

Assessing the Effectiveness of our Humane Education Interventions with High-Risk Children



by Barbara W. Boat, Ph.D.

“I know my humane education program makes a difference in the lives of high-risk children. Now, how do I **prove** it?”

Sound familiar? Even if we don't say so aloud, we really are convinced that our programs make a difference in some important way and, hopefully, make a difference forever. Otherwise, why would we bother? Here are some of the goals I have heard proposed to describe outcomes of humane education with high-risk children:

- ❖ *Enhance self-esteem*
- ❖ *Increase child's ability to delay gratification*
- ❖ *Create a more compassionate child*
- ❖ *Create respect for needs of animals and humans*
- ❖ *Enhance empathy for all living things*
- ❖ *Make child a better student, person and citizen.*

Goals vs. Objectives.

I am not arguing against lofty goals – they should represent your dreams and wishes for your program in the best of all possible worlds. Goals are to be strived for. But goals are not the basis for program evaluation. Objectives are. Objectives can be measured. Objectives specifically describe what you intend to achieve and guidelines for determining success. If your goal is to “create a more compassionate child,” one relevant behavioral objective for an eight-year-old child who has been exposed to aggressive dogs in her neighborhood and is very fearful of dogs might be “to brush the therapy dog three strokes at each

session.” If your goal is to “enhance self-esteem” and having parents and children participate together is essential to your intervention, one objective might be that parents and children together attend 90% of the sessions. (Please note that any program that gets 90% participation must be fabulous! The show rate for high-risk families in therapy is less than 50%.)

Objectives are your working words. These words are not grand, attention-getting or necessarily inspiring. The job of objectives is to communicate to you and to others what you think is important to accomplish in order to “make a difference” in the lives of high-risk children and what you are actually doing to get the changes you want.

Realistic Expectations.

We tend to be optimistic and a bit grandiose about the power of our interventions to effect change in people's lives. Problems arise when we ask too much of our interventions and too much of our participants. The purpose of this article is to provide a set of realistic expectations when assessing your humane education program that involves high-risk children and their families.

Realistic Expectation #1: Humility helps.

I am a child psychologist who works with high-risk (abused, neglected, traumatized) children and their families. My work provides daily lessons in humility. I like to think that my interventions result in better coping skills. However, when change does occur, I know that many factors having nothing to do with me may be central. Maybe

the sexually abused little six-year-old is sleeping better because I have talked about the Safe Touching Behavior Rules and given ideas to her mother for a better bedtime routine. But maybe during this time her grandmother has come to stay with the family and provided critical support. Perhaps the offender was just incarcerated, relieving her stress, or she has started a new medication to reduce physical symptoms of anxiety. Her behavior change is due to many things, some of which I will never know. Maybe the behavior change (sleeping through the night) will last and maybe it won't.

We cannot take sole credit for behavior change. We cannot say our intervention caused a behavior change. But we can: **1) describe the outcomes we would like; 2) figure out a way to measure them; 3) describe our interventions, and 4) determine if the behavior (or attitude or knowledge) we wanted actually happened.** If we are able to document change, we can humbly say that there appears to be a relationship between our interventions and the child's behaviors.

Realistic Expectation #2: We can't prove that our interventions are effective.

Just take my word for it or take a course in the philosophy of science. Researchers who study nonmedical interventions with human beings never use the word “prove.” We should not either. This is another way of saying “Be humble” as human behavior is too complex and multi-determined to be otherwise. And don't say “prove” ever again.

Realistic Expectation #3:

It can be tough to figure out what questions are the most important to ask or what behaviors are the most important to assess. When in doubt, more is better.

Irv Yalom, a well-known therapist, asked a new client to do an exercise with him. In a diary she would note the events during each session that were the most helpful to her. Yalom would keep separate notes on what he perceived to be most helpful to her.

When therapy ended, they shared their observations. Yalom noted that his insights and interpretations (the techniques) were the most powerful aspects of the sessions. The client wrote that what mattered most to her was that he was there when she came, he welcomed her, and he believed she could change (the relationship). If Yalom had assumed his techniques were paramount, given her a list of his techniques and asked only about these, he would have missed important feedback. What you will get out of your evaluation will depend on what you decide to put in. It is better to have too much information than too little.

Realistic Expectation #4:

Your program evaluation won't answer all your questions the first time through.

Before planning your assessment, decide how you want to use the information you get. Who is your audience? Try to stick with this. Need to connect with your funding source? Information about numbers of children served and reliable documentation of behavior change or knowledge increase may be most useful. Want to make your program more responsive to your participants' needs? Feedback from participants and anecdotal observations may be your best approach. You can always fine-tune your evaluation the next time.

Realistic Expectation #5:

There is no single best instrument to help you measure the impact of your program.

How I wish there were! But the nice thing is that you have choices. Thus,

depending on what you want to assess, you can use questionnaires, surveys, rating scales, observations, content evaluations that can include interviews, anecdotal feedback, cognitive tests (short answer, matching, multiple choice, essay and true-false), and attitude surveys. You can videotape and code behaviors. (See *Methods For Measurement: A Guide For Evaluating Humane Education Programs* by Vanessa Malcarne, available through the NAHEE website).

Remember, to demonstrate change, you need to assess before the intervention begins and after the intervention ends (pre and post measures). You can measure the gains made by each child pre and post. Or you can compare one group of children who participate in your program with a similar group of children who do not participate in your program (control group) if you have the support for this kind of research.

Don't forget that you also can collect important information based on number of participants who stayed with the program, kinds of questions and concerns they had, spontaneous or solicited comments from caregivers, number of requests for information, and follow-up activities of participants, such as continuing to be involved with a humane society.

Realistic Expectation #6:

Get assistance before you start.

Take a colleague or friend with research skills to lunch. If you live in a community where there is a local college or technical school, ask departments that provide courses in education, psychology, counseling, or statistics if they will partner with you. Perhaps there is a student who will work on your project for credit. It's all about networking. A real win-win!

Realistic Expectation #7:

We are all biased. Garbage in, garbage out.

We all want our pet project to look good and we will most likely do what confirms that expectation. If I ask "Tell me all the ways my intervention has

helped you," I leave you no way to tell me how it might have harmed you - unless you are very assertive! If I assume the boy sitting near the dog and rocking back and forth as he pets the dog is communing comfortably with the animal, I may miss the fact that the boy really has to go to the bathroom. Teaming up with other professionals provides a check and balance for our normal biased ways of being.

Realistic Expectation #8:

Not everyone will be as excited about doing a program evaluation as you are.

Get input and suggestions early from staff and volunteers. They will have some great ideas, and this increases "buy in" potential. Their support is critical if they will be gathering information. You must obtain consent from the child and the child's guardian to do your evaluation. Not all of them will say O.K. Protect confidentiality always! The information you obtain about particular individuals should not be shared with *anyone* without permission.

Realistic Expectation #9:

We will never know unless we ask! And numbers count so go get some data!

One of the greatest contributions you can make to the welfare of at-risk animals and at-risk children and their families is to fearlessly ask the questions you think are important and meticulously document what you do in your intervention program. This way your program will have the best chance of being replicated if it is successful.

Finally, although your most important information may not be contained in numbers, numbers do count and are a powerful asset when lobbying for programs. So go get some data!

And good luck!

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