

Bridging Insight and Action: Convening Evaluators and Programs to Advance Two-Generation Learning

Introduction

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has long supported two-generation (2Gen) approaches, investing in programs, policies, and research to promote better outcomes for the whole family.¹ As part of its commitment to exploring ways of advancing the field, the Foundation hosted the Two-Generation Evaluation and Learning Convening (Convening) in July 2024 to bring together program leaders, evaluators, and funders. The convening attendees engaged in discussions on fostering peer learning, identifying gaps in evaluation methodologies, and translating insights into actionable strategies.

The Convening was established within a larger ecosystem of learning and is connected to the ongoing efforts of organizations such as Ascend at the Aspen Institute² and the Administration for Children and Family Office for

Featured Grantees of the Annie E. Casey Foundation

[Agape Child and Family Services](#), a Memphis-based faith nonprofit organization, provides early childhood education, mental-health counseling, case management, and family connector services to strengthen and build the capacity of families.

[Community Action Project of Tulsa \(CAP Tulsa\)](#), an anti-poverty agency, combines high-quality childcare and educational opportunities for young children with strong evidence-based education, workforce readiness, and parenting programming for families.

[Generation Hope](#) provides direct support to young parents in college and their children. Its Scholar and Next Generation Academy programs offer holistic services, mentoring, and 2Gen programming. Generation Hope also engages education and policy partners to drive systemic change.

[Impact for Equity](#) developed the Chicago-Cook County 2Gen Economic Mobility Project to drive policy reforms to enhance housing stability and economic mobility.

¹ For examples of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2Gen work, see [Family-Centered Community Change](#), [Two-Generation Approaches](#), [Investing in Innovation](#), and [Data Governance for Two-Generation Programs](#).

² [Building Evidence Together for a Better Tomorrow](#), Ascend at the Aspen Institute.

Planning, Research, and Evaluation.³ This work has played a central role in defining the 2Gen approach and advancing knowledge. The activities at the Convening built on this foundation by contributing to the advancement of knowledge, partnerships, and pathways for 2Gen services and evaluation.

This brief synthesizes the key insights and highlights emerging themes, persistent challenges, and opportunities to strengthen 2Gen evaluation. It highlights specific project activities and evaluation results for four Annie E. Casey Foundation grantees.

Emergent Themes

Trust and connection play a critical role in family-centered approaches

Convening attendees identified trust and connection with program participants as being foundational to successful 2Gen program implementation and evaluation. Families are more likely to engage in services and persist through challenges when they are connected to program staff.

Many described envisioning participants as both recipients of services and members of the organization. Many 2Gen programs work with families who previously had negative experiences accessing resources, which makes fostering a positive environment—where individual family members and families as a whole feel safe, valued, and heard—essential. However, building trust requires significant time, intentionality, and an organizational culture that prioritizes relationships. Attendees emphasized that trust must be embedded at all levels of program implementation, from frontline staff interactions to leadership decisions. Fostering trusting relationships is a shared responsibility across the organization, requiring long-term commitments.

In the context of evaluation, trust is equally important. Families are more likely to provide meaningful feedback and participate in evaluation activities when they understand how their input will be used to improve services. Attendees discussed the need for transparency in data collection, ensuring families are active partners in shaping how success is defined and measured. Additionally, trust between programs and evaluators is critical. When programs are partners in the process, they can be more open to reflection and sharing challenges, and evaluators gain deeper insights and context that strengthen the quality and relevance of the work. Mutual trust helps ensure the evaluation

³ [Next Steps for Rigorous Research on Two-Generation Approaches: Final Report](#), Mathematica, prepared for the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023.

becomes a tool for growth, learning, and continuous improvement on both sides and helps bridge the research to practice gap.

While trust-building may take time, attendees emphasized that it strengthens program outcomes, improves participant retention, and enhances the sustainability of 2Gen efforts and evaluation.

Recommendations

- **Use a whole family perspective when designing programs and evaluations** to build lasting, trusting relationships between families and staff; demonstrate commitment; and ensure every perspective is heard.
- **Adopt human-centered design principles** to ensure family voice is centered in programming. Programs should invest the necessary time and resources to provide families with opportunities to help shape the design of services.
- **Ensure evaluations reflect the experiences and goals of families** by designing methods that capture lived experiences by families and definitions of success rather than relying solely on traditional outcomes.
- **Develop a feedback loop where data is shared with families in meaningful ways** by providing updates on how family input is being used to refine services.

Grantee Highlight: Elevating Lived Experience

To center student parent voice in evaluating its [Scholar Program](#), Generation Hope developed a participant advisory committee. Participants informed research questions, shaped measurement tools, and helped interpret [findings](#). They also participated in a creative storytelling project to share lived experiences. This approach ensured the evaluation reflected the participants' definitions of success.

Implementation and evaluation challenges are interrelated

The Convening highlighted several challenges that could impact the ability of 2Gen programs to effectively implement services and measure long-term successes. Attendees identified a tension between tailoring programs to the unique needs of families, while also adhering to predefined evaluation metrics. Since families receive a range of services tailored to specific needs, it can be difficult for evaluations to pinpoint which components are driving changes in outcomes.

Another persistent challenge is measuring long-term program success. Many 2Gen program goals, such as economic stability and educational attainment, take years to achieve. For participating children, meaningful outcomes may not be fully realized until adulthood. However, short-term funding cycles and reporting requirements often push programs to prioritize immediate, quantifiable

outcomes rather than capturing the gradual and complex pathways that lead to lasting change. Without sustained investment in programming and long-term evaluation, programs may struggle to demonstrate their full impact.

A strong workforce is a foundational asset of 2Gen programs. Trust and connection depend on consistent, meaningful relationships between families and staff. To build and sustain these relationships, 2Gen programs rely on professionals who can navigate complex systems and offer culturally responsive, holistic support. However, many programs face persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining staff due to funding limitations which restrict the ability to offer competitive compensation. The high demands of these positions also contribute to burnout and staff turnover, disrupting continuity and implementation of services and weakening relationships central to long-term success.

Recommendations

- **Commit to continuous quality improvement (CQI) to adapt implementation strategies** by embedding CQI practices to allow programs to adapt implementation strategies in real time. This approach ensures service adjustments can be made without waiting for long-term evaluation cycles, helping programs demonstrate both immediate progress and long-term impact.
- **Develop a framework for defining and measuring 2Gen outcomes** that addresses the challenge of tailoring services while meeting predefined evaluation outcomes. Programs can combine broad domains from established frameworks (e.g., Ascend, OPRE) with tailored, flexible measures that reflect individual service variations.
- **Articulate pathways toward short- and long-term outcomes** by using logic models to demonstrate how program activities lead to these outcomes. Be explicit about interim indicators that can help track progress toward long-term outcomes.
- **Invest in workforce stability** by offering targeted professional development and fostering a supportive workplace culture to retain skilled staff.

Grantee Highlight: Putting Rapid Cycle Evaluation Into Action

Agape Child and Family Services and Mathematica co-implemented the LI² ([Learn, Innovate, Improve](#)) rapid-learning framework by partnering with staff, participants, and community groups to identify challenges, potential solutions, and iteratively refine services in real time.

Sharing evidence and cross-sector engagement are pathways for field advancement

A growing body of evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of 2Gen approaches. Research has shown positive impacts on a range of outcomes for both parents and children.⁴ However, there are still opportunities to understand what works and why, refine evaluation methods, and strengthen collaboration across sectors.

Measuring whole-family outcomes remains an area for advancement. Attendees noted that traditional evaluations tend to focus on either parents or children, while 2Gen programs recognize the outcomes of one generation as often influencing the other. Strengthening evaluation methods to capture these interconnected effects can help programs better demonstrate their impact and make the case for continued investment.

Human-centered design presents a significant opportunity for refining program implementation and evaluation. By centering family participants in decision making, programs can ensure services are responsive to family needs and evaluation methods reflect their lived experiences.

Finally, 2Gen work spans multiple sectors, such as early childhood education, housing, health, and workforce development. The broad reach of 2Gen programs addresses the complex needs of families but also creates difficulties in identifying common outcomes across sectors. Establishing methods for cross-sector knowledge sharing is essential for strengthening the 2Gen evidence base.

Recommendations

- **Strengthen knowledge sharing among 2Gen researchers** by creating peer learning opportunities for researchers, evaluators, and practitioners to help ensure new evidence builds on prior learnings, accelerating progress across the field.
- **Engage with other programs and evaluators to share best practices and learnings** to ensure programs and evaluators can actively collaborate to refine measurement strategies and improve implementation approaches.

Grantee Highlight: Embedding 2Gen Into Public Systems

[The Chicago-Cook County 2Gen Economic Mobility Project](#) shows how public systems can be realigned to support whole-family approaches. By working across housing, early childhood, and human services, the project led to policy recommendations and funding strategies that better reflected family experiences and needs.

⁴ Sommer, T. E., Franchett, E., Yoshikawa, H., & Lombardi, J. (2024). A global call for two-generation approaches to child development and caregivers' livelihoods. *Child Development Perspectives*, 18(4), 204–214. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdep.12516>

- **Create a repository to share 2Gen evaluations to inform policymakers and funders** to help funders, policymakers, and practitioners access key insights on program implementation and effectiveness. This resource would support evidence-based decision making, strengthen advocacy for sustained funding, and provide a foundation for ongoing learning and refinement in the field.
- **Host national 2Gen convenings and conferences**—such as [the 2024 Aspen ThinkXChange: National Forum on 2Gen Approaches](#) and the [Annie E. Casey 2017 Two-Generation Talk Back](#) series—to strengthen cross-sector collaboration, advance evaluation strategies, and ensure diverse perspectives inform the evolution of the 2Gen field.

Sustainable funding cycles builds trusts and mechanisms to measure meaningful impact

Attendees emphasized the critical role of sustainable funding to ensure the success of 2Gen programs. Meaningful change for families takes time; however, short-term funding cycles don't provide an opportunity for programs to measure long-term implementation and impacts. Attendees frequently discussed the difficulty of planning for long-term impact with short-term grants. Short funding cycles are challenging and limit the ability of programs to expand services and engage in deeper evaluation. Additionally, organizations are forced to spend considerable time seeking new funding sources rather than focusing on refining and expanding.

The abrupt end of funding streams can also damage family trust. When services are discontinued due to a lack of financial resources, families are left without support, weakening confidence in the programs designed to help them. Trust and trusting relationships are the foundational elements of 2Gen program success. Funding gaps can damage both.

To address these challenges, funders must recognize the importance of long-term commitments to support both service delivery and associated learning. Investing in multiyear grants ensures programs have the stability to implement high-quality services, track meaningful outcomes, and adjust strategies based on evidence. Additionally, blended and braided funding models can help programs sustain their impact even as individual funding streams fluctuate.

Recommendations

- **Align public policies with 2Gen strategies to ensure state and federal funding supports holistic, family-centered services.** Sustainable funding requires more than philanthropic investment; public funding streams must also be structured to support 2Gen programs. Policymakers should work to align state and federal funding with 2Gen strategies, ensuring families receive comprehensive, long-term support.

- **Complete more cost studies backing 2Gen work** by evaluating the economic impact of 2Gen strategies. This can help funders and policy makers understand the value of making long-term investments.
- **Advocate for multiyear investments to allow for long-term program evaluation** to encourage funders to support multiyear grants. This will help programs balance short-term reporting requirements with the long-term vision which is necessary for meaningful family change.

Grantee Highlight: Spurring A Decade of Impact

A decade-long follow-up study by Northwestern University found persistent positive impacts for parents participating in Community Action Project of Tulsa's CareerAdvance program. Parents reported higher levels of education and health care employment and less material hardship. These findings underscore the importance of multiyear investments in capturing long-term outcomes for families.

Source: [*IPR Rapid Research Report \(2023\)*](#)

Appendix: 2Gen Terms and Definitions

blended and braided funding: These are funding strategies that align resources from multiple sources to support coordinated and comprehensive services. Blended funding combines funds into a single stream to be used collectively to support program activities. Braided funding keeps funding streams separate, but aligns them strategically toward shared goals, with each source tracked individually.

continuous quality improvement (CQI): An ongoing process used to improve programs and services through regular data collection, analysis, and iterative refinement. CQI promotes a culture of learning, responsiveness, and accountability.

human-centered design: A collaborative approach used to design programs, services, and systems that focuses on the experiences and perspectives of the people most affected. It emphasizes empathy, shared power among program designers and community, and ongoing learning through meaningful engagement.

rapid cycle evaluation: This fast-paced, iterative evaluation method delivers timely insights for program improvement.

two-generation (2Gen) approach: Two-generation (2Gen) approaches build family well-being by intentionally and simultaneously working together with children and the adults in their lives. These approaches center the whole family to create a legacy of educational success and economic prosperity that passes from one generation to the next.

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