



Considerations for Collecting Outcomes Data from Parents in Complex Families

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Child Trends, with funding from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, has put forth recommendations for outcome measures that may be used in evaluations of healthy marriage and relationship education programs serving parents in complex families.

Creating a strong data collection plan involves both selecting appropriate measures to assess program outcomes, and carefully considering how the data will be collected. Toward these aims, Child Trends has developed a set of [recommended outcome measures](#) that may be used in evaluations of healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs serving parents in complex families.¹ These recommended items are appropriate for a diverse set of families, including married and unmarried couples and low-income couples.

This tip sheet is a companion piece that provides advice on collecting outcomes data from parents in complex families and considers issues that could arise when studying this population. Specifically, complex families are defined as families where couples are in a committed relationship (married, cohabiting, or in a committed romantic relationship, even if they are not living together), they have at least one child together, and one or both parents have children from previous relationships. By definition, complex families are just that—complex—and involve multiple individuals and relationships. Decisions must be made about which family members should provide survey data, which relationships should be assessed, and how to define “family.” There is no one correct approach; the best approach will depend on a particular program’s goals, research questions, and resource constraints. This document presents researchers, evaluators, and program staff with key considerations for developing a data collection plan appropriate for their situation.

What are the intervention’s goals and target population(s)?

When developing a data collection plan, it is essential to first consider what outcomes and populations the intervention is intended to impact. For instance, is your program only intended to impact the program participant, or also the participant’s partner or children? Does the program aim to improve the participant’s current relationship, or also co-parenting relationships with previous partners? If parenting is a focus of the intervention, do the research questions require information about the parenting relationship between the parent and his or her resident children, or all of the parent’s children (resident and nonresident, biological and non-biological)? While most HMRE programs have similar core goals and target populations, different curricula and research questions will necessitate different data collection approaches. Having a clear logic model for the intervention, and well-defined research questions, will allow you to determine the most important outcomes to examine in your evaluation and will inform other decisions you will need to make when designing your data collection plan.

Who should answer the questions?

Ideally, you would collect data from multiple individuals to obtain the most complete picture of a complex family. However, this approach is resource intensive. You will likely need to

¹Scott, M.E., Moore, K.A., Benedetti, A.M., Fish, H., Rosinsky, K. (2015). Healthy marriage and relationship education: Recommended outcome measures for parents in complex families. OPRE Report #2015-66a. Prepared by Child Trends. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <http://www.childtrends.org/our-research/marriage-and-cohabitation/3m/>

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prioritize the key respondents you want to survey. Given this, how do you decide if you should ask a question of one partner or both partners? Asking one partner requires fewer resources but means you will only collect data on that individual's experiences and perceptions. This approach may be sufficient if the program services and research questions are focused primarily on changes in individual outcomes, but it may not be sufficient if the focus is on changes in a couple's relationship. Other cases may require that a question be asked of multiple partners. This can be particularly useful in addressing sensitive topics² (like infidelity) and systematic over- or under-reporting (like mothers routinely under-reporting father involvement).³ Obtaining information from both partners can also allow you to obtain a more complete understanding of a relationship.⁴ For example, relationship satisfaction questions may show that one partner is very pleased with the relationship while the other partner is very displeased.² Because collecting data from multiple individuals is resource intensive, carefully consider whether such data are necessary for answering your research questions.

Who should the questions be about?

In addition to making decisions about who should answer questions, you should consider about whom the questions should ask. Should the question focus on the respondent's own behavior or the partner's behavior? For example, a survey can ask whether respondents listened to their partners when they needed someone to talk to, or whether the respondents' partners listened to them. Asking respondents about their partners' behavior or attitudes allows you to gain insight into how respondents are experiencing relationship dynamics, independent of their partners' actual behaviors or attitudes. This approach also allows you to gauge whether the quality of the respondents' partners has changed (for instance, have the partner's communication skills improved? Did the respondent choose a new partner with better communication skills?). The focus of the program and your research questions will determine whether it is necessary to ask about partner behaviors.

In addition to focusing on the couple relationship, some of Child Trends' recommended measures focus on co-parenting relationships with current and former partners, and parent-child relationships. For these kinds of relationships, there may be multiple family members who could be the focus of an item. For example, when assessing co-parenting behaviors, do you focus on the co-parenting relationship between the respondent and his or her current partner? A previous partner? Likewise, when asking about the respondent's children, should you ask about one focal child or all of the respondent's children? These choices depend on the focus of the intervention, where you expect to see change, and the target population. If a more limited set of subjects is chosen (current partner only, one child, etc.) it may mean running a risk of not capturing the breadth of program effects. On the other hand, casting a wide net to collect information on many subjects requires substantial resources and could contribute to survey fatigue, because respondents must answer the same question(s) for multiple subjects.

How should data be collected?

If your survey contains sensitive questions (for instance, about interpersonal conflict), it will be important to administer the survey in a way that protects privacy and promotes truthful responses. Topics that may not appear to you to be sensitive may be sensitive for complex families. For instance, questions about co-parenting relationships with past partners may feel very personal to parents in complex families, given the complex histories and emotions that may be associated with each different relationship. You will be more likely to get accurate responses to sensitive questions if respondents complete the survey on their own, instead of answering questions posed by an interviewer.⁵ In some cases, it may also be preferable to separate couples during the administration

²Acock, A. C. (1999). Quantitative methodology for studying families. In M. Sussman, S. K. Steinmetz & G. W. Peterson (Eds.), *Handbook of Marriage and the Family* (2nd edition ed., pp. 263-289). New York: Plenum Press.

³Coley, R. L. and J. E. Morris (2002). Comparing father and mother reports of father involvement among low income minority families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 64, 982-997.

⁴Erel, O. and K. Kissil (2003). The linkage between multiple perspectives of the marital relationship and preschoolers' adjustment. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 12(4), 411-423.

⁵Morsbach, S. K. and R. J. Prinz (2006). Understanding and improving the validity of self-report of parenting. *Clinical Child & Family Psychology Review*, 9(1), 1-21.

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of the survey. It is always important to follow standard procedures for ensuring human subjects protection and addressing issues that may arise when collecting sensitive data (such as mandatory reporting requirements).

How should “family” be defined?

When collecting information from parents in complex families, provide clear instructions about what you mean by “family.” If you anticipate asking about specific individuals throughout the survey, it may be necessary to collect a family roster to identify multiple partners and children. While a roster provides rich contextual information and helps clarify complicated family relations, the information can be difficult to collect and poses additional burden on both the respondent and the data collection staff.

Conclusion

The tips presented here, along with the corresponding measures tables, are meant to support researchers, evaluators, and program staff in their efforts to assess HMRE outcomes for parents in complex families. As described above, we encourage all researchers, evaluators, and program staff to consider an intervention’s goals and target population(s), the most appropriate respondents and question subjects, the mode of survey administration, and the definition of “family.” Our hope is that these resources will provide guidance for creating a strong data collection plan that is responsive to the program’s goals, research questions, and resource constraints. Ultimately, this will strengthen your ability to evaluate and draw conclusions from HMRE programs for parents in complex families.