



5.1 EVALUATION THEORY: USING RESEARCH LITERATURE FOR BUILDING PROGRAM EVALUATION MODELS

WHAT is the “RESEARCH LITERATURE”?

The research literature includes published research in particular areas such as medicine, health, psychology and social work. It provides an evidence base for evaluation theory (such as theory of change) as well as for supporting the relationship between types of interventions (such as program activities) and the intended outcomes of the activities.

The research literature includes several levels of evidence quality. Peer-reviewed research literature is more credible because this information has been reviewed and critiqued by other researchers working in a similar area of research.

The table to the right shows some of the different sources and levels of credibility of research literature.

Although the sources of evidence at the top of the table are in general, more credible, caution should be taken before incorporating the findings of any research

literature. Learning how to judge the credibility of evaluation and research methods or seeking the advice of someone who is skilled in judging research evidence is advised (See *Visual Insights Information Sheet, ‘Evaluation Method Essentials’*).

Type	Examples	Level
Systematic review	Cochran reviews of medical research studies	High
Peer-reviewed research papers	Journal articles	High
Research reports	Government publications, Evaluation reports, Theses, Unpublished manuscripts	Medium
Online and print media	Websites, newspapers	Low

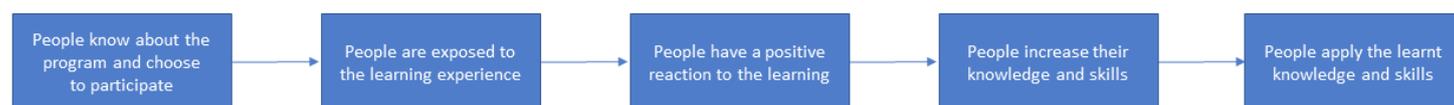
WHY use the RESEARCH LITERATURE for building program evaluation models?

The research literature provides an evidence-base for:

1. **Helping inform the building of a program Theory of Change (TOC) or other program model:** The research literature can provide information about how programs have been evidenced to work, how they bring about change for the target group. This helps with the development of a TOC for program planning and evaluation.

For example, if your program is targeted at parents of children with autism spectrum disorder, one of your goals may be to improve behaviour problems in the child. Some of the steps to achieve this goal may involve information provision through a series of parent education sessions. In this case, sourcing similar programs or education programs in general, will provide information on the chain of events that have been shown to lead to behaviour improvements in the child. General literature on education programs show that before a program can improve the behaviour of children with autism, there are a chain of changes that need to occur first. These are shown below. For example, the literature specific to parent education and autism, shows that reduction in parent stress and increased sense of self-efficacy are earlier changes that happen as a result of such education programs.

The chain of early results for participants of education programs



2. **Reflection on the current program model based on comparison with good practice:** Accessing and reading research evidence related to your program can enable reflection on the way your program is operating and assist you in adapting your program to increase its impact.

In the parent education session for children with autism, the research evidence shows that parent-training which includes parent-child coaching sessions, home visits and phone-calls is more effective at improving problem behaviours in children with autism spectrum disorder than providing information through education sessions alone (JAMA clinical trial 2015). This information is helpful for reflection and consideration of program delivery changes.

3. **Strengthening the argument of your program model or TOC:** Program TOCs show how the program is believed to achieve its goals by showing the series of changes that a program influences over time.

In the example of the parent education sessions, you may only have the resources and capacity to provide evidence that the parents participate, are engaged and demonstrate increased knowledge after the sessions. The literature can support the links further along the outcomes chain such as evidencing the behaviour change in children as a result of the parents applying the skills they gained during the education sessions. Including this additional evidence strengthens the justification for your program.

HOW to use the research literature

There are many ways of approaching the research literature. Here we provide one step by step process for using the research literature

1 Clarify, articulate and 'narrow down' what you are 'searching' for. E.g. If you are looking for education for parents of children with autism, searching 'autism' programs without narrowing the search further will mean having to look through a lot of information to find what you need.

2 Identify some search terms from your topic. In our example, you might start with "parent, education, program, autism"

3 Choose a database for your search. If you have access to a university library, a search using academic databases is the most rigorous way of searching the literature. There are hundreds of databases spanning different subjects so getting assistance is recommended. Many universities offer guides and courses for this. We show how to search using Google Scholar as everyone has access to it.

4 Type your search terms into Google Scholar (or other database)

5 Scan the summary of articles and look for "systematic reviews".

6 Set some parameters such as "year" to narrow down the search. E.g. Start with the last 5 years

7 Narrow down your selection by looking at title and description for relevance. Numbers of citations can be an indicator of credibility. The screenshot of the search below provides some pointers of things to look for to get you started.

8 Choose a number of research papers to read. Many research papers are available to download directly from the search. Others will require accessing through a library.

9 Read the papers and use some strategies to assess credibility before incorporating the findings.

Narrow this number down if you can - start with restricting time frame (points to 'About 146,000 results')

Select time-frame for search here (points to 'YEAR' dropdown)

[PDF] researchgate.net (points to a search result)

Complete article available here (points to a search result)

Title tells you it is not about autism (points to a search result title)

Higher level of credibility of evidence (points to 'A systematic review' in a search result title)

Indicative of credibility (high number of articles 'citing' it) (points to 'Cited by 437')

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