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...information for program designers and program funders on why and how to assess program quality.

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HOW CAN I ASSESS THE QUALITY OF MY PROGRAM? TOOLS FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM PRACTITIONERS

Part 8 in a Series on Practical Evaluation Methods

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BACKGROUND

During the last decade, policy and public attention have focused increasingly on the out-of-school hours, and programs to fill this time have proliferated for children and youth. These programs serve varying purposes, including providing child care and a safe haven, improving academic performance, enhancing general youth development, allowing children to explore their interests, and preventing undesirable behaviors. Regardless of the content and structure of programs, parents and children want programs that are engaging and interesting. Defining and measuring quality across diverse programs has been a challenge for the field. However, numerous program quality assessment tools have been developed that can be used for self-assessment and program improvement. This brief identifies some of the advantages of using these tools and suggests a number of quality assessment tools currently available to assess program quality.

WHAT IS PROGRAM QUALITY?

The After School Corporation (TASC) has identified ten essential elements that define quality in an after-school program:

Ten Elements of Program Quality (The After-School Corporation (TASC))¹

- **Environment/Climate:** Safe, healthy, and nurturing environment for all participants.
- **Administration/Organization:** Well-developed infrastructure and sound fiscal management to support and enhance worthwhile programming and activities for all participants.
- **Relationships:** Develops, nurtures, and maintains positive relationships and interactions among staff, participants, parents and communities to support the program's goals.
- **Staffing/Professional Development:** Recruits, hires and trains diverse staff members who value each participant, understand their developmental needs, and work closely with families, school partners and co-workers to achieve the program goals.
- **Programming/Activities:** Provides a well-rounded variety of activities and opportunities that support the physical, social and cognitive growth and development of all participants.
- **Academic Alignment/Achievement:** Staff works closely with school staff to ensure that after-school academic components and activities are aligned with and enrich school standards and curriculum.
- **Youth Participation/Engagement:** Provides opportunities for participants to participate in planning, to exercise choice, and to engage in a rich variety of offerings and opportunities.
- **Parent/Family/Community Partnerships:** Establish a strong partnership with families and communities in order to achieve program goals.
- **Program Sustainability/Growth:** A coherent vision/mission and a plan for increasing capacity that supplies continuing growth.
- **Measuring Outcomes/Evaluation:** A system for measuring outcomes and using that information for on-going program planning, improvement and evaluation.

WHAT ARE PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS?

Program quality assessment tools assess the quality of varied elements of an out-of-school time program. These tools can include *observations* of an out-of-school time program, *interviews* with program staff or program youth, *surveys*, or staff *self-assessment* checklists. By using these tools, out-of-school time program administrators and staff can examine which aspects of their program are lacking in quality and require improvement.

HOW ARE PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS DIFFERENT FROM PROGRAM EVALUATION?

Program evaluation is a broad term that includes both process evaluation and outcomes evaluation. **Process evaluations** assess whether a program is implemented as intended, and **outcome evaluations** assess a program's success in reaching its goals and effects on participants.^{2,3,4} **Program quality assessment tools**, on the other hand, refer to *the criteria, standards, or models that are used to assess program quality*. These criteria, standards, or models may be used to assess the different components that comprise "quality." While evaluation and quality assessment are distinct, they are very complementary and are often used together, as quality assessment may be a piece of a larger program evaluation activity.

WHY ARE PROGRAM QUALITY ASSESSMENT TOOLS IMPORTANT FOR OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS?

A program functions best if the sponsoring organization is able to actively monitor and promote quality. Assessment tools can provide a structure for assessing the organization's program model and for identifying areas that need development. Program quality assessment tools can be used for self-evaluation, research, and planning.

- **Program quality assessment tools provide structured information about significant aspects of programs.** As shown earlier, these basic elements of program quality include: administration/organization, relationships, staffing/professional development, programming/activities, academic alignment/achievement, youth participation/engagement, parent/family/community partnerships, program sustainability/growth, and measuring outcomes/evaluation.⁵
- **Program quality assessment tools may be used with new programs or more mature programs.** Certain elements of a quality program are relevant to all types of programs, regardless of the focus and population of the program. For instance, the safety of youth and staff is important for any successful program.⁶ Quality assessment tools can be used as a blueprint for start-up programs, as well as to upgrade an existing program that has been around for a longer period.⁷
- **Program quality assessment tools can provide learning opportunities.** Program administrators and staff can learn what areas in their program are implemented with high quality and what areas need improvement. For example, quality assessment tools can be used to assess staff performance and address staff development needs, so staff may become more aware of the best methods to enhance child and youth development.⁸ Also, a quality assessment tool can help educate program staff about the program's goals.⁹ By spelling out the important parts of a quality program, staff knows the elements on which they need to focus. This increased familiarity with a program's goals may also make for an easier transition to more advanced professional development. Tools also provide the ability to set benchmarks for program and individual improvement over time.

"BEST PRACTICE" PROGRAM QUALITY TOOLS

Quality programs tend to be programs that are reflective and willing to improve, change, and grow, and those that are committed to their mission. Tools have been developed to help programs be reflective, to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses, and to target areas for improvement. In addition, tools have been developed for traditional research and evaluation purposes that also assess program quality. **Exhibit 1** describes these various tools, their core components, the necessary skills to use them, and the information that can result through their use. It also provides information on cost. Many of the tools are available for free.

Exhibit 1: Program Quality Assessment Tools

Tool	Developer	Purpose	Ages of Youth	User	Data Provided
After-School Activity Observation Instrument (free) http://childcare.wceruw.org/form3.html	Pechman, E., & Marzke, C. (2005). Policy Study Associates and Wisconsin Center for Education Research.	Research	Grades K-8	Researcher	Six, 15-minute observation periods can be conducted to observe a range of activities using the following dimensions: Four Components: Activity Context Coding (type, knowledge areas, space, materials used, staff ratio); Activity Description (qualitative entries); Promising Practices (supportive relations with adults, supportive relations with peers, level of engagement, opportunities for cognitive growth, appropriate structure, over control, chaos, mastery orientation, each rated on a 4-point scale); and Overall Program Quality (3-point scale, low, moderate, high).
After-School Environment Scale (free) http://childcare.wceruw.org/form3.html	Rosenthal, R., & Vandell, D. L. (1996). Quality of care at school-aged child-care programs: Regulatable features, observed experiences, child perspectives, and parent perspectives. <i>Child Development</i> , 67(5), 2434-2445.	Research	Grades 3-5	Youth	Thirty-six items can be used to assess the program including, for example: youth reports of frequency of experiences; enthusiasm for and perceptions of emotional support; beliefs regarding opportunities for autonomy and privacy; and opportunities for peer affiliation.
Assessing Afterschool Program Practices Tool (APT) (free) http://www.niost.org/pdf/APAS%20brochure_Jan_25_08.pdf	Miller, B. M., & Surr, W. B. The APAS Evaluation System. Wellesley, MA: National Institute on Out-of-School Time at the Wellesley Centers for Women.	Self-assessment	Grades K-8	Program Staff, Researcher	Observers rate the program on a four point scale. Section one of the APT measures activities, transitions, arrivals, and snack time. Section two focuses on child outcomes. Section three rates the physical environment, socio-emotional environment, relationships, and schedule.
Chicago Youth Program Standards http://www.cityofchicago.org/webportal/COCWebPortal/COC_EDITORIAL/StandardsREV4_v2.pdf	Chicago Area Project. (2006). <i>Chicago Youth Program Standards</i> . Chicago: Chicago Department of Children and Youth Services.	Self-assessment	Ages 13-18	Practitioner	Twenty standards are organized into four categories: relationships, environments, programming, and administration. These categories are rated in order to provide support for frontline staff, agency managers, youth participants, and families.
Child Development Instrument for Categorical Program Monitoring (free) http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/cr/cc/documents/cdins08.doc	California Department of Education. (2005). <i>Child Development (CD) Instrument for Categorical Program Monitoring (CPM): An Ongoing Monitoring Process</i> . California: California Department of Education.	Self-assessment	All	Practitioner	Programs are evaluated on seven program dimensions: involvement; governance and administration; funding; standards, assessment, and accountability; staffing and professional development; opportunity and equal educational access; and teaching and learning.
Competency Observation Assessment Tool (free) http://www.nydic.org/nydic/documents/Tool%20FINAL.pdf	National Youth Development Learning Network. (2005). <i>National Collaboration for Youth Competency Observation Tool</i> . Washington, DC: National Human Services Assembly.	Self-assessment	All	Practitioner, Program Staff	Ten competencies are evaluated via observation: understanding and application of youth development principles; engagement in positive relationships and communication; adaptation of activities for youth; respect for diversity; involvement with youth; identification and reduction of risk factors; involvement with families and community; display of professionalism; demonstration of qualities of a positive role model; and support of asset-building through interactions with youth.
County 4-H Program Standards & Quality Indicators (free) http://www.clemson.edu/extension/4h/	South Carolina 4-H Youth Development Program. (2006). <i>County 4-H Program Standards & Quality Indicators</i> . Clemson, SC: Clemson University.	Self-assessment	All	Practitioner	Twelve standards are evaluated via a checklist: base county 4-H program; volunteers; educational activities and events; 4-H program management, support, and internal communications; marketing and promotion of 4-H; opportunities for teens; public speaking program; recognition of program participants; participation in regional, state, and national programs; programming and advisory committees; collaboration and networking; and commitment to professional development and professionalism.

Program Quality Assessment Tools

Tool	Developer	Purpose	Ages of Youth	User	Data Provided
DC Standards for Out-of-School Time (free) http://www.nsba.org/MainMenu/ResourceCenter/EDLO/WhatBoardsCanDo/ResearchandEvaluation/QualityStandardsprojectForOutOfSchoolTimePrograms.aspx	DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation. (1999). <i>DC Standards for Out-of-School Time</i> . Washington, DC: DC Children and Youth Investment Trust Corporation.	Self-assessment	All	Practitioner	Fourteen organizational standards are evaluated through a survey: human relationships; indoor environment; outdoor environment; community development; safety; health; nutrition; administration; program standards, including program activities related to cognitive development; recreation; workforce development; artistic development; civic development; and open time.
Established Standards of Excellence Self-Assessment Tool: K-12 (free) http://www.nccap.net/documents/NC%20CAP%20Updated%20Standards.pdf	North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs. <i>Established Standards of Excellence Self-Assessment Tool: K-12</i> . Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Center for Afterschool Programs.	Self-assessment	Grades K-12	Practitioner	Seven quality indicators are evaluated via a checklist: active engagement of participants in learning; balance of academics and enrichment; consistent participant attendance; dynamic, qualified, and caring staff; positive participant and staff interaction; orderly, safe, and healthy environment; and active family, community, and school partnership.
Exemplary Practices in Afterschool Program Development (free) http://www.tcoe.org/AfterSchool/Resources/Evaluation/Rubrics.pdf	Center for Collaborative Solutions & the Community Network for Youth Development. (2004). <i>Exemplary Practices in Afterschool Program Development</i> . Center for Collaborative Solutions & the Community Network for Youth Development.	Self-assessment	All	Practitioner	Fourteen quality indicators are evaluated via a checklist: vision; leadership, mentorship, and management; staff development; youth development; academic alignment; diversity, access, inclusion, and equity; physical and emotional safety; supportive relationships; challenging and engaging learning experiences; youth participation; neighborhood and community connections; attendance; measuring and managing outcomes; and sustainability.
NCEA Continuous Improvement Process (\$3,500 for site visit) http://www.ncea.com/ncea_continuous_improvement_process.aspx	National Community Education Association. (2005). <i>Continuous Improvement Process</i> . Fairfax, VA: National Community Education Association.	Self-assessment	All	Practitioner	Nine community education principles are utilized: leadership development; self-help; self-determination; localization; integrated delivery of services; maximum use of resources; inclusion; responsiveness; and lifelong learning.
The NSACA Standards for Quality School-Age Care (free) http://www.nationalserviceresource.org/files/legacy/filemanager/download/learns/2.quality.pdf	National Institute on Out-of-School Time. (2000). <i>Understanding Basic Standards for A Quality Out-of-School Time Program</i> . Boston: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.	Research	Ages 5-14	Practitioner	Seven items are evaluated via a checklist: human relationships ; indoor environment; outdoor environment; activities; safety, health and nutrition; and administration.
Out-of-School Time Observation Tool (free) http://www.policystudies.com/studies/youth/Revisiting%20Quality%20Report.pdf	Birmingham, J., Pechman, E. M., Russell, C. A., & Mielke, M. (2005). <i>Shared Features of High-Performing After-School Programs: A Follow-up to the TASC Evaluation</i> . Washington, D.C.: Policy Studies Associates, Inc.	Self-assessment	Grades K-12	Researcher	The OST uses a seven-point scale to assess activity type, participant demographics, learning skill use, environment, relationships, youth participation, and staff skill building.
Program and Activity Assessment Tool (\$14.36) http://www.uwex.edu/ces/4h/index.cfm	University of Wisconsin Extension, Department of 4-H Youth Development (2001).	Self-assessment	All	Practitioner, Youth	Opportunities and supports provided to youth in programs and activities are evaluated, as well as the organizational support needed, through 53 survey questions dealing with nine supports and the following five opportunities: self-directed and active learning; taking on new roles and responsibilities; emotional support; motivational support; and strategic support.

Program Quality Assessment Tools

Tool	Developer	Purpose	Ages of Youth	User	Data Provided
Program Observation Tool (POT) (\$300) http://naaweb.yourmembership.com/?page=NAAAccreditation	National Afterschool Association, Charlestown, MA, (1998).	Self-assessment, Accreditation	Grades K-8	Program Staff, Researcher	Six categories of program quality are measured through observation and questionnaires, including human relationships, indoor environment, outdoor environment, activities, safety, health, and nutrition, and administration.
Program Quality Observation Scale (PQO) (free) http://www.gse.uci.edu/childcare/de/s4.html#measures	Vandell, D. L., & Pierce, K. M. <i>Program Quality Observation</i> . Irvine, CA: University of California, Irvine.	Self-assessment	Grades 1-5	Program Staff	Through observation, the PQO rates qualitative aspects of the program such as environment and staff behavior, as well as quantitative measures of children's activities and interactions.
Promising Practices Rating Scale (PPRS) (free) http://www.gse.uci.edu/childcare/pdf/pp/observation_manual_spring_2005.pdf	Policy Studies Associates, I. (2005). <i>Study of Promising After-School Programs</i> : Wisconsin Center for Education Research.	Research	Grades K-8	Researcher	The PPRS assesses supportive relations with adults and peers, level of engagement, opportunities for cognitive growth, appropriate structure, control, and chaos and mastery orientation through observation.
Quality Assurance System (QAS) (\$75) http://gas-foundationsinc.org	Weisburd, C., & McLughlin, R. (2004). <i>Quality Assurance System</i> . Moorestown, NJ: Foundations, Inc.	Self-assessment	Grades K-12	Program Staff, Researcher	Part one of the program profile assesses essential aspects of an out-of-school time program such as staffing, facilities, health, and safety. Part two of the program profile focuses on program specifics such as program mission, target population, and activities. The QAS adjusts the assessment to the actual goals and activities of a specific program.
Quality Review for Beyond the Bell Partnerships (free) http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/lausd/offices/btb/BTB_quality_standards.pdf	Community Impact Consulting. (2002). <i>Quality Review for Beyond the Bell Partnerships</i> . Los Angeles: Los Angeles Unified School District.	Self-assessment	All	Practitioner	Twelve standards are evaluated in a survey: outcomes; safety; connection; nutrition; equity in participation; relationships; participation in planning; skills; agency capacity; sustainability; continuous improvement; and collaboration.
School-Age Care Environmental Rating Scale (\$14.95) http://www.fpg.unc.edu/%7Eecers/sacers_frame.html	Harms, T., Jacobs, E. V. & White, D. (1996) Teachers College Press; New York, NY.	Research, Self-assessment	Ages 5-12	Program Staff, Directors, Parents	Based on criteria for developmental appropriateness 43 items are rated on a 7-point scale done through observations of six subscales: space and furnishings; health and safety; activities; interactions; program structures; and staff development.
Self-Assessment Questionnaire (free) http://www.achievethecore.org/downloads/self_assessment.PDF	Achieve Boston. (2003). <i>Achieve Boston's Self-Assessment Questionnaire</i> . Boston.	Self-assessment	All	Practitioner	Eleven standards are evaluated through a survey: activities/curriculum; building a caring relationship/behavior guidelines; child and youth development; safety, health and nutrition; cultural competence; environment; families and schools; professionalism; program management; workers as community resources; and building leadership and advocacy.
Sense of School as a Community Scale	Battistich, V., Schaps, E., Watson, M., & Solomon, D. (1996). Prevention effects of the Child Development Project: Early findings from an ongoing multi-site demonstration trial. <i>Journal of Adolescent Research</i> , 11, 12-35.	Research	All	Youth	Six features are rated on a scale: warm and supportive interpersonal relationships; an explicit, shared commitment to values of caring, justice, responsibility, and learning; student autonomy, influence, and self-direction; collaborative learning and shared decision-making; an accessible, relevant, and engaging curriculum; and a constructivist approach to teaching and learning.
Standards for Baltimore After-School Opportunities in Youth Places (free) http://www.afterschoolinstitute.org/pdf/workbook.pdf	The Safe and Sound Campaign. (1999). <i>Standards for Baltimore After-School Opportunities in Youth Places</i> . Baltimore, MD: Baltimore Campaign for Children and Youth.	Self-assessment	All	Practitioner	Six areas are rated on standards being met and the date of completion: human relationships; indoor environment; outdoor environment; safety, health and nutrition; administration; and activities.

Program Quality Assessment Tools

Tool	Developer	Purpose	Ages of Youth	User	Data Provided
Youth Development Strategies Inc. Survey (\$500) http://www.ydsi.org/ydsi/what_is/why_supports_2.html	Youth Development Strategies Inc. (Michelle Gambone).	Self-assessment	All	Youth	Program quality is measured via a survey that asks participants about 13 necessary supports and opportunities: guidance; emotional support; knowledge of youth (by staff); physical safety; emotional safety; input and decision making; leadership; belonging; growth and progress; challenging activities; interesting activities; a sense of belonging to and affecting their communities; and an understanding of the community.
Youth Program Quality Assessment (\$39.95) http://www.highscope.org/Content.aspx?ContentId=117	High Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, MI (2005).	Self-assessment, Research	Grades 4-12	Program Staff, Researcher	Seven scales of 29 items are measured through observation and administrator interview: safe environment; supportive environment; opportunities for interaction; engaged learning; youth-centered policies and practices; high expectations for all students and staff; and access.

NEXT STEPS: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR YOUR PROGRAM

The Harvard Family Research Project – Getting Inside the “Black Box” to Measure Program Quality. This article describes common features found in quality programs and discusses solutions to problems associated with program evaluation.

Available online at: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue25/spotlight.html>

The Harvard Family Research Project – Building a Road Map for OST Collaborations. This article offers insight into the process of creating a program quality assessment tool.

Available online at: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/eval/issue33/spotlight3.html>

The Illinois After-School Initiative – 2002 Task Force Report. This report describes elements of a successful program.

Available online at: <http://www.isbe.state.il.us/pdf/afterschool.pdf>

Child Trends – Program Implementation: What Do We Know? This report summarizes research on program implementation.

Available online at: http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Implementationpaper_final_with_CT_footnotes.pdf

The National Association of State Child Care Administrators and Child Trends – Investing In Quality: A Survey of State Child Care and Development Fund Initiatives. This report examines various state efforts to improve the quality of child care.

Available online at: <http://www.childtrends.org/Files/InvestinginQualityChildcareRpt.pdf>

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. This organization provides a listing of evaluation tools that are available for programs.

Available online at: <http://www.sedl.org/pubs/fam95/evaluation.html>

The University of Wisconsin-Extension – Planning A Program Evaluation. This report describes the steps that might take place leading up to and during program assessment.

Available online at: <http://learningstore.uwex.edu/pdf/G3658-1.PDF>

The William T. Grant Foundation. This organization has released two publications on after-school program quality.

Available online at:

http://www.wtgrantfoundation.org/newsletter3039/newsletter_show.htm?doc_id=470199

The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. This organization has released a guide to assessing program quality and effectiveness.

Available online at: <http://www.emcf.org/evaluation/process/programquality.htm>

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