

Quality Improvement Center  
ON EARLY CHILDHOOD



**Response to *Indicators for Child  
Maltreatment Prevention Programs*,  
by Tim Ross and Sharon Vandivere,  
Child Trends**

Vicky Marchand, MSW, MPH  
October 12, 2009

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Center for the Study of Social Policy  
1575 Eye Street NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20005  
[www.qic-ec.org](http://www.qic-ec.org)  
[qic-ec@cssp.org](mailto:qic-ec@cssp.org)  
202-371-1565

# Introduction

The Quality Improvement Center on Early Childhood (QIC-EC) asked Child Trends to identify indicators for potential use in research and demonstration programs aimed at preventing child maltreatment among children from birth through age five. On June 30, 2009, the QIC-EC convened a group of individuals with diverse experience and expertise in child maltreatment to critique a draft version of “Indicators for Child Maltreatment Prevention Programs,” authored by Timothy Ross and Sharon Vandivere. Participants represented a multidisciplinary mix of perspectives, including policymakers, researchers, public agency administrators, practitioners, philanthropists and some members of the QIC National Advisory Committee (see attached list).

This response paper, describing the highlights of the meeting, is intended to serve as guidance to the QIC-EC regarding the selection of indicators and the design of evaluation efforts for upcoming research and demonstration projects. The discussion was intended to tap the combined expertise and commentary of participants rather than achieve consensus on a list of indicators. As a result, this paper presents themes that emerged during the discussion of the indicators and measurement tools proposed by Child Trends in the categories of agreements, tensions, challenges, and recommendations.

# Agreements

## **Explicit outcomes and indicators of progress promote meaningful coordination among stakeholders and multiple systems.**

All meeting participants readily accepted the premise that defining critical outcomes and identifying key indicators of progress offers an effective approach for promoting investment in quality interventions likely to achieve the desired result of preventing child maltreatment and neglect. With an explicit set of desired results and measures, diverse stakeholders have the common language and tools necessary to recognize their shared interests and to disentangle their roles in mitigating the complex conditions and experiences associated with child abuse and neglect.

Given the potential array of actors with an interest in the prevention of child maltreatment – researchers, practitioners, program managers, systems administrators, funders, (change semicolons to commas) policy makers – clearly defining shared results and indicators can become a means for galvanizing action. Several meeting participants suggested that the Child Trends paper is too restrained about the potential of this work to advance on-going efforts and stimulate new thinking about the potential to improve community conditions which prevent harm to and promote well-being of children. With a common purpose and the capacity to determine how children, families, and communities are doing, funders and policy makers can justify investments and administrators and practitioners can target

resources effectively. One meeting participant with experience in an urban setting suggested that had they been able to use the Child Trends paper as a starting point, it would have significantly jump-started their efforts.

## **Effective efforts to reduce child abuse and neglect must balance risk reduction and promotion of protective factors.**

Participants readily agreed that reducing risk alone is not likely to result in reduced incidence of maltreatment and that measuring the results of prevention activities presents significant challenges. Prevention of child maltreatment requires a combination – reducing risks such as maternal depression or lacking basic needs AND increasing protective factors such as knowledge of child development and parental resilience. The QIC-EC's intent is to structure an initiative to prevent child abuse and neglect using actions that will have results across the three outcomes, so stakeholders can present a more complete picture of the benefits of their work.

## **Measuring three outcomes - optimal development, reduction in the likelihood of maltreatment, and increased family strengths - addresses multiple dimensions of change, and shows different audiences with different agendas that their intentions can converge around common outcomes.**

While adding complexity to the analysis, including measures for three outcomes that balance

prevention of harm and promotion of positive development offers an enriched framework for tracking impact. This work around common outcomes can also play an important role in translating common ideas for different audiences. If indicators are going to galvanize action to achieve outcomes, they must reduce the jargon among disciplines that contributes to poor coordination and silos of interventions. It may also be important to strengthen references to informal supports and to ensure that community capacity goes beyond service delivery to include libraries, green space, bus stops, and neighborhood safety. Simplifying the language may be particularly valuable for engaging non-provider stakeholders. For example, the business community may resonate more with the following:

- are young children getting hurt (safety and maltreatment) and
- are young children ready for school (optimal development).

### **Accepted measures of school readiness at age 5 are likely to be adequate to show optimal development for this purpose.**

Participants noted that using existing school readiness measures typically assessed at age five may provide meaningful indicators which are politically salient and already tracked for significant populations in many jurisdictions. A number of measurement instruments and strategies already in place for other purposes may also be relevant to the proposed prevention information systems, such as the Protective Factors Survey; the Early Development Instrument (EDI); the Dartington scales; and various achievement tests (i.e., language and cognitive development).

# Tensions

**Measuring program results alone does not adequately show the impact of other critical elements (policy, system reform, resource availability, etc.).**

Meeting participants expressed strong agreement regarding the value of the Child Trends paper for framing a discussion of indicators to include a comprehensive scan of child, family, and community measures balancing risk and protective factors. However, they struggled with the explicit focus in the paper on the impact of individual programs, which may miss much of the activity and may be too limited to achieve the desired outcomes. It is not clear whether a common set of measures *applied at the program level* will lead to a better understanding of the cumulative impact of multiple efforts, particularly those targeting different populations or focusing on the community and societal levels of the social-ecological model.

Various synonyms were used during the discussion – interventions, services and supports, systems reform, community-wide efforts – which have significant implications for the scope of measurement and change. As the Ross and Vandivere acknowledged, individual programs are not likely to have the level of influence necessary to address structural obstacles or contextual issues, such as employment opportunities or core community resources. In addition, the program level of analysis emphasizes direct interaction with a group of participants – targeting individuals or families – suggesting that the indicators measure

benefits exclusively for program participants rather than changes in community conditions.

**Many stakeholders may require different indicators to satisfy their needs, but a simple comprehensive menu needs to be developed to show progress quickly and accurately across domains.**

Various potential audiences, including the general public, frontline practitioners, program or agency administrators, community coalition leaders, policy makers, researchers may want to know different things about the impact of activities to inform the decisions they make to set policy, allocate resources, manage initiatives, improve practice, and coordinate systems. Participants suggested that organizing the indicators differently across dimensions would emphasize the breadth of impact for readers. Framing indicators for different audiences or for defined a target of impact (i.e., individual/participant; family; community; systems) may better convey areas of potential progress.

**Connections between conditions, interventions, systems, policy and outcomes are especially difficult to demonstrate, but need to be attempted with increasing precision based on best current knowledge to further enrich the knowledge base.**

The emphasis on individual programs does not provide adequate guidance about how communities might engage collectively around the

issue of preventing child abuse and neglect. Whether or not they offer specific programs, other community supports and institutions, such as schools, health care providers, parks and recreation, housing, etc., may make critical contributions to the prevention of child abuse and neglect.

To address this tension about applying an extensive set of indicators, one participant suggested using the analogy of a car dashboard, which seemed to resonate among participants. Using this approach, the objective is to select a

handful of key measures that can tell readers at a glance in real time how the car is doing, without having to be an expert in the operations of the car. In combination with some information about other cars and road – or community – conditions, one can monitor “well being” over time. The dashboard may include reminders about “preventive maintenance” or key touch points for assessment

# Challenges

**Using maltreatment reports as an outcome measure continues to be a problem for many reasons, but these are the main common administrative data available and are essential to the policymaker and public audiences. Additional indicators will help measure the reduction in maltreatment more accurately.**

While the Child Trends analysis lays out important limitations on the use of Child Welfare Agency reporting data as a proxy for child maltreatment, participants felt the lines were too strongly drawn. Given the historical reliance on this information and the linkage to public resources, tracking of reports and substantiation of child maltreatment will continue to be a politically and administratively important measure. One participant observed that while not necessarily an indicator of the incidence of maltreatment, changes in agency data signal changes in the system or community that may be relevant for other planning and evaluation efforts. In addition, child welfare systems (CWS) data may point to opportunities for intervention. For example, the very high percentage of reports that occur in the first thirty days of life may suggest specific interventions and points for measurement during the perinatal period.

However, for many reasons, everyone agreed that the over-reliance on these data may be misleading and could be better balanced with a “basket” of indicators including those identified in

the paper. Given the low incidence of reports and substantiation even among families considered at risk, this indicator is not adequately sensitive to analyze interventions without a very large sample size. So incorporating other measures of injury or signs of need (such as hunger or homelessness) may contribute to a better understanding of actual maltreatment.

**Defining populations, levels of anticipated impact and timing of measurements need to be clearly spelled out by the QIC-EC for the research projects, and the indicators selected should reflect the parameters of the research projects (duration, comparison groups, etc.).**

Defining the target population for measurement, not a simple technical task, reveals several challenges about the application of a set of indicators. Demonstrating impact at the population level, even if limited to vulnerable communities or other subpopulations, may be the most powerful finding possible for the field and for other key decision-makers. However, achieving and measuring change in populations requires significant investment in strong interventions and assessments designed to reach an adequate sample. While much easier to implement, indicators applied only to program participants may not tell an adequate, credible story about the effectiveness of initiatives or strategies. Yet, local decision makers and direct service providers do not want to be held

accountable for change at the population level, when their interventions touch only a small number of people.

From a research perspective, indicators can be most useful for determining the effectiveness of particular activities or strategies if data is collected for control or comparison groups. As a result, target populations must be limited and inclusion criteria clearly defined so that a non-intervention population can be identified. The selection of indicators depends on the likelihood of being able to observe effects at the measurement points during the project. Indicators will differ if the objective is to show change during the life of a program or later well-being. Certain indicators may be more appropriate for use by the Early Childhood QIC research and demonstration projects with a four-year time frame while other indicators should be tied to related data systems to follow people over time and support longer-term analysis. This longitudinal view raises the possibility of using some measures related to multi-generational experiences, such as maternal education or adverse childhood experiences which are not directly impacted by programs.

**The proposed indicators lack adequate measures of how interventions work on multiple levels or show practice changes, systems and community changes.**

Participants struggled with the implications of limiting the analysis to the impact of programs, arguing that strategies aimed at systems reform, community development, and the policy and resource contexts are likely to be critical to the success of any prevention efforts. There was

extended discussion about the interim results related to practice changes, interventions at the community level, and systems reform that could be integrated in this section. Indicators explicitly tracking practice, process, and infrastructure changes may serve to encourage interventions targeting the outer circles of the ecological model – community and society. One participant suggested using the theory of change to tie components of the intervention (i.e. screening and identification, service delivery, enriched social networks, and outcomes) to target of impact (i.e. child, family, service system, community). This approach provides other opportunities to demonstrate how interventions work on multiple levels simultaneously and demonstrates the potential of strategies that are more than a collection of isolated programs.

**At the end of the project, the report on outcomes needs to be accompanied by clear direction about what actions should be taken to achieve the results**

If one objective of focusing on outcomes and meaningful measures of change is to motivate stakeholders, they must have ready access to information about what to do – effective and promising strategies for preventing child abuse and neglect and achieving optimal development. Since effective prevention of child maltreatment is beyond the capacity of any single intervention, agency, or program, the results shown by the selected indicators is likely to be the result of contributions from many activities. Starting with outcomes and mapping back to practical, understandable measures of change may reveal the

synergistic impact of strategies, services, and supports across these levels.

This enhanced knowledge can provide the foundation for a widely accepted theory of change identifying activities given the population, community context, and available resources, immediate outputs, and their contribution to the desired outcomes given the population identified. Participants raised concerns about whether a set of indicators in the absence of an explicit theory of change can result in measures likely to reveal the impact of varied programs or initiatives. Making the connections between what is actually

happening and the desired results may be necessary to pinpoint the measures that are likely to reveal change and the appropriate timing during the course of the project for measurement activities. For example, direct family support activities may be most likely to show impact on measures of parenting capacity while policy initiatives may be better tracked through neighborhood resource or financial security measures.

# Recommendations

## **Move ahead with a comprehensive set of outcomes (optimal development, reduction in maltreatment, increase in family functioning)**

Participants agreed about the potential value of selecting indicators to measure progress in both reduction of risk and the promotion of well-being, as well as identifying pitfalls of adding to the perception that factors related to child maltreatment are too complex to measure let alone prevent. By offering an expanded frame for selecting indicators to measure progress which balances the reduction of risk and the promotion of well-being, this analysis offers a broad, unified picture of what works in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. While not escaping the challenges and cost of implementing a rigorous measurement and tracking system, the Child Trends paper offers important advice for the QIC in terms of specific strategies and tools for advancing strategic investments in direct services and supports, community infrastructure, and systems reform, and highlights gaps in our knowledge requiring further research.

## **Frame the research projects narrowly, with an eye toward what can actually be shown in the timeframe, then pick indicators and instruments to measure them with this in mind. Longer term outcomes will not appear in the timeframe.**

Even when practical measurement tools were identified, participants cautioned about applying a selected set of indicators. Participants raised many

concerns about the differing interests of audiences for indicators and whether a single “dashboard” would tell an adequate story. Stakeholders are likely to pick different indicators depending on the audience(s) for findings and the story they want to be able to tell. A set of indicators cannot function as a complete information system. Instead it offers one snapshot to track progress toward common outcomes and to suggest areas for further exploration to achieve desired results.

## **Focus on the risk/protective factor shifts in families. We need much more information on how this works.**

Participants noted that the field will benefit from further clarification about the relationship between risk and protective factors. The general sense of the group was that promotion of optimal development captures outcomes greater than simply the inverse of risks, although some measures may suggest otherwise. For example, a measure may range from social isolation to social networks while the measure for social connectedness may be very different. This focus on the balance of the reduction of risk and promotion of protection also offers links to other important positive outcomes, such as school readiness. The discussion revealed some additional challenges, such as the need to account for the cumulative impact of risks and/or protective factors and the further development of a basket of measures which offer better proxies for the incidence of abuse and neglect.