



Engaging Tribal Communities in Evaluation

Rigorous Evaluation in Tribal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting

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Introduction

Research in tribal communities has often disregarded the concerns and sovereignty of those communities (for more information, see brief 1 in this series: *An Overview of Local Evaluations*), sowing distrust and reluctance to share information. The evaluations of the Tribal Home Visiting Program demonstrate the commitment of federal and tribal partners to create a new way forward in research and program partnership.

Community engagement incorporates meaningful community input into all phases of evaluation: determining evaluation questions, designing the evaluation plan, selecting appropriate measures, interpreting findings, and returning knowledge back to the community through ethical dissemination (Tribal Evaluation Workgroup, 2013). It requires time and commitment. The evaluator must get to know the community and its relationships and build trust and mutual respect.

The Tribal Home Visiting Program is a federally funded initiative that supports the provision of maternal, infant, and early childhood services to American Indian and Alaska Native families. Grantees that received 5-year awards beginning in 2010, 2011, and 2012 conducted local evaluations to strengthen the evidence base for home visiting in tribal communities and to answer locally relevant questions. The evaluations combined scientific and cultural rigor to ensure results that are valid for both researchers and communities.

This brief, the third in a series about the local evaluations, describes how the grantees engaged their communities while designing and implementing the evaluations. The series is designed to help federal staff and leadership support tribal communities to build local evaluation capacity. It may also be of interest to other policymakers and researchers in the human services field. For more information, visit the [Tribal Home Visiting Program](#) website.

The Administration for Children and Families provided Tribal Home Visiting grantees with flexibility to fully engage their communities in their evaluations and contribute to the home visiting evidence base (for more information, see brief 2 in this series: *Supporting Tribal Home Visiting Grantees in Meeting the MIECHV Evaluation Requirements*).



Lessons on Community Engagement

The Tribal Home Visiting Program evaluations offer important lessons for anyone interested in conducting community-driven evaluations. The highlights below are based on articles that appeared in a special issue of the [*Infant Mental Health Journal*](#) (May/June 2018) authored by grantees, technical assistance providers, and federal staff.

Take time to build partnerships and share information with the community. The grantees partnered with evaluators from the community, private firms, and academia. It took time for the external evaluators to understand the community's strengths, values, and culture. Program directors and evaluators emphasized the importance of participating in program planning and implementation. They also stressed the need to engage with program staff and community members—especially tribal leaders and elders—in developing the evaluation and sharing the findings in a way that “gives back” to the community (Ayoub, Geary, Londhe, Hiratsuka, & Roberts, 2018).

Engage the community in developing the evaluation methodology.

The grantees found that it was important for community and cultural protocols to inform methodological decisions such as identifying research questions and designs, selecting measures, and determining data collection procedures. Collaboration with tribal community advisory committees and others ensured that the selected outcomes, measures, and study designs were both scientifically and culturally rigorous. Indigenous worldviews were emphasized and acknowledged by local evaluators and program staff to ground the evaluations in community cultures and traditions (Kilburn, Lyon, Anderson, Gutman, & Whitesell, 2018).

Use measures and instruments that fit the community.

The grantees gathered community input to determine the relevancy of existing instruments, adapt them to fit community contexts, and create new ones when valid and reliable measures for tribal communities did not exist (Whitesell et al., 2018). They engaged community members in defining adaptation goals, clarifying adaptation goals, and operationalizing intended outcomes. Evaluators cannot do this alone. They must serve as both facilitators and guests, translating community priorities into an evaluation that is locally relevant and acceptable (Meyer et al., 2018).

Build on community strengths.

The grantees focused on increasing positive outcomes rather than reducing negative ones, which many studies in tribal communities have historically done. Some grantees emphasized qualitative data—consistent with traditional storytelling and knowledge transfer from person to person—over quantitative data (Whitesell et al., 2018).



Grantee Case Studies

The grantees used multiple strategies to involve community members in the evaluation in ways that were unique to their program and context. The following case studies describe the experiences of two grantees.

Case Study 1: The Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe Together for Children Program

Overview. The Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe (PGST) Together for Children Program implemented the [Nurse Family Partnership](#) (NFP) home visiting model with families that enrolled prior to the 28th week of pregnancy and delivered a curriculum based on the [Touchpoints](#) philosophy to families with children aged 0–5. The NFP model was chosen, in part, because the community valued its emphasis on addressing maternal stress.

Evaluation design rationale. The program staff and evaluation team collaborated with community stakeholders and the Chi-E-Chee Coalition, composed of tribal residents and local agency staff, to develop the implementation and evaluation plans.¹ As the primary voice for the community, the coalition plans local prevention and intervention initiatives and oversees research. The team also collaborated with the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribal Council, which supervises all tribal activities, to obtain a formal resolution and human subjects approval to conduct the evaluation. The team systematically garnered interest, engagement, and ongoing support of the evaluation by conducting community and staff needs assessments, interviewing families, and acknowledging and respecting the cultural realities of the community.

Evaluation implementation. As a result of the community-engaged planning process, PGST chose an evaluation question and design that allowed it to determine whether the home visiting program was addressing parenting stress. Based on program and community input, PGST determined it would not be feasible to identify a control group of mothers within the community and instead chose a single-case design, which aligned with the local context and interests. PGST credits the completion of its rigorous evaluation to community and staff support and involvement.

¹ All Tribal Home Visiting grantees are required to develop an implementation plan to guide program goals, services, and model enhancements.

Case Study 2: Native American Professional Parent Resources Tribal Home Visiting Program

Overview. The Native American Professional Parent Resources (NAPPR) Tribal Home Visiting Program provided a culturally enhanced version of the [Parents as Teachers](#) (PAT) model to families in Albuquerque and three surrounding counties. The enhancements included nine cultural activities and discussion guides to augment standard PAT lessons with Southwest intertribal core values and beliefs, language, customs, songs, and traditional parenting practices.

Evaluation design rationale. The evaluation focused on cultural connectedness because a community needs assessment had identified a need for culturally relevant services that supported cultural revitalization. A mixed-methods design was selected to generate reliable findings and a holistic picture of the intervention implementation and its effects. The evaluation team felt that surveys and focus groups would be efficient and accepted by the community. The qualitative component helped alleviate concerns about measuring a conceptually challenging construct (i.e., cultural connectedness) without a validated instrument, and it addressed community values by including home visitor and participant voices. Validated measures for cultural connectedness, cultural self-efficacy, and cultural interest did not exist, so NAPPR created measures drawing on an extensive literature review and consultation with experts in the field. The evaluation was guided by a community-engaged approach that addressed tribal community values and needs through the perspectives of a range of key stakeholders.

Experience implementing the evaluation. NAPPR's approach was instrumental in generating interest and trust in the intervention and evaluation process. The program was effective in establishing community and staff buy-in, designing and implementing rigorous evaluation methods, maintaining flexibility to account for contextual realities, and strengthening local evaluation capacity.

Key Takeaways

This brief describes how tribal home visiting grantees engaged community members in the evaluation planning and implementation process. Federal program staff and leadership working with tribes and tribal communities may benefit from considering the following when overseeing locally designed evaluations in this context:



Individuals designing grant requirements for projects with tribal communities should be familiar with the importance of community engagement.



Time to engage community members should be incorporated into grant activity time lines and requirements. Federal project officers may use the strategies provided in this brief as examples for other tribal communities.



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