

Using evidence to improve our services

A guide to using evidence from the Evidence Portal
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Table of contents

Purpose	3
Introduction	3
Evidence - what is it?	3
How should I be using evidence?	4
So where should I start?.....	4
Creating a theory of change.....	4
Where to look for evidence	5
Quality of evidence	6
Checklist for choosing evidence	6
Assessing impact	7
Features of the DCJ Evidence Portal	7
Home Page and About the Portal	7
Evidence Available on the Portal.....	8
Find Evidence function.....	8
Types of evidence on the portal	8
Future Enhancements to the Portal.....	11
Additional resources	11



Purpose

This document is a user guide designed to accompany the [DCJ Evidence Portal](#). A [quick start reference checklist](#) is also available.

Introduction

We can use evidence to help understand what works, why and for whom. It can also tell us what doesn't work so we don't repeat the mistakes of unsuccessful programs and practices.

Your organisation may be a small, not-for-profit organisation, or a large organisation. Everyone can access freely available research.

We have created this guide as a starting point to finding the evidence that might help you. This document will support you to make the most of the resources available on the Evidence Portal and to build your confidence in using evidence to inform decisions about service delivery.

There will of course be challenges in translating research evidence into practice, particularly in the context of the realities of working with complex families. It may not be a straightforward process, and involve trial and error. However, the important thing is to keep working towards a more evidence-informed approach. Using evidence as the basis for service delivery will help work towards achieving better outcomes for families and communities.

Evidence – what is it?

If you are not a researcher, it may be quite overwhelming when faced with the academic terminology and complex methods applied. However, you don't need to understand every different approach or concept to take an evidence-informed approach.

Evidence is quite simply factual information to support a claim or belief. Some might think evidence consists of purely academic studies found on dedicated research databases or searchable through internet resources such as clearinghouse sites. However, there are many forms of evidence.

Types of evidence include:

- research evidence
- lived experience and client voice
- professional expertise.

Evidence can cover a wide spectrum from the results of randomised control trials to qualitative feedback from service users.

See [What is evidence?](#) on the Portal for further information. This section of the Portal also provides helpful definitions of the various study designs used to conduct research.



How should I be using evidence?

While there are different types of evidence, the weight that is given to evidence in decision making will vary.

Research evidence has the advantage of greater rigour and independence when compared to other types of evidence. This doesn't mean that you should follow research evidence to the exclusion of all other evidence. You should, of course, consider the views of practitioners, clients and stakeholders in the local context in which you are working. However, you should not always rely on professional judgement alone in making decisions. You should be mindful of any cognitive bias and critically assess any opinions or beliefs and actively look to the research evidence to see if it supports your thinking.

The most effective service outcomes will be delivered through a combination of integrating the best available research evidence with professional judgment and knowledge, considering a range of contributing factors including the client's needs, circumstances, preferences and values, and the desired outcome.

So where should I start?

Begin by considering what situation your service aims to address and then identify the possible activities and outcomes that will be required to achieve the desired change. Conducting a [needs assessment](#) will help you understand what the true needs of the target population are and provides a solid basis for determining what a program or service should aim to achieve and how well it is doing.


Using a planning tool, such as a program logic, can provide a useful way to work through each of the stages and can also help you to understand if and how each of these stages link together. When building your plan, you will need to look for evidence on the service components and activities under consideration and how they will lead to your outcomes.

See below for further guidance and resources on developing a program logic, including templates to get started.

<https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/using-evidence/developing-a-program-logic.html>

Creating a theory of change

A key part of a program logic is the theory of change. A theory of change is where you tie all the elements of the program logic together to logically explain what you are doing and how you think it will lead to the outcomes you are seeking to achieve.



It is here you will be explicit about what specific evidence you are using that supports your activities and makes clear how you are going to get to those outcomes.

The type of evidence you use has to match your question.

When populating your evidence and theory of change sections in your program logic, focus on key questions rather than citing broad research evidence which may or may not be relevant. For example, it is not enough to cite evidence of the effectiveness of early intervention. While the early intervention approach has a strong research evidence base, you need to specifically consider the evidence for the activities you are conducting.

Where a community centre, family support service or supported playgroup is seeking outcomes of increased child safety and reduced risk, you need to consider how any potential activities are supported by the evidence. One way you might do this is to consider whether your activities and/or your service model includes the five evidence-informed core components identified on the portal for Preventing Child Maltreatment:

- engagement
- case management
- parental education and modelling
- parental self-care and personal development
- building supportive relationships and social networks.

If you decide on service activities which incorporate these core components, you can reference this evidence from the evidence portal in their program logic in the evidence and theory of change columns.

If there is not conclusive evidence about ‘what works’, explore if there is a need to develop a small pilot to test out a new approach. Assess or evaluate any changes you implement to understand if they have achieved their intended outcomes and identify whether any further changes are needed.

Where to look for evidence

If you are looking for research evidence, it is important to first define what you are looking for. Consider the concepts or issues that need to be investigated and put them into a question or statement of issues.

The [DCJ Evidence Portal](#) has been designed for the human services sector to access high quality research evidence. It was designed specifically to increase the use of evidence in service design and delivery, to improve outcomes for children, young people, families and communities.

Other suggested sources of evidence can be found on the [DCJ website](#).



Quality of evidence

Once you find research evidence, how do you know if you can rely on it?

The good news is that on the DCJ Evidence Portal this work has already been done for you. Much of the evidence on the portal is drawn from systematic reviews commissioned by DCJ using technical specifications developed by DCJ in partnership with the Centre for Evidence and Implementation. These technical specifications set a high threshold for evidence and apply the following principles:

- **Rigorous.** Informed by high quality standards for the assessment of evidence, programs and practices.
- **Usable.** Detail clear practices and activities that are easy to understand and implement.
- **Replicable.** External stakeholders should be able to replicate any of the processes and procedures described.
- **Transparent.** Explicit guidelines for data collection and decision making are described so any user of the portal can understand how it was populated.

If you are sourcing evidence from elsewhere, you will need to critically appraise it. A guide to critically appraising evidence is available on the [DCJ website](#).

Checklist for choosing evidence

Some key questions you might ask when selecting which evidence to use are:

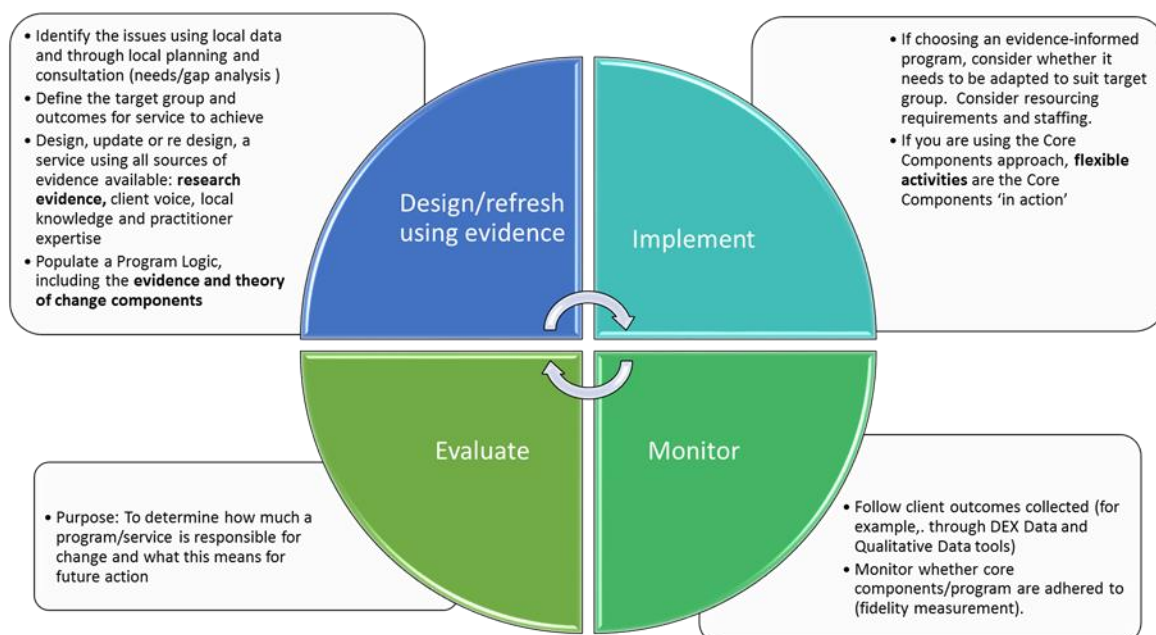
- Is it robust, relevant and does it solve the problem I'm seeking to address?
- Are the findings relevant to my client/population group?
- Does it have an appropriate balance of quantitative and qualitative data?
- Does it draw from a wide range of available data?
- Is it up to date, timely and makes use of current data?
- Does it demonstrate the efficacy of my approach?
- Is it clear, reasonable and doesn't overclaim?
- Is it honest about its limitations?

Assessing impact

Once you have implemented a program or practice, it is a good idea to assess the impact it is having. While the evidence may be strong for a particular program or practice, there may be differences in the local context in which you are applying the approach. You can only understand this if you monitor and assess the impact your program or practice is having. This might be for example, by conducting an evaluation to clearly demonstrate if it is making a difference and represents value for money. If you are unable to conduct an evaluation of your own program, you can learn from past evaluations conducted by others or look to broader research.

See Figure 1 below for the cycle of evidence-informed service design.

Figure 1 – Cycle of evidence-informed service design




Features of the DCJ Evidence Portal

Home Page and About the Portal

The [Home Page](#) is the gateway to the evidence on the portal. There is a top menu allowing you to browse information about the portal and access:

- the evidence reviews commissioned for the portal
- find evidence (search) function
- guidance on using evidence
- news and events
- contact details for enquiries.

If you scroll down the Home page, there are also tiles which take you to some of the main features.



The [About the Portal](#) section explains why the portal was set up, provides information on what the portal includes and access to technical information about the evidence reviews (such as the Technical Specifications and how the evidence is rated). There are also a [Glossary of Terms](#) and [FAQs](#) here.

Evidence Available on the Portal

The current evidence reviews available on the portal can be found at:

<https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/our-evidence-reviews.html>

Each evidence review on the portal includes:

- An Evidence to Action note which outlines the scope and findings of the evidence review.
- A Search Strategy detailing how the review was conducted (e.g. the search strings and databases searched).

The majority of the evidence reviews on the Portal are conducted in accordance with the Technical Specifications developed for the Portal. A broad range of technical skills, competencies and experience are required to use the Technical Specifications. If you are interested in learning more about the detail in the steps applied in the Technical Specifications including the evidence rating scale see:

<https://evidenceportal.dcj.nsw.gov.au/evidence-portal-home/about-the-portal/evidence-portal-technical-specifications.html>

Find Evidence function

The Portal includes a [Find Evidence](#) function which allows you to filter according to the evidence type you are looking for (e.g. Evidence review/Core Components/Evidence-Informed programs).

The Find Evidence function allows you to narrow your search to the client group you are interested in and various other filters such as by outcome domain and/or location. This function will be particularly useful as the evidence available on the portal grows.

However, while there are currently only a limited number of evidence reviews available, it is recommended to browse these via the [evidence reviews](#) page to find the review relevant to your needs.

Types of evidence on the portal

The evidence on the portal consists of outputs from evidence reviews commissioned for the portal. Specifically the portal has the following types of evidence:



Program summaries for evidence-informed programs

The portal includes short, one page summaries of each of the evidence-informed programs captured through the evidence reviews.

You can browse the available program summaries as a starting point to assessing their potential suitability to meet your identified aims. In addition to basic information provided about the program, there are links to further resources so you can find out more.

See also [What are evidence informed programs and how do I use them.](#)

Summaries of Core components

We know that it is sometimes not realistic, feasible or even appropriate for service providers to purchase and implement manualised programs that are 'off the shelf'. It is for this reason that the portal adopted the core components approach.

The core components were identified as common program components of the evidence-informed programs found in the evidence reviews. Each evidence review has a group of between four to six core components.

The core components summaries on the portal include key information about the core components, including relevant target groups, client outcomes, a list of ways to implement them (flexible activities) and important considerations.


Below are some of the advantages and limitations in using the core components:

Advantages

- Can be used where there is no suitable manualised program available for the target group or issue.
- Are modular and flexible so can be applied to different service designs responding to multiple client needs.
- Are adaptable to change (e.g. are not required to follow a specified length and intensity as with manualised programs).
- Can be delivered effectively and with fidelity by non-specialist practitioners (as opposed to trained program facilitators).

Limitations

- Are sourced only from rigorously evaluated programs so may not capture other effective ways/components of working.
- There is an element of subjectivity in the method used to select the core components. Researchers conducting the evidence review are required to undertake a content analysis of the evidence-informed programs, looking for key words, phrases and concepts in order to group specific activities into broad categories. These categories become the core components. The core component has to appear a



minimum of five times to make the final list. There are at least two reviewers to check inconsistencies.

The core components approach was adapted from a similar approach originally developed in clinical and therapeutic practice. **If you are using the set of core components for the relevant outcome you can be confident that you are relying on high quality evidence of what works.**

When using this approach, it is important to remember that the core components should be viewed as **a group and not be separated**. For example, if your identified outcome is “Preventing Child Maltreatment”, you should be seeking to implement, or be able to refer clients to services for **all five core components**. If you select one or two core components, you will no longer be using an evidence-informed approach.

For further information, see [Using a Core Components Approach](#).

Summaries of flexible activities

In addition to the summaries of core components, the portal provides summaries of flexible activities. These are examples of ways you can implement the core components. These flexible activities have also been derived from the evidence-informed programs found in the evidence reviews. Unlike the core components, flexible activities are optional – services can choose the activities that are most relevant to their clients, the local service delivery context and the resources available to communities.

Other research evidence

The portal is being expanded to include other research evidence, particularly to explore evidence and fill gaps which are not captured by the high threshold of evidence required by the Technical Specifications. For example, the [Aboriginal Cultural Safety and Wellbeing Evidence Review](#) was commissioned to identify activities, practices or principles that ensure the cultural safety and wellbeing of Aboriginal children, young people, families and communities in early intervention services.

This review broadened the search beyond the parameters available in the Technical Specifications to include other forms of evidence, namely:

- Cultural safety and wellbeing frameworks.
- Practice guides and related information.
- Programs, practices or activities developed to ensure the cultural safety of Aboriginal children, families and communities.
- Research studies published in academic or industry journals.

From there, the review was able to identify common themes (critical elements) as guidance to service providers as part of the ongoing process towards delivering culturally safe programs and services.



Future Enhancements to the Portal

DCJ is in the process of commissioning further evidence reviews to be added to the content on the Portal.

DCJ also plans on building the evidence for emerging locally developed programs. For further information, see [How we are building the evidence base](#).

The aim is for the evidence portal to be as useful as possible to the sector – that is why it was built. There is no point having a repository of evidence-informed programs and practices if no one looks at it.

Further guidance and resources will be developed to support services in taking an evidence-informed approach.

If you have any thoughts or suggestions on how to improve or enhance the portal, please get in touch evidenceportal@dcj.nsw.gov.au

Additional resources

There are numerous resources you can access to better understand how to use evidence.

The [Alliance for Useful Evidence website](#) has a range of publications and resources to help decision-makers use high quality evidence in policy and practice.

The Knowledge Translation Network has developed a number of useful guides to help non-government organisations to access and engage with evidence and use evidence to influence policy and practice:

- [Engaging with evidence: How communities can get and use evidence](#) aims to introduce what is meant by communities engaging with evidence, why it is important and how communities can engage with evidence.
- [Evidence from Elsewhere: Gathering, analysing and using other people's evidence](#) provides guidance on how to use secondary evidence to inform, influence and improve policy or practice.
- [Evidence for Success: the guide to getting evidence and using it](#) provides guidance to non-government organisations on how to use evidence to influence policy and practice.