



# Beyond Anecdote: Using Qualitative Data in Program Evaluation



**FRIENDS National Resource Center for Community Based Child Abuse Prevention**

*A Service of the Children's Bureau,  
a member of the T/TA network*

[www.friendsnrc.org](http://www.friendsnrc.org)



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## Overview

- Understanding Qualitative Data and its uses
- Identify different techniques in Qualitative Data
- Outline steps in a Qualitative Data process
- Provide examples of making sense of the data

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## Qualitative Data

- Useful part of program evaluation
  - Allows for first-hand knowledge to be shared
- Utilizes listening and learning to build knowledge
  - Brings numbers and stories together

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## Characteristics of Qualitative Research

- Intentionally Subjective
- Encourages Discovery
- Explanatory
- Relationship-Based
- Contextual
- Known by various names

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## Getting started in using Qualitative Data

- 1) Start by identifying an issue or creating a focus
  - What areas do you wish to know more about?
  - Is there an area related to an unachieved goal or objective?
  - Is there an area that is going really well that you wish to understand more about?

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## Sample Issues to Examine

- Too many families dropping out of the program
- Insufficient progress on measures by families completing the program
- Staff translating training into practice

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## Using Qualitative Data

### 2) Identify questions to address the issue or focus

- Brainstorm a list of questions based on the Issues you want to learn more about
- Once created, prioritize the list of questions to narrow the scope to the most relevant areas

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## Issues and Questions

- We are uncertain if families value what we are doing and see the program as a blessing or a burden.
  - How do parents really think and feel about home visits and parenting classes?
- Staff experience and training really varies. Morale and job satisfaction seems to be at an all-time low.
  - How competent and confident do staff feel in their new roles as home visitors?

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## Using Qualitative Data

### 3) Protect Privacy and Confidentiality

- Personal questions about or observing habits, behaviors, or feels are a necessary part of qualitative data collection
- Respect families and protect them to feel less vulnerable

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### Rules for Protecting Participants

- Issue a letter of invitation
- Keep all data in a locked cabinet
- Collect only information that you truly need to know
- Check with participants after (or during)
- Change the names of persons, places and programs

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### Using Qualitative Data

#### 4) Recognize limits in skills and resources

- **This is about qualitative data and NOT qualitative research!**
- Considerations for planning the process:
  - Time for collecting, analyzing, writing and reporting
  - Persons available and skilled at collecting, analyzing, writing and reporting
  - Expertise available with knowledge and experience in design and conduction
  - Space available to conduct interviews and observations
  - Equipment necessary for capturing information

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### Using Qualitative Data

#### 5) Dealing with sensitive findings

- Life circumstances painful to consider
- Views critical of you, your colleagues, or program
- Incidents of maltreatment

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### **Collecting Qualitative Data**

- **Interviews**
- **Observations**
- **Enumeration and sampling**
- **Documentation**

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### **Interviews**

- **Conversations with individuals or groups for a specified purpose.**
  - Informal and open-ended
  - Specific and standardized
- **Make sure questions are linked to your program's mission, goals, activities, or anticipated outcomes.**
- **Be ready for surprises**

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### **Design an Interview Protocol**

**A list of questions that you believe will help you answer the questions you posed as part of your evaluation.**

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Questions for Parents:	Purposes:
Tell me how you and (child's name) came to the Families Program.	Discover family history, background and expectations of the program, and discover program referral sources.
What parts of the Families Program have been most valuable to you? (Probe for specifics about home visits.)	Discover family values and priorities; allow comparisons with program missions, goals and priorities.
If you could change anything about the Families Program, what would it be?	Discover aspects of the program that families think difficult or would like to add; allow comparisons with program mission, goals and priorities.
What have I forgotten to ask you that is important for me to know?	Allow participants to define priorities; allow comparisons with program priorities.

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**Invite or Select Participants to Interview**

- Good key informants
- Balance number of interviewees and available time
- Consider Focus Groups

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**Conduct the Interview**

- Create an opening statement
- Convey the importance of the information and why
- Disclose how the information will be used and for what
  - Privacy issues
  - Signed Consent
- Explain your role
- Provide written copies of the questions
- Have a quiet, private place for interviews
- Listen actively

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## Observations

Observations occur in real-life contexts that allow one to learn what people do or do not do in the contexts of home, work, and community.

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## Guidelines for Observation

- Inform others about what you are doing
- Dress appropriately for the setting
- Remind people of what you are doing
- Focus your observations
- Take field notes

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## Enumeration and Sampling

- This is likely data you already collect
  - Numbers served
  - Demographics
  - #'s of resources provided
- Interviews and observations provide context or explain these numbers and statistics

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What you wish to know...	What kind of data...	How you gather it...
What people experienced, what they believe, how they view something, or how they think of a given time or over a period of time	INTERVIEWS (Individual or Focus-Group)	Ask questions that are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-ended ("Tell me about your child")</li> <li>• Semi-structured ("When you say your child is destructive with other children, tell me how you know that?"),</li> <li>• Structured ("Give me an example of how home visits have helped you as a parent")</li> <li>• In the moment/think aloud ("How do you think you and your child did today as you played together?")</li> </ul>
What people do at a given time or over a period of time	OBSERVATIONS	Observe and make written notes (or video record and make notes) of people in action and in context (such as parents interacting with children during home visits; home visitors guiding parents about their child's development; staff peers discussing their work)

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What you wish to know...	What kind of data...	How you gather it...
The numbers, percentages, proportions or distributions of something important about or something important to people and programs	ENUMERATION AND SAMPLING	Count events, conditions, opinions (such as reports to children's services; risk and resilience factors; parent satisfaction with services; staff members' feeling of competence), and translate counts into percentages, proportions, distributions
The mission, intentions, projections and history of a person, agency, organization or community	DOCUMENTS	Collect documents (such as mission statements, policy documents, grant proposals, brochures, web site text, program or community needs assessments) in order to compare the ideal with the real

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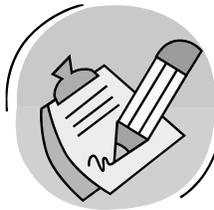
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## Data Activity



- Examine data list
- Search for groupings
- Identify top three areas

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