

Results-Oriented Child Welfare Practice

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Introduction

Federal mandates requiring states to conduct outcomes-based practice argue strongly for a focus on examining the results of the child welfare interventions as part of the service delivery process. This document describes federal regulations regarding measurement of results-oriented information, and explains how child welfare supervisors can comply with these mandates. It also reviews the various types of information that are collected to determine results of interventions, and explores what they tell us, or do not tell us, about the welfare of children and their families. Lastly, this paper will identify the types of information that can help to determine the effectiveness of child welfare services.

Current Federal Mandates Require Better Results for Children

Federal mandates require states to conduct “outcomes-oriented practice” with abused and neglected children, children in foster care, and those awaiting adoption. States must therefore *collect, report, and use* data. State compliance with these federal data requirements is assessed in three main areas: 1) the administration of state programs; 2) child safety and permanency; and 3) child and family well-being. These mandated areas represent three different kinds of information about child and family well-being.

Three Types of Success Measures

Three distinct types of results-oriented information about children and families can be collected, reported, and used by child welfare workers, supervisors, and administrators: “process data,” “output data,” and “outcome data.” The federal government does not distinguish between these different types of data -- it refers to all

three types as “outcomes” -- but they will be explored as separate entities to help the reader gain an understanding of what they reveal (and do not reveal) about the well-being of children and families.

First, process data refers to whether a service is being delivered and/or the family or child is making use of the service. Administrators and policy-makers often gather this information because it is *hoped* that the delivery and use of a service will lead to desirable ends. Indeed, without delivery or receipt of a service, meaningful changes in families and children are unlikely.

Process goals are usually specified in service contracts and parent/agency agreements. Examples of process goals include: a) a parent attending seven out of ten parenting classes; b) completion of treatment for substance abuse; and c) a worker making monthly visits to a foster family. Families are provided services like these to help them improve the care of their children. It is hoped that achievement of process goals such as these will lead to better care of children, but the achievement of such goals – the receipt of service -- it is not an *actual* measure of the child’s, parent’s, or family’s well-being. That is, the delivery of an intervention to a family or child does not always lead to positive changes. One might say that process goals are usually necessary but not sufficient for positive changes in children and families to take place. For example, it is possible for parents to attend parenting classes without applying what they are taught to their parenting, for a parent to complete substance abuse treatment without becoming or remaining substance free, and for a worker to visit a foster family regularly without meeting the needs of her clients.

The second type of results-oriented data is called an output, which is a change in the *status* of a child or family within the child welfare system. A child returning home after being in foster care, or being adopted, are both examples of outputs. Often an output is the ultimate goal specified in an agency's case plans.

Both of the above examples reflect a change in a child's placement or legal status. It is hoped that this change will be reflected in an improvement in either the child's, the parent's, or the family's functioning. However, like process goals, outputs are not *actual* measures of well-being. This does not mean that they are not valuable; they can help child welfare agencies and systems determine whether their permanency goals are being met. Thus, outputs are of special concern to agency administrators, since their achievement is often tied to funding. For example, the Adoption and Safe Family Act authorizes funding for adoption incentive payments. Thus, states that facilitate a certain number of adoptions over their baseline figures are rewarded financially.

Both outputs and process data can be distinguished from an outcome, which is the direct measurement of change in child, adult, or family functioning. Examples of outcomes include improved mother-child interaction and a child's increased sense of self-esteem. Simply put, an outcome is the only kind of information that *directly measures and reflects* the well-being of children or families.

Attention to all three types of information is important to creating service plans with clients and to evaluating program success. Outcomes are often the most significant kind of data to workers, supervisors, and program directors, for improvements in them are frequently a direct result of their work. They also help workers make decisions about the best course of action for their clients – changes (or the lack of change) in client

outcomes should lead to changes in client outputs). Despite their value, outcomes are seldom measured because they can be difficult to measure, their measurement takes time from other tasks, and the system usually rewards the achievement of outputs rather than outcomes.

Current Federal Policy

Better Outcomes for Children: The Child and Family Services Review:

Beginning in January 2000, a federal mandate called Better Outcomes for Children - The Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), was implemented. It is intended to help states improve child welfare services and achieve positive results for abused and neglected children, children in foster care, and those awaiting adoption. Each of the 50 states will be audited; the audits began in March 2001 and will be completed in fiscal year 2004. The state of Michigan will be audited under this mandate on September 9, 2002.

Two areas are covered in the CFSR: various client-level activities and results, and the administration of state programs. The review is a two-stage process: it entails a statewide assessment and an on-site review. For the latter portion, the on-site review, a team is sent to examine a sample of case records and conducts interviews with children and families, child welfare case managers, and community stakeholders. Auditors look for compliance with seven sub-goals of the overarching goals of safety, permanency, and child and family well-being. Although referred to under the umbrella term “outcomes,” all three types of goals (process, outputs and outcomes) are measured as part of the on-site review.

Figure 1 lists the goals of the CFSR assessment. For each, the overarching goal to which it corresponds (e.g., safety, permanency, or well-being) is specified, and the type of results-oriented data (e.g., process goal, output, or outcome) is noted beside each specific criteria. The entire instrument which will be used to evaluate a state's child welfare program can be reviewed by visiting www.childwelfarereview.com, clicking on Child Welfare Review System, then clicking on Child and Family Services Reviews Instruments, and finally clicking on the Acrobat or HTML version of the instrument.

Figure 1

The Child and Family Services Review - Goals of the Statewide Assessment:

1. Children receive sufficient services to meet their educational needs (This indicator is related to child well-being and, overall, is a process goal.)
 - a. Educational needs of the child
 - i. If the child is in foster care, has the child been enrolled in multiple schools as a result of being placed in foster care? (output)
 - ii. Indicate below whether or not the child's educational needs are being addressed in the following ways (process):
 1. Special education classes
 2. Normal grade placement
 3. Services for identified educational needs
 4. Early intervention for preschool children
 5. Inclusion of school records in case file
 6. Advocacy with the education/school system
 7. Attention to education in case planning
 8. Giving child's education records to foster parents
2. Children receive suitable services to meet their physical and mental health needs (This indicator is related to child well-being and, overall, is a process goal).
 - a. physical health of the child
 - i. If the child is in foster care, was an initial health screening (or other medical examination) provided within the timeframe specified in the State's guidelines? (process)
 - ii. Indicate below whether or not the child's physical health needs are being addressed in the following ways (process):
 1. Preventive health care
 2. Preventive dental care
 3. Immunizations
 4. Treatment for identified health needs
 5. Treatment for identified dental needs
 6. Giving health records to foster parents
 - b. mental health of the child
 - i. If the child is in foster care, was an initial mental health screening or assessment provided upon entry into foster care (or within the timeframe specified in the State guidelines)? (process)
 - ii. Indicate below whether or not the agency is addressing the child's mental health needs in the following ways (process):
 1. Assessment or screening
 2. Treatment for identified needs
3. Children safely reside in their homes, whenever possible and appropriate (This indicator is related to child safety and, overall, is an output goal)
 - a. services to child(ren) to protect in home and prevent removal
 - i. Where there were substantiated or indicated reports of abuse or neglect or apparent risks of harm to children in the family during the period under review, did the agency provide or arrange for services to the family to protect the child(ren) in his/her own home prior to removal, if applicable, including family preservation, family support, or other placement prevention services? (process)
 - ii. If no, state the reason.
 - b. risk of harm to children
 - i. For the period under review, was there a risk of harm to the child(ren) in the family that necessitated the child(ren)'s placement in foster care or providing services to the family? (output)
 - ii. If yes, were efforts made by the agency to reduce or remove the risk of harm through specific interventions? (process)
 - iii. Are there indications that case decisions and planning around placement of the child(ren) from the home or reunification were based on concerns about the child(ren)'s health and safety? (process)

4. Family relationships and connections are preserved (This indicator is related to permanency and, overall, is an output goal.)
 - a. proximity of foster care placement
 - i. What is the proximity of the child's current, or more recent, placement to the parents? (output)
 - ii. For children placed outside the community or county of their parents' residence, is the reason for the location of the placement clearly related to helping the child achieve his or her case plan goals? (outcome)
 - iii. For children placed outside the State, is the child visited at least every 12 months by a caseworker of the supervising agency and a report filed to the agency holding custody? (process)
 - b. placement with siblings
 - i. If the child has siblings who are also in foster care, are they placed together? (output)
 - ii. If no, is there clear evidence that separation is necessary to meet the needs of the children? (outcome)
 - c. visiting with parents and siblings in foster care
 - i. What is the most typical pattern of visiting frequency between the child and parents? (process)
 - ii. What is the most typical pattern of visiting frequency between the child and siblings placed separately in foster care? (process)
 - iii. Are there other forms of contact in place between the child and parents? (process)
 - iv. Are there other forms of contact in place between the child and siblings? (process)
 - v. Are visiting frequency and arrangements in accordance with State policy? (process)
 - d. preserving connections
 - i. Are the interests of American Indian children being addressed through:
 1. Placement with American Indian families? (process)
 2. Referral to tribes? (process)
 3. Other ICWA provisions? (specify)
 - e. relative placement
 - i. Is the child in foster care placed with relatives? (process)
 - ii. For children not placed with relatives, were relatives considered for placement of the child? (process)
 - iii. For children not placed with relatives, state the reason.
 - f. relationship of child in care with parents
 - i. Is there evidence of a strong, emotionally supportive relationship between the child in foster care and the child's parent(s)? (outcome)
 - ii. Where appropriate, has the agency made efforts to promote or maintain a strong, emotionally supportive relationship between the child in foster care and the child's parent(s)? (outcome)
 - iii. If no for either [i.] or [ii.] above, specify the reason.
5. Children's living situations are permanent and stable (This indicator is related to permanency and is, overall, an output goal.)
 - a. foster care re-entries
 - i. Has the child had multiple entries into foster care? (output)
 - ii. Have any of them resulted from the same general reason? (process)
 - iii. How many entries has the child had in foster care during the period under review? (output)
 - b. stability of foster care placement
 - i. Did the child change placement settings during the current episode of foster care? (output)
 - ii. If yes, how many placement changes occurred during the period under review? (output)
 - iii. Did any of the placement changes occur for reasons not directly related to helping the child achieve the goals in his or her case plan? (output)
 - iv. Is the current placement setting stable, i.e., no apparent threat of disruption? (output)
 - c. permanency goal for child
 - i. What is the child's current permanency goal? (output)
 - ii. How long has the goal been in place and unachieved? (output)
 - iii. If there are delays in achieving the permanency goal, to what are the delays attributable? (process)
 - d. independent living services (for children 16 and older)
 - i. Does the child have a written independent living plan in the record? (process)
 - ii. Are independent living services being provided consistent with the child's independent living plan? (process)

Figure 1 (Continued)

- f. permanency plan of other planned permanent living arrangement (for children with a permanency goal of emancipation or planned permanent living arrangement other than adoption, guardianship, or return to family)
 - i. Is the child's permanency goal a planned living arrangement other than adoption, guardianship, or return to family? If yes, specify the permanent living arrangement. (output)
 - ii. Have other, more permanent goals been considered and appropriately ruled out for the child?
 - g. Are services being provided to help the child attain the goal of another planned living (output)
6. Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect (This indicator is related to safety and is, overall, an outcome goal.)
- a. timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment
 - i. How many reports of suspected abuse or neglect have been received on children in the family? (process)
 - ii. In how many of the reports were the investigations initiated in accordance with the States timeframes and requirements for a report of that priority? (process)
 - iii. In how many of the reports was face-to-face contact with the child made by the investigating worker within State agency guidelines? (process)
 - b. repeat maltreatment
 - i. Where there have multiple substantiated or indicated reports of abuse or neglect on children in this family, have any of them involved:
 - 1. The same perpetrator? (output)
 - 2. The same general complaint? (output)
 - ii. How many of the reports checked "yes" were received during the period under review? (output)
7. Families have an improved ability to meet their children's needs (This indicator is related to child and family well-being and, in general, is an outcome goal.)
- a. needs and services of child, parents, foster parents
 - i. Indicate below whether or not the major needs of the child, parents, and foster parents, as they relate, to safety, permanency, and well-being, have been adequately assessed and identified. (process)
 - 1. The child
 - 2. The child's parents
 - 3. The child's foster parents
 - ii. Indicate below whether or not the major needs of the child, parents, or foster parents are addressed through appropriate services including, where the need is indicated, community-based family support services, time limited family reunification services, and adoption promotion and support services. (process)
 - 1. The child
 - 2. The child's parents
 - 3. The child's foster parents
 - b. child and family involvement in case planning
 - i. Indicate below whether or not the parent(s) or guardian and child (when old enough) are actively involved in the case planning activities. (process)
 - 1. Child
 - 2. Parent(s)
 - ii. Are procedural safeguards in place with respect to parental rights pertaining to the removal of children from home, changes in placements, and visiting privileges? (process)
 - c. worker visits with child
 - i. What has been the most typical pattern of visiting frequency between the caseworker and the child during the last 6 months (or the last 6 months before the case was closed, if applicable)? (process)
 - ii. Where visits are occurring less frequently than monthly, are there agency staff, volunteers, or service providers, e.g., contract providers, who are visiting the child at least monthly? (process)
 - d. worker visits with parent(s)
 - i. What has been the most typical pattern of visiting frequency between the caseworker and the parent(s) during the last 6 months (or the last 6 months before the case was closed, if applicable)? (process)
 - ii. Where visits are occurring less frequently than monthly, are there agency staff, volunteers, or service providers, e.g., contract providers, who are visiting the parent(s) at least monthly? (process)

At the end of the instrument, reviewers conducting the federal audit rate each goal as a "strength", "area needing improvement," or "NA". Each item within each of the six goals must be rated as "substantially achieved", "partially achieved", "not achieved", or "outcome not applicable to this case". It should be noted that the federal mandate and the review plan's descriptions of the three goals (safety, permanency, and well-being) do not always coincide with the three types of results as we describe them (process goals, outputs, and outcomes). For example, the mandate's goal that aims for children to receive sufficient services to meet their educational needs is under the main goal of "well-being." However, only *outcomes* are true measures of well-being, and because this goal is concerned with service delivery, it is a *process goal*. Achievement of this goal may lead to better academic outcomes for children, but it alone is not a measure of well-being.

The first component of the review, the statewide assessment, occurs during the six-month period prior to the on-site review. The Children's Bureau gives states their data profile in aggregate form (i.e., summary statistics on cases, rather than information about each individual case). These data concern the state's foster care and in-home service populations. These data will allow the state to compare certain safety and permanency statistics to national standards set by the Children's Bureau. Conformity is determined by assessing statewide performance on six data indicators, which are derived from the safety and permanency goals (Goal #3: Children safely reside in their homes, whenever possible and appropriate; Goal #4: Family relationships and connections are preserved; Goal #5: Children's living situations are permanent and stable; and Goal #6: Children are protected from abuse and neglect). Following are the data indicators that will be used.

- a) Recurrence of maltreatment (safety outcome)
- b) Incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care (safety outcome)
- c) Foster care re-entries (permanency output)
- d) Length of time to achieve reunification (permanency output)
- e) Length of time to achieve adoption (permanency output)
- f) Stability of foster care placement (permanency output)

The information listed above will be gathered from two national databases, AFCARS and NCANDS, which are described later in this paper.

The CFSR is designed to assess both strengths and needs of State programs, and ultimately is intended to help support improved results for children and families. It is essential for child welfare workers, supervisors, and administrators to understand that the reviews also emphasize accountability. The review process incorporates opportunities for States to make improvements in programs in cases of nonconformity before financial penalties are imposed and Federal funds withheld. However, failure to make necessary improvements, and thus to achieve substantial conformity, can result in significant financial penalties for State child welfare programs.

National Databases: What are States Required to Report?

The Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System (AFCARS):

Beginning in 1994, states have been required to report detailed information to the federal government on children and families involved with foster care and adoption. Each state must provide data on every child in foster care for whom the state child welfare agency has responsibility for placement, care, or supervision. More precisely, each state

is required to collect case-specific information on children in foster care. States also must collect information on all adopted children who were placed by the state child welfare agency or by private agencies under contract with the public agency. In addition, they are encouraged to report private adoptions that are finalized in the state.

. The database is composed of over one hundred data elements, which are compiled in the Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System (AFCARS). Successful completion of AFCARS reporting results in federal financial support for state child welfare programs. Required AFCARS information includes demographic and other information about clients (inputs) and output information. Child and family demographics collected include race and gender, among others. Also required is information about children's special needs, such as physical disability, retardation, and mental health status. Placement information is reported as well, including such data as the date of removal, reason for removal, movement within the child welfare system, and completion of adoption. Details about client case plans are also required. The list of all AFCARS data elements appears in Figure 2.

Figure 2: AFCARS Data Elements:

Foster Care Data Elements Standards:

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|--|--|
| 1. State | 34. Child's Behavior Problem |
| 2. Report Period Ending Date | 35. Death of Parent(s) |
| 3. Local Agency (FIPS Code) | 36. Incarceration of Parent(s) |
| 4. Record Number | 37. Caretaker's Inability to Cope Due to Illness or Other Reason |
| 5. Date of Most Recent Periodic Review | 38. Abandonment |
| 6. Date of Birth | 39. Relinquishment |
| 7. Sex | 40. Inadequate Housing |
| 8. Race | 41. Current Placement Setting |
| 9. Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity | 42. Out of State Placement |
| 10. Has Child Been Clinically Diagnosed with Disability(ies) | 43. Most Recent Case Plan Goal |
| 11. Mental Retardation | 44. Caretaker Family Structure |
| 12. Visually or Hearing Impaired | 45. Year of Birth (1 st Principal Caretaker) |
| 13. Physically Disabled (Child) | 46. Year of Birth (2 nd Principal Caretaker – if applicable) |
| 14. Emotionally Disturbed (DSM-IV) | 47. Date of Mother's Parental Rights Termination (if applicable) |
| 15. Other Medically Diagnosed Conditions Requiring Special Care | 48. Date of Legal or Putative Father's Parental Rights Termination (if applicable) |
| 16. Has Child Ever Been Adopted? | 49. Foster Family Structure |
| 17. If Yes, How Old Was Child When Adoption Was Legalized? | 50. Year of Birth (1 st Foster Caretaker) |
| 18. Date of First Removal From Home | 51. Year of Birth (2 nd Foster Caretaker) |
| 19. Removal Transaction Date | 52. Race of 1 st Foster Caretaker |
| 20. Date Child Was Discharged From Home to Date | 53. Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity of 1 st Foster Caretaker |
| 21. Date of Latest Removal from Home | 54. Race of 2 nd Foster Caretaker (if applicable) |
| 22. Removal Transaction Date | 55. Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity of 2 nd Foster Caretaker (if applicable) |
| 23. Date of Placement in Current Foster Care Setting | 56. Date of Discharge from Foster Care |
| 24. Number of Previous Placement Settings During This Removal Episode? | 57. Foster Care Discharge Transaction Date |
| 25. Manner of Removal from Home for Current Removal Episode | 58. Reason for Discharge |
| 26. Physical Abuse | 59. Title IV-E (Foster Care) |
| 27. Sexual Abuse (alleged/reported) | 60. Title IV_E (Adoption Assistance) |
| 28. Neglect (alleged/reported) | 61. Title IV-A |
| 29. Alcohol Abuse (parent) | 62. Title IV-D (Child Support) |
| 30. Drug Abuse | 63. Title XIX (Medicaid) |
| 31. Alcohol Abuse (child) | 64. SSI or Other Social Security Benefits |
| 32. Drug Abuse (child) | 65. None of the Above |
| 33. Child's Disability | 66. Amount of Monthly Foster Care Payment |

Adoption Data Elements Standards:

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|--|---|
| 1. State | 20. Date of Father's termination of parental rights |
| 2. Report Period Ending Date | 21. Date adoption legalized |
| 3. Record number | 22. Adoptive parents' family structure |
| 4. State Agency Involvement | 23. Year of birth (Adoptive Mother) |
| 5. Child's Date of Birth | 24. Year of birth (Adoptive Father) |
| 6. Sex | 25. Race (Adoptive mother) |
| 7. Child's Race | 26. Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity (Adoptive mother) |
| 8. Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity | 27. Race (Adoptive Father) |
| 9. State Agency...special needs | 28. Hispanic or Latino ethnicity (Adoptive father) |
| 10. Primary basis...special needs | 29. Relationship-Stepparent |
| 11. Type of Disability-Mental Retardation | 30. Relationship-Other relative |
| 12. Type of Disability-Visually or Hearing Impaired | 31. Relationship-Foster parent |
| 13. Type of Disability-Physically Disabled | 32. Relationship-Other non-relative |
| 14. Type of Disability-Emotionally Disturbed | 33. Child was placed from |
| 15. Type of Disability-Other medically diagnosed condition | 34. Child was placed by |
| 16. Mother's year of birth | 35. Monthly subsidy |
| 17. Father's year of birth | 36. Monthly amount |
| 18. Mother married | 37. Adoption assistance – IV-E |
| 19. Date of Mother's termination of parental rights | |

The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS):

Another national database, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), is a *voluntary* data collection and analysis system. This system began in its earliest form in 1974 as a way of tracking abusers, but has undergone changes since then. It consists of two components: the Summary Data Component (SDC) and the Detailed Case Data Component (DCDC). The SDC collects child abuse and neglect statistics based upon referrals to Child Protective Services in each state, including information about child maltreatment reports, investigations, victims, and perpetrators. The DCDC is a set of case-level (i.e., client level) information from child protective services agencies on children who are the subjects of reports. Having case-level information allows for statistical analyses that can identify relationships among numerous data elements, and thus can provide more detailed specialized and sophisticated information about child maltreatment than can be achieved with summary data. All 50 states contributed data to the SDC in 1999, although there was considerable variation in the number of individual survey questions states answered. Twenty-three states provided data for the DCDC in 1999 (NCANDS, 2001).

Information collected in NCANDS includes input (e.g., demographics, type of maltreatment, caretaker, child and family problems), process (e.g. the support services provided to the family) and output data (e.g. the child's whereabouts. Information about perpetrators of maltreatment is not included in the files.

What Do the National Databases Contribute to Results-Oriented Services?

NCANDS and AFCARS provide much useful information about whom the child welfare system serves and how they move through the system (i.e., outputs such as their

movement into, out of, within, and some times back into the child welfare system). Information about clients' entry re-entry into the system, is related to child safety, the chief concern of the child welfare system under the Adoption and Safe Families Act. AFCARS also provides information as to whether permanency goals are being reached, the time it takes to reach them, the stability of placements in the system, and the appropriateness of those placements. Because of children's need for permanency, stability, and continuity of relationships, these data are critical. These measures, and most others in the databases, are measures of status change, and as such are outputs; they are assumed to be measures of child well-being but are not direct measures of this.

Are Outputs Enough? What They Do Not Tell Us

In general, outcomes need not be reported to either federal or state agencies. The rare exceptions to this rule occur in the CFSR review, which collects information regarding child safety -- protection from abuse and neglect -- and the increased ability of families to meet the needs of their children.

Notwithstanding the importance of the outputs collected in the national databases, their limitations are several. As explained earlier, outputs tell us nothing about the well-being of people, specifically children and parents. Rather, they only provide information about their status in the system. In addition, they may tell us nothing about how effective a program is. Changes in outputs may reflect historical events or other non-programmatic inputs such as changes in laws and incentives. For example, changes in time from foster care to adoption may reflect an increase in families who wish to adopt and/or federal incentive payments rather than actual improvements to foster care and adoption services. Another limitation of outputs as a measure of program success is they

often originate outside of the relationship with the client, and therefore may not be seen as important by them. Lastly, the focus of the databases on outputs reflects a concern about “program accountability,” not client or service improvement, and therefore may be less useful to agencies monitoring the effectiveness of their programs. The current emphasis on reporting outputs, and the resources expended on these may limit agencies’ ability to evaluate whether their services are actually stimulating positive client outcomes.

Filling The Gap: Why Are Outcomes Important, and Which Are Most Important?

Measuring actual changes in individuals, families, and systems can offer valuable information about the overall effectiveness of programs. It can also answer questions such as who does the program work for, under what conditions, etc., that can lead to program improvement. Equipped with information about change in client well-being after the delivery of a service, child welfare agencies can evaluate their success at various ecological levels.

Deciding which measures of child and family well-being should be targeted can be a difficult task, but must be undertaken by child welfare professionals. In deciding which outcomes ought to be monitored, several factors should be considered. First, appropriate outcomes should be measured as part of practice (i.e., worker and supervisor responsibilities) so it can inform it. Knowledge of outcomes can inform case planning, intervention choices, and decision making. Workers must be guided in their practice by both the need to achieve timely permanency outputs and the need to ensure the well-being of their clients.

It is critical to determine what is *important* to measure, not just what is *measurable*. It follows, then, that workers and supervisors ought to think about choosing outcomes they regard as important *first* and find an instrument or method for collecting these outcomes *second*. One author (Jones, 1991) has used this last criterion to identify five domains that can help child welfare workers understand a child and family's overall functioning. Workers and supervisors should consider assessing the following:

1. Child outcomes: physical health, temperament, including responsiveness-
engagability and general adaptability/coping; physical appearance and dominant mood; motor development and activity; social/emotional functioning, cognitive functioning, language, and play; social competence, and self-regulatory behaviors.
2. Parent outcomes: general health, socioemotional functioning, cognitive functioning, life-course development, and parental functioning, including physical caregiving, parent's attitudes about him/herself as parent, availability to the child, appropriate communication, and parent as teacher.
3. Parent-child interaction: mutuality and reciprocity of child and parent; dominant affective tone and intensity of engagement; frequency of interaction; modes of communication; and play.
4. Family systems: family dynamics and patterns, including informal social support, marital relationship, family cohesion, and family adaptability.
5. Family resources: external or environmental resources that are available to a family: money, employment, housing, mental and physical health care, education, transportation, day care, and self-help groups.

Of course, these true outcomes can be difficult to capture, especially given limited time and resources available to child welfare professionals. Nevertheless, agencies can often gauge the success of an intervention and the degree to which client well-being has improved by assessing two or three important outcomes, so long as the outcomes are chosen based on what one would expect to result from the services provided.

Conclusion

Collecting and submitting data to the national databases (NCANDS and AFCARS) are essential, as participation is tied to child welfare funding and because they provide a snapshot of the children in care, their movement within the system, and the achievement of outputs important to the system. Still, the information gleaned from these databases is not complete; they do not provide a direct picture of the well-being of children, parents, or families, and many questions regarding actual and meaningful outcomes remain unanswered. Assessment tools can help child welfare workers, supervisors, and administrators obtain a richer understanding of the impacts of services provided by the child welfare system and the achievement of practice goals. Information systems should be in place that can assess processes, outputs, and outcomes in order to track the accomplishments of the child welfare system, and determine which clients are most likely and least likely to be served well by it. Equipped with this information, the child welfare system can make better choices about the services it provides and can better meet the needs of its clients.

Helpful Resources

- **Better Outcomes for Children – The Child and Family Services Review:** A brief description the reviews can be found at Children’s Bureau website: <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/hotissues/index.htm>. For more information about these reviews, click on “Child Welfare Review Project” near the bottom within the text. A menu will display links to many aspects of the reviews, including:
 - Child Welfare Review System
 - The Child Welfare Review System (Fact Sheet)
 - The Child Welfare Review Project (Fact Sheet)
 - Child Welfare Final Rule (Executive Summary)
 - Child Welfare Final Rule (Questions and Answers)
 - Adoption and Safe Families Act
 - Child and Family Services Reviews
 - Tentative Schedule Children's Bureau Child and Family Services Reviews 2001-2004
 - Schedule of Child and Family Services Reviews Conference Calls
 - Child and Family Services Reviews Procedures Manual
 - Child and Family Services Reviews Instruments
 - ACF National Standards for the Child and Family Service Reviews
 - Amendment to National Standards for the Child and Family Service Reviews
 - Instructions for Completing the State Policy Submission Form
 - Tips for Creating Onsite Review Schedules
 - Sample Schedule for Review Team Leaders
 - Sample Schedule for Local Site Leaders
 - Sample Schedule for Team Members
 - Procedures for Completing the Quality Assurance of the Onsite Review Instruments
 - Local Site Leader Checklist for Completing the Quality Assurance of the Onsite Review Instruments
 - Reviewer Checklist for Completing the Quality Assurance of the Onsite Review Instruments
 - Title IV-E Foster Care Eligibility Reviews
 - Title IV-E Review Protocol
 - Title IV-E Review Instrument
 - Title IV-E Review Schedule
- **AFCARS and NCANDS:**
 - The 1999 NCANDS annual report: “Child Maltreatment 1999” is available at on the Children’s Bureau website, as are recent AFCARS reports. Start off at <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/index.htm>, click on Factsheets/Publications on the left-hand side of the screen, scroll down to Reports/Publications, and click on either the HTML or PDF version of the report of interest.

- Information is also available at <http://www.ndacan.cornell.edu>. Scroll down to “Datasets” and click on “Table of datasets available”. You will see a table of databases; when you find the one you are looking for, click on the link to read a brief description and history of the database. In addition, the actual AFCARS frequencies can be viewed and printed by visiting this table of databases. AFCARS is the first one listed, and in the right-hand column, you may click on the link to either “Adoption Data” or “Foster Care Data”.
- **Locating Standardized Instruments to Measure Outcomes:**
 - The Ansell-Casey Life Skills Assessment www.casey.org
 - <http://ericae/net/testcol.htm>
 - Mental Measurement Yearbook
 - Test Critiques
 - Dictionary of Unpublished Experimental Measures
 - Health and Psychological Instruments
<http://gateway.ovid.com/genr7.8fldguide/hapid/htm>
 - Tests in Print
 - Numerous handbooks for Specific Fields of Practice (crime and delinquency, alcoholism, marriage and the family, trauma, family assessment, child development).
- For a reading on measuring meaningful outcomes, see Jones, M. A. (1991). Measuring outcomes. In K. Wells & D. E. Biegel (Eds.) Family Preservation Services. Research and Evaluation pp. 159-186. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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