

Evaluation and quality improvement: Complementary approaches to improve your programs

Evaluation and quality improvement (QI) both play a vital role in enhancing the quality of programs in the child and youth mental health and addictions sector. These methods help you – professionals working in the sector – demonstrate the impact of your programs and improve outcomes for children, young people, and families. However, with limited resources and staff, organizations may find it challenging to choose and implement the most suitable method to improve programs.

Check out the glossary of terms at the end of this resource on all things related to evaluation and QI.

We developed this resource to help you understand the key elements and complementary nature of evaluation and QI so that you can select the best approach for your specific needs. In this resource, we:

- Define evaluation and QI.
- Describe the role of evaluation and QI in improving programs.
- Identify key similarities and differences between evaluation and QI.
- Explain how your organization can integrate evaluation and QI for ongoing improvements.

In this resource, we refer to a program as a structured and purposeful set of activities, resources, and interventions coordinated to achieve specific objectives or outcomes. These may include service delivery models or system and organizational processes tailored to address the needs of children, young people, and their families.

What is evaluation?

Evaluation involves systematically collecting and analyzing information to see whether a program is doing what it is set out to do (Whitman & Wadud, 2013).



If you are new to evaluation and would like to learn more, see our [Program evaluation toolkit](#). The toolkit is a beginner's guide suitable for anyone who is starting the evaluation process.

What role does evaluation play in improving programs?

Evaluation can help you learn more about your programs and offer insights into their effectiveness. It examines how programs achieve their objectives and tells you why they may fall short of meeting their goals (Patton & Campbell-Patton, 2021).

What is quality improvement?

Quality improvement, or QI, refers to the actions you take to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of processes and activities within your organization. QI is ongoing. It involves continuous efforts to improve programs to achieve better outcomes for everyone involved (Health Quality Ontario [HQO], 2012).

What role does QI play in improving programs?

QI helps you identify and address persistent challenges within your programs. It focuses on streamlining processes and activities by setting clear and measurable objectives. This process involves making small but significant changes that result in better experiences and outcomes for children, young people, and families (HQO, 2012).

Similarities and differences between evaluation and QI

Both evaluation and QI (Brown & Grierson, 2022; Wandersman et al., 2015; Woodhouse et al., 2013):

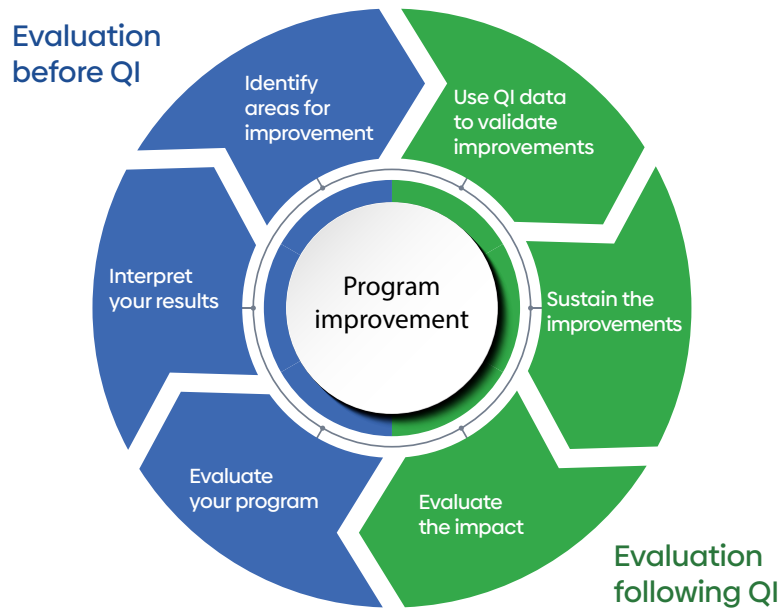
- Aim to enhance programs to achieve better outcomes.
- Rely on collecting and analyzing data to assess program effectiveness and inform decision-making.
- Emphasize the importance of continuous learning and adaptation, using feedback and findings to improve processes and practices.
- Prioritize evidence-based practices and accountability.

Evaluation and QI, while complementary, are separate methodologies and have some distinctions. The following table shows the key differences and provides examples relevant to the sector (Alkin & Vo, 2018; HQO, 2012; Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health, n.d.).

	Evaluation	QI
Purpose	Evaluation tells you how and why a program is effective. It seeks to answer questions such as: Did our program achieve its goals? How and why is our program achieving its goals?	QI continuously looks for ways to enhance your programs. We use QI to answer questions like: What can we do to improve our program and make things run smoothly? How can we modify our processes to see big improvements?
Timing	The timing of the evaluation depends on the type and purpose of your evaluation. For example, you can conduct a process evaluation during implementation to ensure that everything is going as planned. On the other hand, you would carry out an outcome evaluation to assess the program's results after it has been implemented.	If your program's outcomes fall short of meeting specific targets, such as those set by accreditation standards or governing bodies, you can take action to improve them through QI. QI is a continuous process that can be initiated at any stage of your program's life cycle.
Models	Evaluation models vary based on their context and purpose. Participatory and developmental evaluations are some of the models most often used in the sector.	Among the various QI models used in the sector, Lean Six Sigma and the Model for Improvement are two of the most common.
Strategy	There are two main strategies you can use to carry out an evaluation: process evaluation and outcome evaluation. Process evaluation helps you understand how well you are delivering your program, while outcome evaluation helps you assess the impact or results of your program.	There are two frequently used QI strategies in the sector: DMAIC (Define, Measure, Analyze, Improve, Control) and the PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) cycle. The DMAIC provides you with a structured path to improve your program. The PDSA cycle allows you to learn from experience and improve based on the outcomes.
Tools	Your evaluation will draw from a set of tools, including an evaluation framework, a logic model, and a theory of change.	QI uses a wide range of tools. Some examples include a value stream map, a fishbone diagram, and the A3.
Implementation of findings	Implementing findings for program improvement involves translating the evaluation results into actionable steps.	Implementing QI findings for program improvement requires making real-time adjustments and developing actionable steps based on ongoing feedback.

How to integrate evaluation and QI to improve your programs

Figure 1. Integrating evaluation and QI efforts adapted from Brown & Grierson (2022).



Evaluation before QI

Evaluation helps you identify what works well and what is not working in your program. Having this knowledge and understanding can help you set the stage for implementing a QI initiative (Brown & Grierson, 2022). To effectively leverage evaluation for QI, consider the following steps:

- Evaluate new or existing programs to see whether they are achieving their goals.
 - Interpret your evaluation results. Are there goals that are not being met? What goals have been met?
- Use evaluation findings to identify opportunities for improvement that you can address with a QI initiative. Determine what aspects of your program need to be improved to reach the intended goals.

Evaluation following QI

Evaluating your program after implementing a QI initiative provides evidence of QI's impact on your program's effectiveness and efficiency (Brown & Grierson, 2022). To do an evaluation following QI:

- Use QI data to verify that the shortcomings you addressed with the QI initiative have been resolved.
 - Continue to apply QI tools and techniques until you have optimized your program and made it sustainable.
- Evaluate your program to measure the impact of improvements and how they benefit children, young people, and families.

Merged model of evaluation and QI

The merged model of using evaluation and QI together is a great example of how you can leverage the strengths of both methods. This will ensure program effectiveness and efficiency, while also prioritizing safety, equity, and a client-centered approach to program delivery. This approach uses logic models – an evaluation tool – to anchor QI initiatives in evidence-based practice. It provides a link between processes, outputs, and long-term goals (Woodhouse et al., 2013).

Benefits of integrating evaluation and QI

Integrating evaluation and QI can lead to many benefits for your organization (Brown & Grierson, 2022; Wandersman et al., 2015; Woodhouse et al., 2013).

- **Improved program effectiveness:** It allows you to develop a more comprehensive improvement strategy to ensure your programs are not only efficient but also achieve meaningful results.
- **Increased efficiency and use of resources:** By eliminating waste in processes, your programs can use their resources more efficiently and effectively.
- **Improved accountability:** It allows you to demonstrate that your programs are making a positive impact and meeting the ever-changing needs of the children, young people, and families in a safe, equitable, and client-centred way.

Moving forward together

We hope you find this resource helpful in understanding the differences and similarities between evaluation and QI methods for program improvement.

Incorporating evaluation and QI initiatives into your daily work can be especially helpful in achieving your program improvement goals, even when faced with resource constraints. By combining these two methods, you can optimize the impact of your programs.

With this new understanding, you can improve your programs and ensure they meet the ever-changing needs of children, young people and families.



To learn more about program evaluation and QI initiatives explore these additional resources:

- [Eval Academy](#) – An online platform that aims to empower individuals worldwide by providing resources and training to enhance their evaluation skills and drive organizational learning and improvement.
- [Health Quality Ontario](#) – Here you'll find information about QI in Ontario's healthcare system .



If you have questions about this resource, please contact us at: info@cymha.ca.

Glossary

Developmental evaluation: A model used to assess programs as they develop in complex or dynamic environments. Developmental evaluation emphasizes learning and adaptation in real-time. It recognizes that programs are part of a larger system and that changes in one part of the system can lead to changes throughout the program (Patton, 2016).

Lean Six Sigma (LSS): A model that combines the principles of Lean and Six Sigma to enhance programs and processes. Lean focuses on eliminating wasteful activities, while Six Sigma aims to identify and address the root causes of errors. The goal of LSS is to help individuals and organizations achieve better results by optimizing the use of time, effort, and resources (American Society for Quality, n.d.).

Model for Improvement: This structured model helps to drive improvement efforts in various contexts. It has two main components: Three Fundamental Questions and the Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) Cycle. The Three Fundamental Questions are: What are we trying to accomplish? What change can we make that will result in improvement? How will we know that a change is an improvement? The questions help teams clarify their goals, measure success, and identify interventions for improvement. The PDSA Cycle is used to test changes in real-world settings by planning, implementing, studying results, and acting upon them (Institute for Healthcare Improvement, n.d.).

Outcome evaluation: Outcome evaluation helps you understand the impact or results of your program. It also helps you determine whether your program has been successful in reaching its intended goals. Outcome evaluation takes place once all your program activities are complete (Wadsworth, 2011).

Participatory evaluation: A collaborative and inclusive model of conducting program evaluations. This approach is grounded in meaningful engagement where all partners, including providers, families, and users, are actively involved in all stages of the evaluation process (Chouinard, 2013).

Process evaluation: Process evaluation tells you how well your program is being delivered. This type of evaluation is often done when a program is new. It can help you determine whether your program activities are carried out as planned and whether you need to make any improvements (Wadsworth, 2011).

Program: A structured and purposeful set of activities, resources, and interventions coordinated to achieve specific objectives or outcomes. These may include service delivery models or system and organizational processes tailored to address the needs of children, young people, and their families.

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