the table. Try not to close out any ideas too soon.²

² [Within Our Reach: A National Strategy to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities](#) (2016) is a good starting place for strategy discussion.

- **Prioritize.** In the case of strategy, less is more. In addition to time, it is important to consider where there are resources and opportunities to move forward. In other words, ultimately strategy boils down to doing things you can do something about. There are many tools to help think through the strategy options. [Scenario planning](#), for example, can help think through decision making where there are a lot of unknowns or a [Before Action Review](#) can help identify potential challenges and risks, drawing on lessons learned in the past. In addition to tested tools, strategies can be prioritized more informally using a rating system that answers the following questions:
 - Which ones will have the most impact?
 - Which ones align with our values?
 - Which ones are more likely to be successful?
 - Which ones have windows of opportunity to act on now?



- **Put Strategy to Paper.** Convert your thinking into written strategic objectives that clarify intent and meaning and will produce the intended outcome.
- **Set Performance Measures and Targets.** Like defining how you measure outcomes, it is important to measure successful strategy execution. In the strategy context these are called key performance indicators. Outcome evaluation signals how effective a strategy was. Key performance indicators help set how much and how well a strategy was executed.

Strategic Learning

Key performance indicators do not help advance or improve strategy. Strategy implementation, not just its outcomes, needs to be evaluated. This is especially important when not all of your strategies have been proven. This is referred to as the [Triple Loop Learning Framework](#) and it centers on three learning agendas:

- **Learning about What You Are Doing.** What can be learned about how the strategy is being executed?
- **Learning about How You Are Thinking.** What can be learned to further inform or challenge our assumptions and thinking?
- **Learning about How We Are Being.** What can we understand about why the strategy is being executed this way?

Sustainability

Sustainability refers to a specific set of strategies that is intended to ensure that work extends beyond an initial funding period. Sustainability strategies generally fall within three categories:

- **Institutionalization.** Structures, relationships, and activities become embedded and owned outside of the initiative
- **Financing.** Ongoing fiscal support for specific strategies or programs
- **Capacity.** Skills and knowledge have been built to the extent that the challenge or problem will continue to be addressed

Historically, a focus on programs led to overemphasizing ongoing financial support and less on other aspects of sustainability. Child Safety Forward is encouraging the use of the [Program Sustainability Assessment Tool](#) to begin thinking about sustainability. Part of sustainability is also recognizing when it is time to exit a strategy.

Other Resources and Examples

The [Strategic Learning Process](#) is a quick tool for keeping strategy agile.

Guidebooks for setting strategy:

- [Child Welfare Information Gateway: Strategic Planning](#)
- [Strategic Planning in Child Welfare: Integrating Efforts for Systems Improvement](#)
- [Developing a local health department strategy plan: A how to guide](#)

Tools for setting and evaluating strategy:

- [A Guide Book for Strategy Evaluation](#)
- [Guide to Evaluating Collective Impact](#)

This product was supported by cooperative agreement number 2019-V3-GX-K005, The OVC FY 2019 Reducing Child Fatalities and Recurring Child Injuries Caused by Crime Victimization demonstration initiative.