

**Way to Grow:  
Implementing An Outcome-Based Approach to  
Evaluating a Family Support Program**

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**I. Introduction -- The Way to Grow Program**

The Way to Grow Program began operation in the fall of 1993, funded by the Des Moines Community Foundation, United Way of Central Iowa, and the Des Moines Public School system. Way to Grow's mission was to:

provide a continuum of services for children from conception through age six to include intensive school- and home-based case management and coordination of human services and community resources to meet the needs of children and their families who are at high-risk to assure that they thrive at home and achieve in their schools and communities.

Way to Grow hired four case managers or "family development specialists," each of whom was stationed at an elementary school within a poor Des Moines neighborhood. Each case manager worked with approximately fifteen families, some referred by the school or by other agencies, and some recruited by the workers. Altogether, fifty-four families received services and support during the first year of the program.

While the family development specialists received training in child development and parenting education so they could assist families in assuring their children started

school "ready to learn," the workers' responsibility was to work with families holistically and comprehensively. The community identified fifteen "community benchmarks" that Way to Grow was designed to improve, including increasing school readiness but also including increasing welfare-to-work participation, reducing child abuse cases, and reducing juvenile delinquency.

Way to Grow is similar to many new "prevention-oriented" programs that seek to partner with families in identifying and achieving goals through embracing family support, frontline practice principles -- community-based, family focussed, holistic, asset-based, and flexible and individualized.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the goals for any particular Way to Grow family could be quite different from those of other families.

## **II. Developing an Evaluation Strategy for Way to Grow**

Programs like Way to Grow present a challenge to traditional evaluation techniques. They are not seeking to achieve a single outcome for all families that can be easily measured -- there is no single, "dependent variable." And their approach to working with families is likely to be highly individualized -- there is no single, "independent variable."

At the same time, however, funders, administrators, and workers all need to know whether programs like Way to Grow are helping the families they serve. Evaluation strategies need to be developed which can assess whether programs are positively affecting the families they serve.

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of these practice principles, including an appendix describing how they have been applied in different professional disciplines, see: Kinney, Jill, Kathy Strand, Marge Hagerup, and Charles Bruner. *Beyond the Buzzwords: Key Principles in Effective Practice* (National Center for Service Integration: Falls Church, VA: 1994).

The Child and Family Policy Center examined the Way to Grow program and Way to Grow worker experiences in supporting families to begin to address this issue. The Center employed the six-level approach to evaluating comprehensive community-based services developed by Charles Bruner -- one which eventually moves to the types of community-wide outcomes defined for Way to Grow.<sup>2</sup>

These six levels successively address: (1) service penetration, (2) family engagement, (3) family growth, (4) community embeddedness, (5) system response, and (6) community-wide family well-being. Table One shows the set of questions each level is designed to address.

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TABLE ONE GOES ABOUT HERE  
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### **III. Research Methodology**

The Way to Grow program provided an excellent opportunity for exploratory research, as the total number of families served was large enough to draw some generalizations but small enough to examine each family individually. The four elementary schools served by Way to Grow represented a small geographic area that corresponded to specific census tracks, so a number of comparisons between the families served and the families in the neighborhood could be made.

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<sup>2</sup> Bruner, Charles, "A Framework for Measuring the Potential of Comprehensive Service Strategies," in: Young, Nancy, Sid Gardner, Soraya Coley, Lisbeth Schorr, and Charles Bruner. *Making a Difference: Shifting to Outcome-Based Accountability for Comprehensive Service Reforms* (National Center for Service Integration: Falls Church, VA: 1994), p. 29-41.

To gain information on each family, the Center conducted indepth interviews with each of the four Way to Grow workers, discussing each family the worker served. This included obtaining: known background information about the family; how the family was referred to or found out about Way to Grow; the actual frequency, types, and duration of contacts the worker had with the family; the length of time the worker worked with the family; all the needs and goals the family and worker identified; the steps the family took in meeting those needs and goals; and the degree to which any identified need was addressed. Subsequently, the Center categorized these needs and goals to analyze the frequency with which families experienced needs and established goals in different general areas.

As this research was exploratory and as much to test the value of the six-level approach to outcome-based evaluation as to assess the success of Way to Grow, the Center did not follow up with family interviews or other outside confirmations to the reports of the Way to Grow workers. This work would need to be performed in any comprehensive evaluation of such programs.

#### **IV. Findings from the Exploratory Research**

The following describes the findings from this exploratory research, at each of the six levels of evaluation.

1. *Service penetration.* The Way to Grow program served fifty-four families in four elementary school attendance areas in Des Moines. Table Two compares the families served with the families in these neighborhoods on several dimensions. As Table Two shows, the families served by Way to Grow were more likely to be single-parent and unemployed. Parents were more likely to be high school dropouts and to be on public assistance than were other adults in the neighborhood. Further, while Way to

Grow was designed to be a "prevention-oriented" program and serve families with very young children, only eight of the fifty-four Way to Grow families had no children over the age of two. In fact, Way to Grow families had more children than the average for families in the neighborhood -- with a mean number of 2.7 children compared with a neighborhood average of 1.9 children.

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Meanwhile, demographic comparisons of the neighborhoods with Iowa as a whole show that these neighborhoods had substantially higher rates of single parenting, unemployed parents, adults without high school diplomas, and adults receiving public assistance. The neighborhoods are in the top five percent of all neighborhoods in the state on these indicators of family stress.

Finally, taken together, the families Way to Grow served an average of 11.5 children who will be enrolled in kindergarten in each of the years 1995-99. The four elementary schools had a 1994 kindergarten enrollment of 257.

These data help to answer some of the questions raised regarding service penetration.

First, on demographic measures Way to Grow served a group of families representative of the most stressed families within already distressed neighborhoods. There are no signs that Way to Grow "selected" or served the easiest or most motivated cases; in fact the opposite probably is the case.

This composition is explained, in part, by the fact that many of the families were

referred from schools and other service systems. While Way to Grow initially was designed to become involved with families with very young children, very few of the families served involved new parents. In fact, one challenge to programs starting out to provide prevention-oriented services is that they may find they are expected to deal with families who already have been identified as having significant problems and needs. If the goal of a program is to serve new parents primarily, a more explicit strategy for family recruitment needs to be developed than Way to Grow's combination of referral and general outreach. This does not mean that Way to Grow did not serve a population it could help, but rather that it did not serve the population for which it originally was intended.

Second, Way to Grow served a very small proportion of the families in the elementary school neighborhoods. If Way to Grow continues at its current level, fewer than five percent of children entering these four elementary schools will have been served. While these children and their families may be those in greatest need of additional support, the schools themselves report that the majority of children entering kindergarten did not receive the support they need to start school "ready to learn." Therefore, even if Way to Grow is highly successful with the families and children it serves, its success will not produce major changes on dimensions of child well-being on a school-wide or community-wide level.

*Family engagement.* The experiences of Way to Grow workers in serving families were that it took substantial time and effort to establish relationships with families and assist in setting and meeting goals, with contact on a weekly or more frequent basis during the first few months of involvement, diminishing with many families after that point. At the same time, workers were able to establish and sustain their involvement with most families they served, maintaining regular contact that usually involved families initiating some of the contacts, particularly as the relationship was firmly established.

During the four-to-ten month's experience workers had with the fifty-four families at the time the interviews were conducted (the period varied depending upon when the family enrolled during the year), only two families ceased participation. One family moved out of the Way to Grow neighborhood, and the other family refused to accept any assistance from the program.

While there were no set protocols for working with families, workers strongly believed that consistent, frequent contact was essential to their success with families. Given the average amount of time required for meeting and working with families, workers generally believed that they could effectively serve twelve to fifteen families. They strongly felt that serving more would change their role away from being "holistic" and truly personal and individualized in their response. Without their current level of involvement, workers did not believe that they could truly "engage" the families they served.

The reports from Way to Grow workers, as well as the actual case records, clearly show that Way to Grow was quite successful in "engaging" the families it served, with very little turnover. They also suggest that the type of developmental work undertaken by Way to Grow workers, work that involves real "engagement" by families, requires small caseloads.

*Family growth.* Way to Grow workers reported on the specific needs or concerns that families identified and the goals or steps families took to meet them. After transcribing these discussions, the Center sought to categorize the information. First, each need or concern was described by a phrase, and each step a family took to address a need or concern or goal was written as a simple declarative statement. Next, each was categorized according to its general focus, using a categorization scheme shown in Table Three. Where parent activities were involved, distinctions were drawn

between actions by the mother, the father, or both parents. Finally, efforts were made to describe whether the need or concern was fully, partially, or not met at all by any subsequent family action.

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Overall, the fifty-four families identified 227 steps they sought to take, with most families taking three or four steps over their four-to-ten month involvement with Way to Grow. Way to Grow workers reported success in the vast majority of these, with workers reporting full success on 84.1% of the steps, some success on 8.8%, and no success on only 2.2% (status was undetermined on 4.8%). This suggests a high level of commitment, on part of both family and worker, to addressing the specific steps families identified. While the initial focus of Way to Grow was upon developing parenting skills and improving child development through parent-child involvement, these represented only a small portion of the steps families took.

The first steps many families, with the help of workers, took were in meeting basic needs for health care, housing, food, or transportation. The next steps often involved the needs of parents, both economic and psychological. Table Four shows the frequency of actions within different categories (specific illustrations of steps families took will be described later).

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One of the findings from this categorization is that, when working with stressed

families in distressed neighborhoods, workers are likely to face a broad range of needs, often commencing with basic, survival needs. In fact, workers reported that, for many families, housing or health needs had to be addressed and family life stabilized before developmental work and long range goal setting could commence. Programs that are designed to work holistically with families should expect to work across a variety of dimensions of family need.

Another finding is that, while most needs were addressed, those that were not frequently stopped family progress. In fact, the need that workers experienced most difficulty in addressing -- housing -- was the one that resulted in one family leaving the program and several others experiencing delays in tackling other concerns. The fact that nearly half of all Way to Grow families had significant housing needs points to an important issue for the neighborhood as a whole. In addition to describing what a program is able to achieve with families, it also can identify what essential demands families may have for services and supports within a community. While Way to Grow showed reasonable success in accessing housing for its families, it may have done so by effectively getting its families "first in line" for limited housing slots. As programs such as Way to Grow expand, they may experience more resource constraints within the community in meeting newly established demand for scarce resources.

A third finding is that Way to Grow primarily worked with mothers and children, with very limited involvement of fathers. If programs are to more effectively involve fathers, they will have to employ explicit strategies to produce that involvement and do something more than Way to Grow workers did.

*Community embeddedness.* As a very small program operating for a limited time, the Way to Grow program does not have great visibility. Given its limited resources, it does not seek greater recognition and increased referrals. There is likely

to be a critical mass of activity needed before a program like Way to Grow can begin to become a point of congregation for community advocacy and mobilization.

At the same time, however, the actions taken by some families show that this potential exists. In establishing goals for themselves and their families, a number of families undertook volunteer community activities. In some instances, these reflected the family's interest in giving something back. In others, it provided a form of social connection and contact with others going through similar growth experiences. In others, it provided an opportunity for working with one's own and other children at school or pre-school.

In fact, workers volunteered that one "by-product" of their work was the increased contribution of families to the community's social life. Family support programs such as Way to Grow have a potential to produce growth and development that extends beyond the individual families they directly serve, to the neighborhood as a whole.

*System response.* Way to Grow workers were generally positive about the level of cooperation they received from schools and other service providers. In fact, many of the families served by Way to Grow were referred from the schools or other agencies. In most instances, however, Way to Grow workers indicated there was no real duplication of service provision. Their families constituted families who were "known" to other systems, but whose developmental needs were not being addressed by those systems. In the case of child welfare, this was because they were not judged to have problems or crises that required immediate attention. In the case of schools, this was because their needs extended beyond what teachers and school personnel felt they could address. They fell into a "gap" between these two major public service systems with responsibility for children.

In a number of instances, other systems and service providers responded positively to Way to Grow worker requests for help and service for families. These existed on a case-by-case basis, however, and did not produce changes in overall practice. In two instances, Way to Grow workers experienced difficulty in securing substance abuse treatment services that could address the concerns of the parents for the care and involvement of their children. While location within the schools helped in the referring process, Way to Grow workers found they were expected to work with the families individually and not as partners with school personnel.

These experiences probably are representative of many family support programs. First, while duplication of service is often identified as a major problem or concern, for prevention-oriented or early intervention services such as Way to Grow, it is most likely that no other worker is involved in a holistic, developmental way with the family. Workers generally did not find that other public agencies were involved in ways that duplicated their work, even when other agencies were providing some service or support.

Second, the lack of duplication of effort does not mean that there exists seamless, integrated work with families. Through their work with families, programs like Way to Grow that work holistically may help identify service gaps or deficiencies within other systems serving children and families, some of which require a systemic change and not a case-by-case review. A good evaluation and review process can help identify these instances.

*Community-wide family well-being.* The funders of the Way to Grow program established some ambitious, long-term goals for Way to Grow, in terms of changes in community measures of child well-being. Clearly, given the penetration of Way to Grow, its ability to impact school-level, let alone community-level, measures of well-being is minimal. Way to Grow would have to serve far more families to begin to have

that potential. Still, the successes Way to Grow families experienced demonstrate the program's potential, if expanded and implemented over the long-term, to impact many of these community measures.

In addition, however, the steps families took (which Way to Grow may have helped to produce) do not translate directly or linearly to the identified community goals. Table Five highlights twenty representative "steps" that Way to Grow families took and contrasts them with the fifteen Community Benchmarks of Progress identified for the program.

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Only three lines are drawn between the two lists. When this table was shared with program funders, however, many saw the column of steps families took as being very significant and important. Over time, absent too many obstacles or setbacks, people saw these as legitimate steps for meeting one or more of the community benchmarks. In fact, several funders stated that the "steps" families took seemed the more immediate, important, and powerful of the two lists. Table Five certainly shows the importance of distinguishing between long-term community-wide outcomes and the impacts programs working with real families can be expected to achieve, particularly over a relatively short period of time.

**V. Discussion and Implications**

The purpose of this exploratory analysis was not to definitively establish whether the Way to Grow program is effective in working with families. None of the "steps" families took can be attributed conclusively to the presence of the Way to Grow

program. Much more sophisticated analysis would be needed to begin to identify the actual impact that Way to Grow work had on fostering these actions and this growth, probably involving some comparison group of families and certainly involving interviews and confirmation from the families served and other service providers and community members.

At the same time, many of the findings can offer some insight into whether or not the Way to Grow program or other programs with similar missions are succeeding with families.

On the plus side for Way to Grow, it is reaching a population that has significant stresses and needs. It has demonstrated a high level of involvement and ongoing connection with those families. The families have taken significant steps for their growth and development, across a variety of dimensions of well-being. The steps they have taken, on a common sense basis, show great potential in contributing to achieving community-wide goals for child and family well-being. Alternatively, if there had been no sign that Way to Grow families took such steps, that would have raised serious doubt about the value and impact of the program. Programs such as Way to Grow should be held accountable to such measures; that is what they are designed to help families achieve.

Further, the analysis has pointed to a number of areas -- addressing the needs of new parents, involving fathers, addressing neighborhood housing needs, revising substance abuse treatment needs to address family concerns -- that represent areas for further work and improvement.

As more evaluations of programs like Way to Grow develop, it may be possible to establish benchmarks for family engagement, family growth, and community embeddedness both to measure program effectiveness and to point to areas for

continuing work and improvement.

In addition, programs such as Way to Grow should be able to produce some testimonials from families that they have had a profound effect in supporting family growth. While this evaluation did not interview families, Way to Grow workers did identify a number of families of whom they felt most proud and whom they felt would provide testimonials to program success. In evaluating family support programs, such testimonials should not be dismissed as anecdotal and unrepresentative. In fact, some of the stories that families tell about how their lives were turned around demonstrate remarkable gains -- in family self-sufficiency, child growth and development, and family stability. While some of these gains may have occurred without program intervention, programs may be catalysts for these reforms. From the perspective of social costs, one or two of these changes in life trajectories may justify the entire expenditure for the program. Some of the impact of family support programs may depend upon timing, being there when a family is ready to change and when the avenues for change exist. Programs cannot be expected to make those connections with all families or at a given time with any family. The chemistry has to be right. Such testimonials represent further evidence that programs are making important connections with, and having impacts on, families. Alternatively, the absence of the ability to produce testimonials shows the opposite.

On a more structured and systematic basis, as evaluations continue to examine programs like Way to Grow over time, it may be possible to suggest how the individual steps that families take, over time, are likely to be translated into community-wide outcomes.

In the long term, it may be fair to hold Way to Grow and similar family support programs accountable to achieving certain results for its families. Based upon the experiences of the Way to Grow program and other exemplary family support

programs, such measures might include the following outcomes over different spans of time:

#### One year

- o family stabilization in meeting essential food, clothing, and transportation needs,
- o greater residential stability through reduced incidences of "forced" mobility due to inability to pay rent or utilities,
- o establishment of "medical homes" for children and families, improved birth outcomes (birthweight) for any subsequent pregnancies and births, and
- o improved adult coping and planning ability, including relationships with others.

#### Two years

- o improvements in immunization rates for pre-school children, and increases in the numbers of children having regular providers of primary and preventive medical care,
- o reductions in the incidence of subsequent pregnancies for adolescents and better spacing of pregnancies and fewer unplanned pregnancies for all women,
- o reductions in child abuse reports and the need for removal of children from their homes,
- o improved socialization of pre-school children, as measured by greater participation in Head Start and other pre-school experiences and reduced incidence of adjustment problems (fighting, withdrawal, etc.) in such settings, and
- o improved adult skills and credentials for permanent attachment to the work force.

#### Five years

- o improved school readiness upon entry into kindergarten, as measured by teacher reporting,

- o reduced absenteeism from school and on-grade and age-appropriate school performance and behavior, and
- o reduced use of special education services.

#### Ten to fifteen years

- o reduced juvenile delinquent behavior,
- o reduced adolescent pregnancy rates,
- o improved high school completion, and
- o improved post-secondary education enrollment.

It is important to view this list cautiously. Identifying relevant benchmarks has to be based upon the experience of exemplary programs. Standards should not be imposed that do not correspond to what programs actually can do. If success is dependent upon other conditions being in place, that must be recognized. Often, programmatic gains have been shown to be subject to "fadeout." This does not mean that programs are not needed, but simply that single interventions may not sustain gains over time, absent additional efforts. The utility of the evaluation design described here is that it evaluates those things that are the responsibility of programs. It evaluates what the program does in promoting family growth and development at the time the program is operating.

In addition, this evaluation design can identify the outside factors and conditions that can produce fadeout or limit the short- and long-term effectiveness of family support. Clearly identifying these factors and conditions can lead to strategies to overcome them. If a program such as Way to Grow identifies a need -- such as housing or substance abuse treatment -- that it has difficulty helping families secure but is essential to their growth, it can highlight that need. Moreover, continuing to provide developmental family support to families who cannot benefit from that support until

other needs are addressed does not make sense. In such instances, programs can use that knowledge to redirect their focus -- either to supporting families who can benefit and do not face those needs or to implementing strategies that will address those other needs.

Current efforts to hold public programs more accountable for achieving results must keep in mind that, for many children and families, multiple strategies are needed to insure success. Some programmatic efforts may be necessary, but not sufficient, to improve long-term outcomes. For many families, programs like Way to Grow fall into this category. They provide the opportunity for families to see new possibilities and exert effort to achieve goals. If some of those goals are reachable, programs can help families succeed. If barriers are insurmountable, however, families and programs will not succeed. The evaluation design presented here begins to test whether such programs help families see new possibilities and exert effort, and whether other necessary conditions exist to enable families to succeed. These evaluations should be as helpful to improving programs and deploying resources as they are to validating program success.