Evaluation of Early Childhood Programs: The Role of Parents

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ABSTRACT: Recent literature indicates that parents have generally been overlooked as sources of information in preschool and day care program evaluations. The need for parent involvement in program evaluation is detailed and data are presented that highlight some of the problems which may be encountered when parents are included. Behavioral ratings from both parents and teachers of preschool and day care children were collected and differences were noted despite the high internal consistency of the scale used. Approaches toward interpreting such discrepancies are detailed and suggestions for future research and application are made.

Much has been said about the need for evaluation in early childhood development programs. The ideal evaluation tells the funding agency and/or the program staff whether the program is accomplishing what it set out to do and, if not, why not (Perloff, Perloff & Sussna, 1976; Reicken, 1977). Among the reasons usually given for such evaluation efforts, two are especially important. First, funding agencies at the federal, state, and local levels are becoming more concerned with accountability and, second, there is an ever increasing desire to specify the criteria for high quality services (Williamson, Prost & George, 1978). Despite the numerous discussions of the important components, evaluations of preschool and day care centers have generally overlooked the role of the parent. This is not to say, however, that parents are seen as unimportant in child care programs. Indeed, strong statements have been made concerning the crucial role to be played by parents as early childhood programs expand. Auerbach (1975) has detailed the importance of including the parents in day care decision making while Yawkey and Bakawa-Evenson (1975) have described the parents' role as not only crucial to the successful functioning of the preschool or day care program but also as a right to which they are
entitled. Our own work has focused on the problem of involving the parents in program evaluation (Deitchman, Newman & Walsh, 1977).

The purpose of this paper is to show how parents can take an active part in the evaluation of programs in which their children are enrolled as well as to detail some of the problems we have encountered in working toward this goal. In discussing program evaluation, this paper should not serve as a "how to" procedural guide, but more as a general orientation from which further strides can be taken toward effectively including parents as members of an evaluation team.

The Context of Evaluation

The term "program evaluation" is still a rather nebulous one to many workers in the field, primarily because the processes involved in formal program evaluation are still relatively new (the typical worker has not had the benefit of direct training in evaluation procedures). Program evaluation can imply such diverse things as casual judgment of program effectiveness, cost-benefit analysis, descriptive statistics on man hours of service, or performance by individuals on standardized psychological tests. It is important in early childhood programs to clearly specify what, precisely, is of interest in the evaluation setting. This, in itself, is an important problem in this area. In our own work in the preschool and day care setting, we have found three aspects to be especially important. First, procedures which yield measures of a child's behavioral development, especially, in terms of social competencies (Zigler & Trickett, 1978) are preferred; second, both parents and program staff should be included in the assessment of behavior, and finally, to the extent possible, evaluation processes should reflect appropriate design concerns (Campbell & Stanley, 1966).

For extended discussions of these issues the reader might see Anderson and Ball (1978); Perkins (1977); Perloff, et al., (1976) and Reicken (1977). Of course, workers involved in program evaluation must select those components which they deem important given the limitations of the particular situation.

As has been intimated, evaluations of early childhood programs are beginning to appear. For example, Taylor (1978) has reported on an evaluation project in a day care center in which both outcome (the overall effects of the program) and process (how the effects are achieved) analyses were employed. This project used both standardized tests and observational measures within a pretest-posttest, control group design (see also Montes & Risley, 1975). Nelson, Singer and Johnson (1978) described a broad evaluation effort in a residential program for mentally retarded and behavior problem children based on case histories (at preadmission), interviews with cottage counselors