Family-Centered Program Assessment:

A Resource Guide for Child Support Programs

Submitted to:
the State of Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families

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Internal

Contents

Introduction 1

Part I. The Fundamentals of Family-Centered Assessment 2

1. Overview of the conceptual model 2

2. Guiding principles for analyzing family centering 5

Part II. Instructions For Family-Centered Assessment Processes 7

Concluding Remarks 25

Appendices 27

Appendix 1. How does a family-centered assessment compare with other standard program evaluation methods? 27

Appendix 2. Potential outcomes of a family centered approach 28

Appendix 3: Glossary of technical terms 30

Appendix 4: Checklist to document and report the family-centered assessment process 32

Appendix 5. Populations who might face additional barriers to child support engagement 34

References 35

Introduction

Title IV-D of the Social Security Act marked a new era in U.S. social policy by establishing a nationwide child support program for systematic enforcement of child support obligations.[b] Although Title IV-D's initial goal was to strengthen states' ability to obtain greater support for children on public assistance, and to reduce expenditures on public assistance,[1] the program's scope later broadened to include funding for states to support all families with children not living with both biological parents. Following the program's start, the subsequent two decades witnessed a substantial rise in caseloads, from 5 million to nearly 20 million cases.[2] Despite this growth, caseloads declined after the late 1990s, reaching 12.7 million children served (about 1 in 6 nationwide) by 2023.[3,4] For parents receiving support, the average payment is approximately $4,000 annually, representing 9 percent of their total income and providing vital economic support for their children.[5,6]

The IV-D child support program employs a range of enforcement tools to collect child support payments. For families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid, these measures include the requirement to cooperate with child support agencies in establishing paternity and support orders as a condition of benefit receipt, and to assign their right to child support collections to the state to reimburse public benefit costs. Families not receiving these benefits can voluntarily seek IV-D child support services. For all participating families, enforcement measures vary from new hire reporting and wage garnishment to tax refund intercepts, property liens, passport denial, credit bureau reporting, license revocation (driver's and/or professional licenses), and legal actions such as contempt of court and criminal prosecution for nonsupport. These measures are often perceived as punitive or unfair, especially by parents who lack the ability to pay support.[7,8]

While initially successful, the child support program faces challenges in serving families with varied economic circumstances and parenting arrangements. Families with low incomes, who constitute more than 60 percent of IV-D cases,[9] encounter some of the most significant obstacles to participation and compliance. The inability of noncustodial parents to pay support is often linked to economic barriers like low wages, incarceration, and limited job opportunities.[10,11] The ensuing child support debt can further hinder their economic mobility and health.[10,12,13] Moreover, many custodial and noncustodial parents perceive the program as ineffective, unfair, and inflexible, leading some to develop childrearing arrangements outside the program for greater flexibility and to maintain family relationships.[8,14]

To improve parent participation and ultimately promote child well-being, some child support programs have begun to explore tailored enforcement approaches or additional support for families.[15] This resource guide helps programs achieve these objectives by facilitating a family-centered assessment of child support policy and practice, with the goals of helping programs prioritize family needs and enhance parent engagement. This guide integrates research and develops family-centered analytic methods for the child support context. It also incorporates

[b] This resource guide is a product of a larger federally funded project to improve child support services for families. A companion paper, "History Offers Lessons About Serving Families in the Child Support Program?", offers a detailed historical overview of the U.S. child support system, tracing its origins from the 17th century to recent times. Refer to this brief for additional historical context.

insights from three state assessments conducted as part of this project.[c] **While specific instructions and examples are primarily designed for state and Tribal agency-level assessments, the broader conceptual model may also be applied to federal or county/county office assessments.**

Designed for accessibility, the first part of this guide presents a conceptual model for family-centered assessment of child support policy/practice and guiding principles for identifying gaps and strengths in taking a family-centered approach. The second part of the guide summarizes further instructions for conducting key assessment activities, overall recommendations, and concluding remarks.

Part I. The Fundamentals of Family-Centered Assessment

1. Overview of the conceptual model

The conceptual model for family-centered assessment (Figure 1) outlines three core components: the level of government involved (Step 1), the assessment's process flow (Step 2), and the broader policy context (represented by the bottom arrow).

Step 1 highlights that a fundamental aspect of any family-centered assessment is the level of government for which it is conducted—federal, state agency, Tribal agency, or county/county office. This level defines the scope of policy or practice changes that the program can enact directly or influence indirectly—for example, via recommendations to higher authorities.

Step 2 depicts the assessment itself as a structured, iterative process to evaluate current or future policies and practices that prioritize family perspectives and well-being (see Appendix 1 for a comparison with other methods). The process includes five key activities: setting the foundation, engaging service users and communities, leveraging data, identifying family-centered considerations, and planning for change.

The process begins by forming an assessment team and developing a clear, actionable plan. Community engagement—central to the model—ensures that family voices shape data use, bring strengths and gaps to light, and inform change strategies. These activities are not strictly sequential. For example, data analysis may reveal gaps that prompt community input, while stakeholder insights might guide the design of data inquiries.

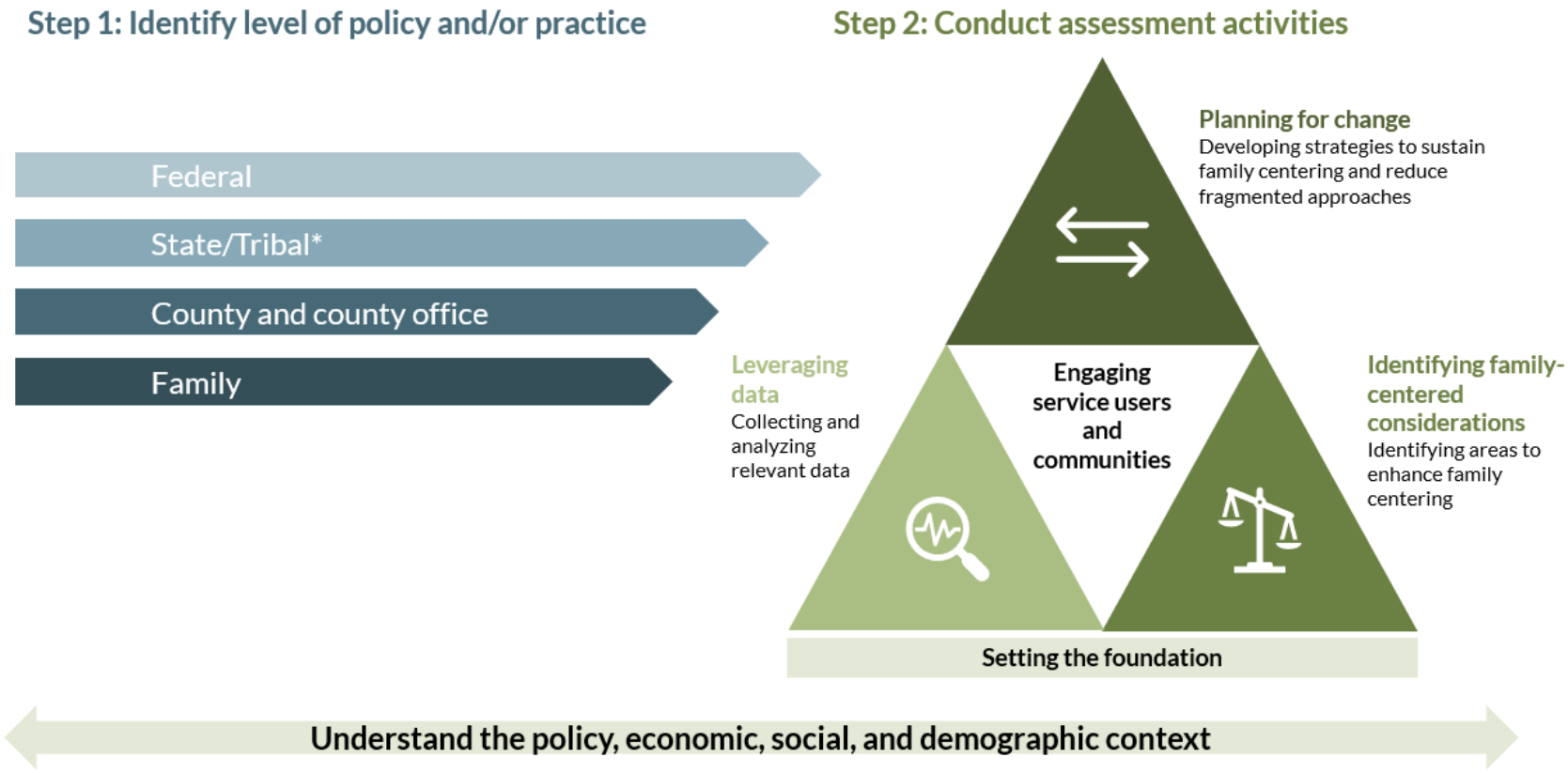
The **bottom arrow** of the model underscores the importance of aligning the assessment with its broader context and timing. Contextual factors—such as where the program sits in the policy cycle (e.g., identification, formulation, implementation, evaluation)—can shape the questions asked, the resources needed, and the assessment's overall timeline. For instance, during early policy formation, the focus may be on broad exploration and stakeholder partnerships; during implementation, engagement may narrow to those directly affected.

Once a focus area is selected, additional contextual factors may become relevant. A family-centered assessment of cost recovery, for example, must consider related systems like TANF that require reimbursement. Similarly, an assessment of order modification—specifically, the policies and procedures that influence how child support orders are adjusted to account for

[c] Refer to the three state reports for complete details regarding these state assessments.

shifting parental or child circumstances—may need to account for economic conditions such as industry trends, job stability, or unemployment rates.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model to Support Assessments of Centering Families in Child Support Programs



* As set forth in the U.S. Constitution, American Indian and Alaska Native Tribal Nations are sovereign entities that maintain unique and legal, nation-to-nation relationships with the federal government. There are currently over 60 Tribal child support programs funded by federal dollars (including Title IV-D of the Social Security Act)[16] and their designation impacts how their policies are designed and implemented.[17]

The conceptual model outlines the steps and key activities for assessing child support programs, providing guidance on the flow and processes of the assessment but not defining or operationalizing family centering. Therefore, the next section, Guiding Principles, will explain how a family-centered assessment can identify opportunities and gaps to achieve family centering.

2. Guiding principles for analyzing family centering

Family-centered programs structure their policies and practices to prioritize families' economic and social well-being.[18,19] Such programs actively seek to understand the experiences of the families involved and, based on this understanding, to integrate elements that promote family well-being into program design and implementation. To advance the overall well-being of families served by the program, a family-centered approach prioritizes program resources to families with the lowest levels of economic and social well-being.[20,21] This approach allows a program to engage families by providing them with program resources meant to advance family well-being. And vice versa, through better engagement, families utilize the program to advance their well-being.[22] A family-centered approach addresses the unique economic and social needs of each family or family member by providing services and resources that increase their well-being and effectively engaging them in those services and resources.

A family-centered approach is a programmatic strategy that prioritizes family well-being, experience, and voice in program design and implementation. This approach also focuses on providing program resources to families with the most significant barriers to engagement.

A family-centered assessment requires ongoing analysis of the program (e.g., its policy, practice, and procedures) to identify gaps and strengths in how well it centers families. For example, establishing the right questions or areas of inquiry is necessary to solicit insights from family members and their communities that are necessary for program improvement to enhance family centering. **Therefore, to ensure clarity, consistency, and rigor in such analysis, this resource guide outlines principles for analyzing family centering in a family-centered assessment**. The guiding principles are based on an adaptation of existing literature[d] on family-centered policy and practice, including sectors beyond child support such as healthcare and child welfare, and have been tailored to the child support program and its specific context. These principles clarify the operationalization of family centering by translating this concept into concrete analytic actions. With this clarity, a family-centered analysis is more likely to be carried out consistently across assessments. Guiding principles foster a shared vision for identifying areas in need of improvement and strengths to sustain.

Family-centered assessment encompasses the following principles:

(1) Prioritizing families over authority

Family-centered assessments prioritize family well-being, experiences, and perspectives rather than program cost, efficiency, or bureaucratic convenience.[23,24,25] Such assessments emphasize

[d] References to this literature are provided in the descriptions of each principle.

family-centered outcomes, many of which are distinct from the federal child support performance measures focused on monetary outcomes (see examples of family-centered outcomes in Appendix 2). While family centering and program efficiency can complement each other—for example, family engagement can improve compliance and reduce enforcement costs[26,27,28]—this principle urges assessors to look beyond existing structures and consider where policies may undermine family well-being or staff empathy for families.

(2) Centering child well-being within family relationships

This principle offers additional guidance on how an assessment centered on the family identifies opportunities to promote family well-being within the context of child support. Child well-being is central to family-centered assessment when approached holistically and in the context of family relationships such as coparenting[18,29,30] The assessment recognizes that economic and social supports are shaped by parents' preferences, capacities, and relationships,[14,31] and seeks to identify program barriers to promoting comprehensive child and family well-being.

(3) Acknowledging behavioral and economic diversity

These assessments respect individual differences and challenge rigid assumptions about participant behavior,[32,33] whereas an approach that is not family-centered might make broad generalizations and assumptions about a family's circumstances. For example, filing for contempt of court against a parent for noncompliance with a child support order without verifying their actual and present ability to pay, based on the assumption that the parent willfully ignored their obligation, overlooks the range of potential reasons for nonpayment and is not family-centered. In contrast, a family-centered assessment highlights program strengths where policy and practice allow families to share their circumstances and preferences or allow procedures to be adapted accordingly to promote engagement.[34]

(4) Aligning responsibility with available resources

Assessments should evaluate whether program demands are proportional to participants' economic, social, and human capital (see Appendix 3 for a glossary of technical terms used in this guide).[35,36] When operationalized in order of establishment, this principle implies setting support orders based on the parent's financial ability to pay. When applied to client communication, it means using accessible language and methods to convey messages effectively. Under this principle, assessments should identify adapted services that address barriers to participation and engagement within the child support program, particularly among parents with the fewest resources and the most significant barriers. Documented barriers to child support engagement include factors such as low income, lack of employability, literacy, legal resources, coparenting challenges, and family violence.[11,14,37,38,39,40]

(5) Transparency in policy and practice

Transparency builds trust, encourages engagement, enhances program accountability, and supports informed participation.[41,42,43,44,45] For example, at the practice level, streamlined application procedures lower participants' learning costs, thereby improving their understanding and utilization of services. At the policy level, clear communication of difficult

policies such as child support pass-through policy to recipients increases their likelihood of responding to policy changes and advocating effectively for their well-being based on a solid understanding of the evolving program.[46,47]

(6) Structured and evidence-based decision-making processes

To minimize biases (intentional or unintentional), error, and inconsistency, family-centered assessments promote structured and evidence-based approaches.[48,49] When purposively designed to limit bias, standardized tools, decision guidelines, and fidelity-monitored practices can help align decisions with families' needs and capacities.[50] By limiting confusion and disputes arising from inconsistent implementation and irrelevant personal stereotypes, it allows a greater focus on serving family needs. Data analysis and staff training may supplement these tools to ensure their intended use.[51,52]

The table below provides a visual representation of these guiding principles and how they differ from a less family-centered approach.

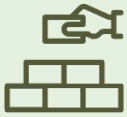
Table 1. Opportunities and barriers to developing a family-centered approach in a child support program

Opportunities	Barriers
Prioritizing families over authority	Prioritizing authority over families
Centering child well-being within family relationships	Considering child well-being independent from family relationships
Acknowledging behavioral and economic diversity	Assuming behavioral and economic similarities
Aligning responsibility with available resources	Assigning responsibility exceeding available resources
Transparent policy and practice	Hidden/complex policy and practice
Structured and evidence-based decision-making	Unchecked discretion and lack of accountability

Part II. Instructions For Family-Centered Assessment Processes

Part II of this resource guide details the five key activities in a family-centered assessment, outlining the main tasks for each and integrating the guiding principles throughout. These key assessment activities and their tasks are shown in Figure 2:

Figure 2. Family-Centered Assessment Key Activities



Setting the foundation

- Define assessment purposes and scope
- Assemble an assessment team
- Determine policy, practice, and outcomes of focus



Engaging service users and communities

- Build intentional and authentic community partnerships
- Partner with community and family member champions
- Approach engagement as a long-term partnership



Leveraging data

- Propose questions and objectives for data analysis
- Identify the population of interest and sample
- Determine the type of data and methods for data collection
- Develop data collection instruments and a data analysis plan



Identifying family-centered considerations

- Identify policy or practice for further exploration
- Interpret findings from empirical analysis
- Explore the implications of unexpected findings



Planning for change

- Determine the level and scope of change
- Foster a family-centered environment locally
- Develop plans for ongoing monitoring and assessment
- Specify implementation details for the change

The development of a family-centered assessment is an iterative process. Each of the family-centered assessment activities are interrelated, influence each other, and should not occur or be considered in isolation.

The specific instructions for each activity are intended for family-centered assessments done at the agency level of child support programs. Each section below is organized to first explain the activity's goals, and then to present key tasks within each activity. For each task, the section explains the task and provides a list of possible assessment items or questions. It also considers input from other stakeholders, potential interactions between tasks, and how questions may vary depending on the assessment's broader economic and policy contexts. This resource guide provides a summary of all relevant tasks pertinent to a comprehensive family-centered assessment. Programs are encouraged to choose which tasks will be most beneficial to their program and can be conducted within their available resources and time. Program assessors may use the checklist in Appendix 4 to document and report a family-centered assessment process.

Activity 1: Setting the foundation

Goal: The goal of this activity is to establish a strong foundation at the outset of a family-centered assessment process. Foundation setting is integral to the success of other assessment activities by proactively creating the necessary conditions for them to succeed.

Key tasks: Foundation setting involves several key tasks, including defining assessment purposes and scope (identifying resources, timelines, and stakeholders); assembling an assessment team; and determining policy, practice, and outcomes of focus (selecting topics of interest as well as defining family centering and its associated outcomes for the chosen topics).

Task: Define assessment purposes and scope.

The purposes of a family-centered assessment often depend on the circumstances that prompt it. These may include launching or revising a program or policy, expanding an existing initiative, ending a funding cycle, responding to ongoing challenges or public concerns, adapting to political, policy, or economic shifts, or responding to new statutory mandates. These preceding events often determine the assessment's purposes, dictating either a specific policy topic (e.g., a particular family distribution policy) or a broad theme of focus (e.g., ways to promote family engagement). The purposes of an assessment often affect its scope, timeline, and allocated resources. Therefore, it's important to clarify the purposes and scope before outlining plans for other assessment activities. Answering the following questions helps achieve this goal:

- What is driving the need for this family-centered assessment?
- If driven by a government entity or funder, what are their core expectations for the assessment's purposes and scope?
- If multiple entities are involved, how can the scope address all anticipated or required purposes?
- If the stated purposes are not family-centered, can they be revised to include that focus? (If not, consider other program assessment tools.)
- How much time is allowed for completing the assessment? How much buffer time can be allocated for unexpected challenges?

- What financial and staffing resources are available for the assessment?
- Based on current information, how do the purposes shape the assessment's goals, timeline, roles, and deliverables? (This can inform a draft scope that will evolve with team input.)

Task: Assemble an assessment team.

There are several ways to assemble a family-centered assessment team. The formation of such a team can be influenced by factors like the initial reason for the assessment, the program's allocation of staff for assessment, and the specific policy topic being assessed. For example, a state legislature might request that the state child support department assess a specific functionality of its program. Depending on how the initial need or problem is formulated, a state agency with primary ownership of the issue may take the lead in assembling an assessment team. The agency can leverage internal or external personnel for support by including them on the assessment team.

The following questions can help define team roles and responsibilities:

- Who will lead the day-to-day operations of the family-centered assessment?
- Who will lead, execute, and support each of the five assessment activities?
- What skills and expertise are needed for each activity and its associated tasks? (Answering this question helps determine the personnel needed for the previous question.)
- Is the assessment team composed of personnel with a diverse range of experiences and skills?
- Who will participate as regular team members versus ad hoc support staff for the assessment?
- What is the decision-making structure for the assessment team?
- Who will provide (versus receive) recommendations?
- Who will make the final decision, particularly when opinions conflict or time is limited to achieve consensus among all members or stakeholders?
- When or how should team members and/or stakeholders reach consensus?
- Who is responsible for monitoring timelines and resources spent on the assessment?

Task: Determine policy, practice, and outcomes of focus.

Based on the assessment's purpose, the team must identify key policy or practice areas to examine. This often involves engaging community members to share experiences that help pinpoint an area of focus. The team then defines what family centering means within that context and determines associated outcomes.

Alternatively, the team might first define desired family well-being outcomes before identifying the policy or practice area affecting those outcomes. For example, if the goal of family centering is to expand children's access to parental support, the team might identify a cost recovery policy currently hindering this goal or a legal practice failing to actively engage parents in court decisions. When multiple policy areas impact the outcomes of interest, limited resources may necessitate prioritizing one or two policy areas for focused assessment.

Example: Minnesota Child Support determined that promoting the economic well-being of children and their previously incarcerated parents would be their assessment's purpose. Staff with direct service experience working with incarcerated parents are included in the discussion to share information about the education and services they provide during parental incarceration. In alignment with the assessment's purpose, the family centered outcomes considered include utilization of re-entry services, parental employment, child support payment, and debt management.

- Based on the assessment's purpose, what outcomes would you examine to strengthen the program's family-centered approach? (See Appendix 2 for a possible list of family-centered outcomes.)
- What laws, regulations, guidance, policies, and practices might affect the outcomes considered? Reviewing the following policy and practice areas may help ensure that all possibilities are considered before choosing a priority area(s).
    - Paternity establishment
    - Child support guidelines
    - Child support referral and intake
    - Order establishment and modification
    - Child support enforcement
    - Child support debt compromise
    - Coparenting plan and child placement
    - Case management, support, and communication
    - Public education and outreach
- If the assessment team engages communities for input (see further guidance under community engagement), what experiences did community members share about the gaps and strengths in family centering during their program interactions? How do those experiences relate to the underlying policies and practices?
- What are the known or expected processes through which the policy levers of focus promote or hinder family centering?
- If a policy or practice area has been identified, what are the intended and unintended effects of the policies or practices being considered?
- How does a policy or practice (or lack thereof) differentially create barriers for a socioeconomic or demographic subgroup to engage with the child support program?

Activity 2: Engaging service users and communities

Goal: The goal of engaging communities is to partner with affected family members and communities throughout the family-centered assessment process to co-lead, design, and implement assessment components. The assessment team should work with community and family member champions to identify multiple approaches and strategies for facilitating community engagement.

Key tasks: Communities and family members are asked to partner with the family-centered assessment team on highest-priority policy and practice areas for assessment and expected outcomes of the assessment. Teams ensure effective partner communication, supports engagement efforts, and shares findings with constituents and communities. The assessment team builds intentional and authentic community partnerships; partners with community and family champions; and approaches community and family engagement as a long-term as a long-term partnership.

Task: Build intentional and authentic community partnerships.

Community and family engagement is at the heart of family-centered assessment for child support programs. Given the complexities of navigating child support systems and the significant impact of child support programs on child and family well-being, it is critical to engage affected communities and family members throughout each phase of the assessment process, including initial goal setting and planning. Identifying individuals, families, and other groups with a vested interest in the implementation and results of family-centered child support assessments in addressing the following questions:

- How can assessment teams build relationships and partnerships with families and include them in decision making about programs that affect them?
- What are the opportunities to incorporate families' voices in child support program policy, design, and implementation? How can existing efforts be leveraged?
- How will incorporating parent, family, and community voice enhance the quality, acceptability, and effectiveness of child support services?
- How can families have a seat at the table during goal setting for the intended outcomes within the assessment process, and not just after the assessment is complete?
- How can parents, families, and communities help the assessment team enhance its understanding, acceptance, and utilization of assessment findings?

Task: Partner with community and family member champions.

As an initial step, assessment teams should engage and partner with community and family member champions to explore strategies for building trust. This may involve leveraging existing relationships with community-based organizations and family members or forming new partnerships. Building relationships takes time and should be deliberately incorporated into the assessment timeline. While developing a community and family engagement plan, organizations should evaluate their plan's alignment with the dimensions of authentic partnership, as illustrated in Figure 3.[53]

Figure 3. Dimensions of authentic partnership



- What existing relationships does the assessment team have with trusted community and cultural brokers?
- How will we approach potential community and family member champions about the partnership opportunity? Do we have a clear set of requests and expectations to share?
- What supports will be in place to help community and family member champions feel included and successful in their role, such as background materials, trainings, mentorship, or other resources? Who will be their point of contact?
- What plans are in place for compensating and integrating community and family member champions as equal assessment team members?

Task: Approach engagement as a long-term partnership.

Assessment teams should approach community and family engagement as a long-term, ongoing partnership, rather than a short-lived, standalone task. Depending on the scope of partnership and level of involvement in the assessment planning process, the assessment team should make considerations to compensate or allocate resources to community and family member champions for their time, just as any other team member might be compensated as part of their regular occupations. The assessment team should strive for cocreation of assessment design and implementation by working *with* community and family members and not *on behalf of* them. Authentic, transparent conversations and engagement during a change-making process may naturally lead to tension and challenging conversations; assessment teams should be prepared to participate and lean in to these discussions and welcome new ideas by actively listening to input in a non-defensive and open way.

- Is there a plan for sustaining community and family engagement activities long-term?
- How will the timeline be communicated to community and family members?
- How will community and family engagement activities be supported through funding, staff time, and other resources?

- How will the assessment team respond to any tension or disagreement that may arise from community and family members? Does the team feel prepared and comfortable to lean in to challenging discussions?
- How will community and family members be compensated for any time dedicated to the assessment process?

Activity 3: Leveraging data

Goal: The goal of this activity is to collect and analyze data to inform decision making in a family-centered assessment. Quantitative data can reveal disparities, disproportionalities, or statistical associations between an intervention and outcomes of interest. Qualitative data can offer family perspectives and insight into program operations and inform findings from quantitative analysis.

Key tasks: The use of data involves several key tasks, including proposing questions and objectives to be analyzed with data, identifying the population of interest and sample, determining the types of data needed and how to collect those data, developing the data collection instruments (e.g., surveys, data collection protocols, etc.), and once collected, identifying appropriate ways to analyze the data.

Task: Propose questions and objectives for data analysis.

- This task closely aligns with determining the policy/practice and outcomes of focus during the foundation setting activity. While foundation setting often establishes the general direction of a family-centered assessment, translating broad themes into actionable inquiries requires assessors to propose specific analytic questions. Asking such questions helps pinpoint the stage of a child support process that requires further assessment. If the assessment selects a new policy that families have not experienced, or if data have not been available, the assessment may need to broaden its analytic approach. For example, it could ask families questions about related experiences to inform the new policy. How might the chosen policy or practice area affect the family-centered outcomes of interest?
- Consider specific aspects (e.g., a procedure) of the policy or practice area being assessed. How might those aspects affect the outcomes of interest?
- How might specific aspects of the policy or practice particularly impact populations with documented barriers to participation? (See Appendix 5.)

Example: If an assessment aims to address perceived unfairness in child support enforcement, and driver's license suspensions have been identified as a policy/practice area of focus, the assessment may propose specific question items such as: characteristics of parents who missed child support payments, reasons for missing payments, the number of missed months before payments were caught up, and receipt of and response to the notice of intent to suspend a driver's license.

- With respect to a particular phase of child support involvement (e.g., contempt of court), does the proportion of a specific demographic subgroup significantly exceed its proportion in a preceding phase (e.g., all cases flagged for three months of nonpayment)?
- Considering a child support outcome associated with the policy of focus, is a specific demographic subgroup statistically more or less likely than other subgroups to experience this outcome?
- Would the data analysis plan involve human subjects, necessitating Institutional Review Board (IRB) review? If so, would the analysis be exempt or would it require expedited or full board review?

Task: Identify the population of interest and sample.

The policy or practice being assessed might affect a subgroup of child support participants or families eligible for child support. In this case, the assessment must first determine the sample corresponding to the population of interest. For data analysis looking to identify a policy's effect, this task may require identifying a group unaffected by the policy for comparison. Administrative data may be utilized to estimate the size of the affected population, inform appropriate sampling, and determine sample size. In some cases, informants—or individuals who provide information about the subject being assessed—may not be families affected by the policy but rather program staff who serve that population. In other instances, the population of interest is program staff themselves—for example, in an assessment of staff implementation of a policy or procedure to center families.

Example: To examine how a low-income adjustment improves child support compliance, the analytic approach could examine payments from those with orders and to whom the adjustment was applied (i.e., parents with low incomes) or compare their outcomes with parents whose incomes are largely comparable but who were not affected by the adjustment.

- Which population would the policy or practice of interest affect?
- Which database (or variables in a database) can you use to identify a sample of this population and its subgroups who face additional barriers to program engagement?
- Which population might serve as a comparison group in your analysis? If possible, consider a population similar to the population of interest but otherwise unaffected by the assessed policy or practice.
- If not the affected population, which stakeholders can you engage to understand participation, engagement, and other outcomes of interest for that population?

Task: Determine the type of data and methods for data collection.

A family-centered assessment determines whether quantitative, qualitative, or both data types are best suited to answer the questions identified. Quantitative data such as surveys and administrative data, offer numeric insights including demographics and family well-being measures. Qualitative data explain the reasons, processes, or characteristics of a subject and can be collected from interviews, focus groups, observations, open-ended survey questions, and case notes. When used together, qualitative data can provide background, context, or meaning for quantitative findings. The choice of data type often corresponds to a limited set of data collection methods. Use the following questions to guide planning for data collection:

Examples: Examples of administrative data include client process data (e.g., intake data), client inquiry data (e.g., customer support), service delivery data, case management data, transaction data (e.g., child support payments), program or policy implementation data, and staff activity data. Some of these data can help identify areas where family-centered focus or priorities are lacking.

<u>General questions</u>

- Does the assessment require the following, given its purposes, scope, and analytic questions?
    - Data on service utilization, enforcement application, new policy or procedure implementation, and other relevant program participation data
    - Demographic data that allow for the assessment of differences in outcomes, representation, and impact across demographic subgroups
    - Family-centered outcome measures (either direct or proxy measures; see Appendix 2)
- Would the assessment benefit from collecting quantitative or qualitative data from programs that intersect with child support, such as correctional and public assistance agencies?
- If the assessment would like to understand nonparticipation, how might it collect data from nonparticipants? Which community partner(s) could support this effort?
- Does the agency conducting the assessment have an in-house research team? If not, what evaluation and research resources are available to inform the analysis plan?
    - Utilize resources such as the Administration for Children and Families' Resource Guide for Child Care and Development Fund Lead Agencies and Qualitative Approaches to Program Evaluation[54,55]
    - Consider consulting external research or evaluation experts

<u>Questions about qualitative data</u>

- Can qualitative data capturing the information above be collected through interviews, focus groups, participant observation, social media, customer support interactions, or case notes?
- Can qualitative data be collected from informants other than the family or parent, such as intake staff, case workers, program managers, court personnel, and local child support directors?
- Which method of nonprobability sampling is best suited to gain qualitative insights from families or explore their experiences?

Questions about quantitative data

- What quantitative data are already available to inform the assessment? For example, administrative data and client satisfaction surveys.
- What are the pros and cons of analyzing existing administrative data for the assessment? Examples may include:
    - Are administrative data more reliable than client self-report data?
    - Do administrative data include policy change information for an assessment aiming to understand policy impact?
    - Would administrative data or survey data better inform an assessment aiming to understand participation barriers?
    - Do administrative data contain the necessary demographic indicators for understanding disparities across demographic subgroups?
- Does the assessment team have access to data support staff to retrieve and/or process administrative data for analysis?
- Does the assessment team have the analytic capacity to leverage existing administrative data for the assessment?
- Does the assessment team have the resources or capacity to collect new quantitative data?
- If a survey methodology is considered, should the survey oversample demographic subgroups who are less likely to respond to surveys?

Task: Develop data collection instruments and a data analysis plan.

To convert ideas into analyzable data, a family-centered assessment develops a data collection instrument (a tool, such as a questionnaire, designed to systematically gather information; see Appendix 3) and selects a data analysis approach aligned with the particular type of data collected. During instrument development, the assessment may involve members of affected communities to enhance the team's ability to collect accurate and relevant data. The assessment should also identify an analytic approach that leverages the instrument's data features to provide empirical evidence or insights that answer previously identified questions and inform the overall assessment.

Questions about instrument development

- Can the assessment use existing instruments to explore family-centered processes and outcomes or should it develop a new instrument?
- How can an instrument be designed to gather data on family centering from the informants identified for the assessment?
    - Consider instruments such as survey questionnaires, interview guides, focus group protocols, observation checklists, document analysis guidelines, or open-ended survey questions.
    - Consider informants such as parents, program staff, and members of an advisory council.
- How does the assessment ensure that an instrument effectively measures the family-centered ideas of interest?

    - Who should codevelop this instrument?
    - Who should review the draft instrument?
    - Can the assessment pilot the instrument before launching it with participants?
- How does the assessment ensure that an instrument is accessible to participants?
    - Are the questions and prompts clearly stated in written or verbal language?
    - Do the questions engage parents by drawing on their knowledge, perspectives, and experiences, allowing them to contribute meaningfully to data collection?
    - How does the instrument balance the collection of rich data and limitation of participant burden?
- What analytic method can be used to feasibly analyze the qualitative data collected?
    - Thematic analysis, a commonly used qualitative method, identifies themes by looking for recurring ideas, topics, and patterns of meaning within the data or by applying a predetermined framework or theory to find recurring patterns. The guiding principles outlined in this document may serve as a predetermined framework in this analysis.

<u>Questions about analytic approach</u>

- How does the assessment conduct descriptive analysis of quantitative data?
    - To consider differences in the risk of an adverse outcome across demographic subgroups, divide the number of participants experiencing the outcome (numerator) by the total number of participants in the subgroup at risk (denominator). Consider other groupings as well, such as by time period, service receipt, and case type.
    - To assess shifts in demographic makeup across enforcement phases, identify the steps involved and estimate the proportion of each demographic subgroup at each step (e.g., percentage of parents in poverty among all delinquent cases, cases receiving an enforcement letter, cases with a contempt hearing, and cases with credit bureau reporting). This analysis can help reveal the phase at which a demographic subgroup begins to disengage with the program.
    - Child support administrative data allow analysis of paired data on both the parent ordered to pay and the parent ordered to receive support, allowing a focus on the whole family.
    - Child support administrative data allow analysis of multiple orders by centering on payors and linking all cases where they are obligated to pay support.

Example: To examine how the child support cooperation requirement affects families' economic well-being, an assessment could track public assistance applicants over time. This would document the proportions of families who drop applications before a child support referral due to the cooperation requirement or other reasons, drop applications after a referral due to the requirement or other reasons, receive a benefit sanction after a noncooperation determination, and continue receiving benefits by meeting the requirement.

- How does the assessment conduct multivariate analysis (Appendix 3) of quantitative data?
    - Child support administrative data (and some survey data) often include longitudinal data (Appendix 3) that follow individuals over time, enabling the use of longitudinal data analysis methods such as time series analysis, fixed-effects models, and survival analysis.
    - Some of these quantitative data could potentially support experimental or quasi-experimental research designs (Appendix 3) that test the effectiveness of a new policy, program, or intervention.

Activity 4: Identifying family-centered considerations

Goals: This activity analyzes policy and practice areas to identify potential opportunities and challenges for family centering, thereby guiding other assessment activities. It also interprets data and information from these activities to assign meanings related to family centering. This requires innovative thinking and collaboration with stakeholders and affected community members. **The guiding principles outlined earlier are especially relevant to this assessment activity, as they are designed to identify opportunities and challenges in family centering.** Therefore, this section illustrates possible analytic processes following the principles.

Key tasks: This activity includes three tasks, including identifying policy or practice for further exploration, interpreting findings from empirical analysis, and identifying external factors and other limitations.

Task: Identify policy or practice for further exploration.

After foundation setting identifies a policy or practice area, the assessment conducts an analysis to pinpoint program specifics for further exploration. This analysis can involve examining all client contact points to identify program components that do not adequately center families. It may also involve review of documents such as policy and procedure manuals, client communications, and state-county policy guidance, or discussion with program administrators to gain insights. Organized around the guiding principles and informed by existing research, the assessment should note both challenges and promising family-centered policies or practices. The findings from this analysis will shape inquiries for other activities, such as community engagement or data analysis.

- How might a child support policy or practice benefit or harm parent and child well-being? [Guiding principle: Family-centered priorities]
    - This analysis may also ask these questions for other relevant outcomes, such as child support, child well-being, parent well-being, family relationships, parent perspectives, and internal or external service utilization (see Appendix 2).
- How might a child support policy or practice promote or harm family relationships, considering both parent-child and coparenting relationships? [Guiding principle: Family relationship]
- How does a child support policy or practice balance the tradeoffs between state burden and individual burden? (For example, regarding the information parents provide, is the

information already in the system and potentially accessible to staff with system upgrades?) [Guiding principle: Family-centered priorities and burden]

- How might users design a child support process differently than administrators? How does the program incorporate client feedback into policy making and program improvement? [Guiding principle: Family-centered priorities]
- What is the family's or parent's burden of complying with program rules? What potential learning, compliance, and psychological costs might parents face? For whom might these costs be particularly difficult? [Guiding principle: Burden]
- Does the program offer additional support or resources to families who face particular barriers to compliance? [Guiding principle: Burden]
- Is a flowchart available to illustrate a parent's journey through the analyzed process? Does the flowchart indicate decision points where parents may diverge? [Guiding principle: Structured process]
- Is the diversion based on human or automatic decisions? If human decisions, are they guided by written staff documentation? If automatic decisions, has the automation been tested for accuracy and are there safeguards in place to prevent mistakes? [Guiding principle: Structured process] For both types of decisions, how are individual circumstances considered? [Guiding principle: Acknowledging behavioral and economic diversity]
- Are the process flow and decision points communicated to parents? What is the format or method of communication? Is it understandable to individuals who are unfamiliar with child support? [Guiding principle: Transparency]
- For assessments focusing on a special population, how might their experiences with the child support policy/practice vary compared to others' experiences? Incorporate subgroup analysis into all assessment inquiries. Assessments without a specific population focus can use Appendix 5 to answer this question for all key child support subgroups. [Guiding principle: Acknowledging behavioral and economic diversity]
- What does scientific literature reveal about this child support policy or practice? How well does the policy/practice align with empirical findings? If findings are inconclusive or not exhaustive, what alternative directions or questions could the assessment to explore? [Guiding principle: Structured and evidence-based decision-making processes]
- How does the focus on family centering shift from policy design to implementation? Is the implementation consistent with the overarching policy's family-centered focus? How is family centering realized in program-client interactions? [Guiding principle: Prioritizing families over authority]

Task: Interpret findings from empirical analysis.

This task interprets community data and input (e.g., from parents and program staff) to assign meanings related to family-centered child support policies and practices. It requires methodological expertise and an understanding of social science theory and policy to accurately interpret data within the context of child support policy. The task also involves recognizing the strengths and limitations of data, measures, and methods, as well as identifying likely processes and conditions for findings. Furthermore, it leverages the relative advantages of each data type to supplement findings and offer multiple perspectives on the problem examined.

- What factors might explain the differences in family-centered outcomes among demographic subgroups?
    - Identifying potential factors for these disparities can inform further data analysis and the assessment of relevant child support policies or practices.
    - Answer this question by listing all economic, demographic, social, and health factors, and all policies and practices that might influence the outcomes examined.
- Could a child support policy or practice contribute to differences in family-centered outcomes among demographic subgroups?
    - Example: Could a policy result in disparate outcomes through its differential treatment based on marital or income status?
- Could the differences in family-centered outcomes across interventions be attributed to the interventions themselves? Were there any confounding factors that changed for participants during the study period?
    - Example: Did the local economy change during the implementation of the enhanced employment service (compared to services as usual)?

Example: What factors might explain the data analysis finding that unmarried parents with support orders are more likely to accrue high child support debt than their previously married counterparts? Explore the following:

- Did they have low incomes, high orders, or high support orders relative to income levels? Did the parents with orders have low incomes, high orders, or high support orders relative to income levels?
- Were they required to repay Medicaid birthing costs?
- Are they more likely to have children with multiple partners, resulting in multiple support orders?
- When did they cease making child support payments? Were there any co-occurring events that might have affected their ability to pay support (e.g., unemployment, incarceration, homelessness)?

- How do the quantitative findings compare with the experiences parents shared in qualitative data collection?
    - Use qualitative data to explain the reasons behind quantitative findings or to shed light on processes and outcomes that cannot be uncovered by quantitative data.
        - Example: Immigrant families represent a sizeable share of community-based program participants but are underrepresented in the child support program. Anonymous interviews reveal their distrust in government programs.
        - Example: Parents reported not being notified of the child support referral, yet data show the vast majority signed the referral notice. Explore how the process might change to ensure that parents understand the referral.
- In what ways does a child support policy or practice contradict data findings, community engagement, and prior research on family well-being?

    - Example: Parents view spending time with children and paying child support as a parenting package,[14] but the child support program does not facilitate parenting time arrangements.
- What factors might account for discrepant experiences reported by parents paying support and parents receiving support? Has child support policy or practice influenced those discrepancies? In what ways?
    - Example: Parents recruited for community engagement may share differing opinions about how policies impact them, depending on their individual circumstances. Often, parents described as "disengaged" do not participate in community engagement, and parents who participate in community engagement might not be able to describe fully the other parent's circumstances. Therefore, it is critical to take a family-centered approach and consider all potential factors—those directly measured and unmeasured—that affect child well-being.

Task: Explore the implications of unexpected findings.

This task considers unexpected or additional findings not initially included in the assessment's scope. It assesses the significance of these auxiliary findings and explores their implications for child support. Some of these findings might point to external factors that create challenges for family-centered child support or highlight overlooked policy-making opportunities within the program's purview.

- How can the data collection plan be refined if the initial plan reveals a general parental impression of the program that does not correspond to a specific policy?
- What limitations in data analysis and community engagement might lead to a lack of findings or inconclusive findings?
- If parents raised issues with programs outside of child support's direct control, how can the child support program help?
- If parents shared personal relationship challenges, can the child support program take an approach to alleviate those challenges?
- For parents who face external barriers to paying support, what can the program do to limit the impact of those barriers?
- What assessment findings should the program treat as contextual or background information when serving families, without actively reversing the course that led to those findings?

Activity 5: Planning for change

Goals: Based on assessment findings, planning for change involves translating assessment findings into a documented plan of action that includes milestones, a timeline, and key individuals responsible for carrying out the steps of the plan. As part of the plan development process, one should identify specific program levers to guide actions and outcomes. This may require analyzing federal/state legislation, regulations, and guidance to determine potential state-level changes, as well as the risks and opportunities of each policy alternative. It might also require separate input from affected communities or co-development of recommendations with them. When findings are inconclusive, this activity develops future plans for data collection or community engagement, or highlights areas for further exploration.

Key tasks: The key tasks under this activity include determining the level and scope of change, fostering a family-centered environment locally, developing plans for ongoing monitoring and assessment, and specifying implementation details for the change.

Task: Determine the level and scope of change.

Upon identifying a gap in family-centered policy or practice, the assessment team convenes a group of policy experts to analyze policy levers for initiating change. This team establishes short- and long-term goals and identifies the necessary level of change to achieve them. This requires analyzing federal and state legislation, regulations, and guidance, suggesting the scope and timeline of change. After the team develops an initial plan, the relevant department or agency (e.g., the state child support department) places it on their policy agenda for consideration, inviting input from key internal decision makers and external stakeholders and communities.

- What are the objectives of a change? Which family-centered outcomes and processes can a change focus on improving?
- Does an underlying structural issue limit the state program's ability to center families? Has this structure been predetermined by the historical development of child support policies or federal legislation for state child support programs?
- What might be some more comprehensive, longer-term changes to address a challenge to a family-centered approach in the state child support program?
- What initial, short-term, or partial solutions might address a challenge to a family-centered approach identified in the assessment?
- If changes are identified for external programs (e.g., TANF), what mechanisms can the child support program use to propel this change? Describe the partnership or collaboration that could enable it.
- What timeline, resources, and stakeholder engagement would be needed for each potential scope of change?
- Given the current political and policy context, which change options are feasible and who would be the appropriate audience to present this change agenda, seek feedback, and secure buy-in?
- Which communities (e.g., parents, program staff) should be consulted about the change or be invited to codevelop the change?
- What funding sources are available to support the formulation and implementation of the change?
- How can the program sustain efforts to continue its existing promising family-centered approach?

Task: Foster a family-centered environment locally.

While a family-centered assessment might point to state-level policy change, it could also suggest focusing on local infrastructure, organizational culture, or the programming environment. Although most program operation decisions occur at the local child support agency level, the state child support department can still use state-level assessment findings to identify or promote best practices. An assessment might also reveal common needs across the

state, enabling the development of a statewide infrastructure to support local family-centered environments, such as an information management system, a client feedback survey, or statewide training materials.

- How does the state share promising local family-centered practices? How does the state gather local feedback on shared practices? Could these practices be successfully applied in other jurisdictions or geographic contexts?
- Did the local variation in program operations identified in the assessment result from social and economic differences in the demographic subgroups served by local offices, or from bureaucratic idiosyncrasies of those offices?
- Is funding (or are resources) available for upgrading the state's infrastructure to support family centered practices at local agencies (e.g., through statewide workforce development)?
- How well are local offices connected to internal and external resources to address families' specific circumstances? Can the state offer support in fostering local networks?
- How can the state enhance staff capacity to apply family-centered techniques? How can the state increase local staff competence in empathy, active listening, and positive reinforcement?

Task: Develop plans for ongoing monitoring and assessment.

Inconclusive family-centered assessment results can stem from insufficient data, staff capacity, resources, and timelines. Despite this, it remains vital to review and evaluate the assessment for lessons learned. The assessment might not provide direct evidence for the chosen policy or practice but could suggest other challenges to a family-centered approach. In such cases, a subsequent family-centered assessment or ongoing monitoring of family-centered outcomes and processes may be necessary. Use the following questions to guide planning:

- What upgrades to the information system could enhance data and measures for a family-centered assessment of in the program?
- What infrastructure is needed to foster regular community engagement in policy making and program improvement?
    - Consider permanent funding, specialized staff, community partnerships, advisory panels, and formal feedback processes.
- What protections can limit the perceived risk and burden of participating in an assessment? What benefits might the assessment offer participants?
- How can the lessons learned from this assessment be applied to the next assessment?
- What trainings or communications could effectively shift organizational culture and commitment to a family centered programs?

Task: Specify implementation details for the change.

Once an action plan is identified and approved, the assessment team may conclude the assessment or proceed with implementation planning. In this stage, program administrators typically take the lead in planning implementation, ideally with input from the family-centered assessment team. The assessment team may be consulted to ensure that the implementation plan aligns with their recommendations. They may also suggest family-centered outcome

measures as part of the implementation plan. To assess the implementation itself, the team should begin a new cycle of family-centered assessment, requiring new data collection, policy analysis, and community engagement.

- When will the new initiative launch with program participants? How much time and resources can be allocated for implementation planning?
- Which stakeholders are required for implementation planning? How can each area of specialty (e.g., policy, communications, legal, contracts, and information technology) contribute to a family-centered implementation design?
- What strategies can be employed to solicit feedback from affected families on the implementation design?
- How might families impacted by the initiative be invited to provide feedback on the implementation design? Should there be a pilot implementation that includes these families?
- In addition to standard reporting, what specific measures could be recommended or required to assess program outcomes for a family-centered approach?

Concluding Remarks

This resource guide provides practical instructions for conducting a **family-centered assessment** of child support programs, with the goal of prioritizing family well-being and perspectives in program design and implementation.

While child support programs have evolved, many families—especially those with low incomes or limited job opportunities—still face barriers to engagement. For some, programs are experienced as punitive, rigid, and misaligned with their individual economic or family realities. This guide offers tools to shift programs away from being authority-centered and toward being more responsive and effective systems through family-centered assessment.

Part One: Understanding Family-Centered Assessment

- **Definition and purpose**
  A family-centered assessment is a structured, iterative process that evaluates child support policies and practices for their impact on family engagement and well-being. It accounts for the level of government (federal, state agency, Tribal agency, county/county office) and the broader policy and socioeconomic contexts, as illustrated in the conceptual model.
- **Guiding principles**
  Six principles ground the entire process:
    1. Prioritizing family voice and well-being
    2. Centering child well-being within family relationships
    3. Acknowledging behavioral and economic diversity
    4. Aligning responsibility with available resources
    5. Transparency in policy and practice

6. Structured, evidence-based decision making to reduce bias and inconsistency

- **Key activities**
  The assessment includes five interconnected activities:
    1. **Setting the foundation**: Define the assessment's purpose, assemble a diverse team, and identify focal policy or practice areas.
    2. **Engaging communities**: Involve families and stakeholders to identify challenges and shape solutions.
    3. **Leveraging data**: Use qualitative and quantitative methods to assess outcomes, disparities, and family experiences.
    4. **Identifying family-centered considerations**: Analyze the degree to which current practices align with family needs.
    5. **Planning for change**: Translate findings into actionable recommendations and implementation strategies.

Except for foundation-setting, these activities can occur in various orders. For example, identifying family-centered considerations may precede or follow data analysis.

Part Two: Implementation Guidance

The second part of the guide offers detailed, practical instructions for implementing each of the five activities. It includes strategies for engaging families and communities, analyzing and collecting data, identifying considerations for implementing a family centered approach, and developing programmatic changes and/or ongoing assessment based on findings. It suggests special consideration for the experiences of populations with added barriers—such as incarcerated, low-income, or unmarried parents—and recognizes the unintended consequences of current enforcement practices.

Vision for Change

Ultimately, this guide promotes a shift in child support from compliance enforcement to collaboration, from one-size-fits-all approaches to tailored support, and from institutional efficiency to family empowerment. By centering family perspectives and well-being, programs can become more fair, effective, and trusted.

Appendices

Appendix 1. How does a family-centered assessment compare with other standard program evaluation methods?

A needs assessment is often conducted prior to program or policy implementation to determine how its design addresses the target population's needs. A process evaluation examines whether a program is operating according to the given program plan, while an outcome evaluation typically considers targeted outcome measures at a specific phase (e.g., the end) of program implementation to assess effectiveness. An impact evaluation seeks to identify causal relationships between the program and broader or longer-term outcomes, such as those unintended by the initial program design. A cost-benefit analysis estimates and compares program costs and benefits in monetary terms to assess the program's economic efficiency. Performance monitoring continuously tracks performance measures aligned with program goals and objectives, often comparing performance data against a benchmark.

A family-centered assessment can be implemented at any stage of program, policy, or practice development. Its method and family-centered priority can be integrated into standard program evaluation methods like needs assessment, process evaluation, outcome evaluation, and impact evaluation. When multiple methods are conducted separately, the divergence of findings from a family-centered assessment hinges on the degree to which the other methods have already incorporated family voice (for example, whether performance monitoring includes performance measures focused on family perspectives).

Appendix 2. Potential outcomes of a family centered approach

Topical areas	Related outcomes	How a family-centered approach might affect these outcomes
Child support	Child support receipt, payment, debt, right-size orders, informal and in-kind support	The goals of a family-centered approach are to maximize receipt and payment (given the child support order), curb the growth of debt, and increase right-sized orders. Child support amounts paid and received may differ due to the cost recovery approach.
Child well-being	Child safety, stable living arrangement, the child's physical health, the child's social and emotional well-being	A family-centered approach respects the roles parents desire in their child's well-being and their understanding of what "child well-being" means. In cases involving child welfare or family court, child support programs may defer to their expertise and/or advocate for children based on their understanding of families' circumstances.
Parent well-being	Employment, economic mobility, housing stability, and mental health	A family-centered approach considers the implications of child support enforcement for these outcomes and the resources that promote them, recognizing that diminished parent well-being has been documented as a common barrier to paying child support.
Family relationship	Parent-child relationship, coparenting relationship, family violence, kinship support, access to coparenting plan or shared placement	A family-centered approach cultivates, rather than compels, family relationships such as parent-child, coparenting, and others, acknowledging their importance for child well-being. Where possible, it reduces family conflict and enhances understanding among family members while maintaining neutrality regarding the interests of either parent.
Parent perspectives	Client feedback, attitudes, satisfaction, perceptions of unfairness, burden, barriers, family culture, parenting preferences	A family-centered approach values and integrates family input into program design and implementation. It seeks to understand and address parents' perceptions of unfairness, burden, and barriers to program engagement. It also

		respects diverse family cultures and parenting choices, provided they do not harm the child.
Internal service utilization	Information and service accessibility, barriers to service or benefit up-take (e.g., lengthy paperwork), service wait time, service utilization, and application of enforcement measures	A family-centered approach ensures that parents can access all relevant program information. It also minimizes barriers to up-take of child support services, especially those which could benefit families. To examine how services might address client needs, this approach considers both direct client feedback and indirect measures like service utilization. Furthermore, the application of enforcement measures should be examined for its impact on the family-centered outcomes previously listed.
External service utilization	Participation in safety net programs, health care, health insurance coverage, legal assistance, and employment service	A family-centered approach ensures that families are connected to necessary external services or benefits, especially those proven to support family and child well-being. Child support enforcement should not deter parents from accessing needed benefits.

Appendix 3: Glossary of technical terms

Data collection instrument is a tool used to systematically gather information from individuals, groups, or other sources for research, evaluation, and analysis purposes. A robust instrument measures what it is intended to measure and yields consistent results over time. Examples include a survey, interview guide, checklist, or standardized test.

Economic capital refers to the money, property, assets, stocks, real estate, and other material possessions that can be converted into money. It can be used to generate income and wealth or to acquire goods and services, thereby increasing the economic well-being of an individual or group.

Empirical analysis is a research approach that uses data collected through direct or indirect observation, experimentation, and measurement of real-world phenomena. It stands in contrast to non-empirical research, which relies on theoretical or abstract reasoning.

Experimental research design is a type of research design used to identify the causal effect of a program or intervention through the random assignment of that treatment across individuals (or other units of analysis). This minimizes bias from other factors that could affect the estimated treatment effect.

Fixed-effects model is a statistical model applied to longitudinal data to adjust for unobserved, time-invariant characteristics of the unit of analysis (such as an individual, family, or household), thereby preventing them from biasing the estimated effects of other factors that do change over time.

Human capital refers to an individual's education, knowledge, experience, skills, health, and other attributes that can contribute to their economic value (e.g., earnings) and that of the broader economy (e.g., productivity).

Human subjects are individuals who participate in a research study, often by answering questions, being observed, or trying out an intervention that is under investigation.

Longitudinal data, also known as panel data, refers to data collected through multiple observations of the same unit of analysis—such as an individual, family, or child support case—over multiple points in time.

Multivariate analysis refers to a collection of statistical techniques used to analyze multiple variables (i.e., factors hypothesized to shape an outcome) within a single statistical model.

Quasi-experimental research design is a type of research design used to estimate the causal effect of a program or intervention through a comparison of groups defined by non-random criteria (such as eligibility based on an age cutoff or location). This design is preferred when random assignment is unethical (e.g., withholding treatment from individuals who might benefit).

Sampling is the process of selecting a smaller group of individuals (a sample) from a larger group (the population) to participate in a study so researchers can learn about the population without studying everyone.

Social capital refers to the social relationships and networks people have—like friends, family, coworkers, or community connections—that they can rely on for support and opportunities.

Stakeholder is anyone who has an interest in or is affected by a program, project, policy, or decision—like community members, family members, funders, program participants, or staff.

Survival analysis, also referred to as time-to-event analysis, is a collection of statistical techniques that analyze the time until one or more events occur.

Time series analysis is a statistical technique used to analyze a sequence of data points ordered chronologically over an extended period. Its purpose is to identify and model underlying patterns, such as trends, often with the goal of forecasting future values.

Appendix 4: Checklist to document and report the family-centered assessment process

A. Activity	B. Task	C. When: Date and preceding task	D. Who: Lead & participants	E. What: Description of task performed and outcomes
Setting the foundation	Define assessment purposes and scope			
	Assemble an assessment team			
	Determine policy, practice, and outcomes of focus			
Engaging service users and communities	Build intentional and authentic community partnerships			
	Partner with community and family member champions			
	Approach engagement as a long-term partnership			
Leveraging data	Propose questions and objectives for data analysis			
	Identify the population of interest and sample			

	Determine the type of data and methods for data collection			
	Develop data collection instruments and a data analysis plan			
Identifying family-centered considerations	Identify policy or practice for further exploration			
	Interpret findings from empirical analysis			
	Explore the implications of unexpected findings			
Planning for change	Determine the level and scope of change			
	Foster a family-centered environment locally			
	Develop plans for ongoing monitoring and assessment			
	Specify implementation details for the change			

Cells in columns C-E are intentionally left blank for documentation entries.

Appendix 5. Populations who might face additional barriers to child support engagement

Populations	Supported research
Parents with low incomes	Parents with low incomes and relatively high support orders are less likely to comply with their orders.[10]
Parents who are unemployed or underemployed	Unemployment, underemployment, and employment barriers are linked to lower likelihoods of child support compliance.[37]
Unmarried parents	Unmarried mothers' interest in and willingness to pursue child support depend on their relationships with fathers.[14]
Parents with transportation barriers	Fathers who reported transportation barriers had much lower earnings and poorer child support outcomes.[11]
Incarcerated parents	Fathers who have experienced incarceration tend to have higher child support arrears than fathers who have not experienced incarceration.[56]
Parents with child support debt	Child support arrears are associated with lower levels of father involvement, including less contact with children and less frequent formal or informal support.[57,58]
Parents without visitation access	Parents who did not have child access reported resistance to paying child support.[37]
Immigrant parents	Non-U.S.-born mothers and mixed-status families are much less likely to have a child support order than their U.S.-born and citizen counterparts, respectively.[59,60,61]
Non-English-speaking parents	Although not specifically addressed in child support literature, language barriers are documented to limit the utilization of health care and social services.[62,63]
Parents who are homeless or in unstable housing	Housing instability is associated with lower child support payments.[11]
Parents who have children with multiple partners	Estimates indicate a lower ability to pay child support among unmarried fathers with multiple support orders due to having children with multiple partners.[64]

Parents with poor mental or physical health	Poor mental health is associated with reduced father involvement[58] and is especially prevalent among noncustodial parents who are behind in their child support payments.[65]

Note: This list may not be exhaustive, as some populations are understudied (e.g., migrant families and children with disabilities), and child support research is continuously evolving.

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