SRAENE
Sexual Risk Avoidance Education
National Evaluation

Is Your Program Ready for an Impact Evaluation?

Well-implemented impact evaluations can reveal whether a program is effective at changing intended outcomes for youth. Because funders want the programs they support to demonstrate strong evidence of effectiveness, positive findings from an impact evaluation can help foster sustainability. However, impact evaluations are time- and resource-intensive undertakings that are challenging to implement well. To avoid spending resources on an evaluation that yields disappointing findings, you should conduct an impact evaluation only if your program and organization are in a strong position to detect positive impacts—otherwise, your program risks spending resources on an evaluation with a high likelihood of yielding unsatisfactory findings. Ask yourself the five essential questions listed below to determine your program's readiness for an impact evaluation.

1. Is your program operating as intended and achieving its goals?

No one wants to conduct an impact evaluation for a year or more only to find the program had no impacts on the outcomes of interest. Guard against that result by gathering preliminary evidence showing that your program consistently achieves its goals—changing outcomes for youth—before you conduct an impact evaluation. To do this, start with a standardized program that is clearly defined and replicable, meaning that all program components are developed and in final form, with standardized training, technical assistance plans, and implementation guidance. Then gather evidence that the program is being implemented with fidelity, and that the quality of delivery is consistently high across all sites and facilitators. Also, before moving forward with an evaluation, you should have pre-program and post-program survey data from participants that show large changes in key outcomes after participation in the program.

2. Are your organization and partners ready?

Before conducting an impact evaluation, determine whether your organization and partners are prepared for the time, expense, and extensive communication and collaboration required during an evaluation. A strong evaluation should be conducted by hiring an experienced and independent evaluator and data collection team, and not by the program staff themselves. Even with an evaluator and data collection team conducting most of the study activities, an impact evaluation requires more time from program administrators and frontline facilitators than

What is an impact evaluation?

An **impact evaluation** assesses the change in outcomes associated with participating in a program. Impact evaluations compare outcomes for individuals who had the opportunity to participate in the program (often called the program or treatment group) with outcomes for individuals who did not (often called the comparison or control group).* To assess impacts, evaluations typically collect data from both the program and the comparison groups before the program begins (at baseline) and after the program ends. In impact evaluations of sexual risk avoidance education programs, data collection often involves surveys completed by youth at two or more points in time. The Family and Youth Services Bureau recommends collecting follow-up surveys that measure risk behaviors after the end of programming, when feasible.

Impact evaluations often use one of the following designs:

1. **Randomized controlled trials:** Groups (or individuals) are assigned to either the program or comparison condition using a random process. A well-implemented randomized controlled trial is a highly rigorous impact evaluation design.

2. **Quasi-experimental designs:** Groups (or individuals) are assigned to either the program or comparison condition through a nonrandom process. Quasi-experimental designs can be rigorous if the groups are well matched on both group and individual characteristics.

* We use the terms program and comparison groups throughout. For randomized controlled trials, the terms treatment and control groups are also used.

when implementing the program without an evaluation. Program administrators will be responsible for helping the evaluator and data collectors coordinate the impact evaluation. Such responsibilities may include tracking youth for surveys and coordinating data collection in the program sites, all the while overseeing high-quality program implementation and youth retention in what will likely be a greater number of implementation sites. Depending on how staff are compensated, your organization may need more funding to cover the costs of the evaluator, data collectors, and increased staff time—ensure that you have the resources to cover these expenses. You should also consider whether the program team, evaluators, and data collectors have a history of collaboration, and then put a strong plan in place to ensure collaboration and communication throughout all phases of the evaluation.

3. Can you increase the number of implementation sites and youth who receive the program while maintaining the integrity of your program model?

To set your evaluation up for success to detect an impact, you need a sizable number of implementation sites delivering your program and a sizable number of youth receiving the program. Your evaluator or the SRAENE technical assistance team can help you determine the scale at which you need to operate for a credible test of your program's effectiveness. If your organization is not currently operating at that scale, you need to assess whether you can expand the program while maintaining high-quality programming. If you need to recruit additional sites, you will need to identify key points of contact, develop relationships with staff, and assess each new site's capacity for strong implementation. If you need to increase the scale at which you operate, you should ensure that your program is standardized, and that you have an effective training plan and a continuous quality-improvement

process in place so that additional sites and facilitators will have the materials, training, and technical assistance to ensure high-quality delivery.

4. How many control/comparison sites can you recruit, and what considerations are important for recruitment?

For an impact evaluation, you need the same number of comparison sites and comparison youth as you have for your program sites and program youth. For example, if at least 10 sites serving 500 youth are receiving the program, you need 10 sites with 500 youth for your comparison group—meaning that 20 sites and 1,000 youth will be involved in evaluation activities. Your sites need to know that they have a chance of not receiving the program during the study period if they are assigned to the comparison group. To help with recruitment, you may wish to offer those in the comparison group the opportunity to receive the program once follow-up data are collected and the evaluation is complete. In addition, in a quasi-experimental design, it is particularly important to make sure the comparison group is similar to the program group in terms of participants' background, including risk and protective factors. Differences in those characteristics would make it more challenging to attribute differences in outcomes to the program.

5. What will your comparison sites be doing instead of your program?

In an impact evaluation, you want to have a strong contrast between the experiences of the youth participating in your program and the youth in the comparison group. If there is no difference in program experiences, there will be no difference in outcomes. Do not recruit sites that offer programs similar to or nearly as robust as yours in terms of content and dosage. If your comparison sites also want you to offer their youth a program, ensure that the content and goals of that program differ from those of a sexual risk avoidance program.

OPRE FYSB Family & Youth Services Bureau Mathematica Progress Together Public Strategies