

## Theory of Change

### Developing a Theory of Change to inform evaluation activities

#### WHAT IS THEORY OF CHANGE?

- Theory of Change (ToC) links outcomes and activities to explain 'How' and 'Why' the desired change is expected to come about (Clark & Anderson, 2004).
- It explains how activities are understood to produce a series of results that contribute to achieving the final intended impacts. It can be developed for any level of intervention – an event, a project, a programme, a policy, a strategy or an organisation (Rogers, 2014).
- A more detailed description and definition for ToC is offered by the Center for Theory of Change:

*"...a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It is focused in particular on mapping out or "filling in" what has been described as the "missing middle" between what a program or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved."*

- ToC is "the product of a series of critical-thinking exercises that provides a comprehensive picture of the early- and intermediate-term changes in a given community that are needed to reach a long-term goal articulated by the community..." (Anderson, 2005).
- Researchers at the Center for Theory of Change (2016) suggest that the process is one of working backwards from the long-term desired goals to identify all the conditions (also referred to as outcomes) that must be in place for those goals to occur. In this sense, ToC differs from a model of Program Logic, which generally only sets out the relationships between the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, or a Program Logframe, which represents the same things in a matrix form (Clark & Anderson, 2005; Rogers, 2014).
- As identified in the definitions above, ToC also allows for identification of the relationships between outcomes and the preconditions/requirements, and the assumptions that have been made about the context.

*The content of this fact sheet describes Theory of Change (ToC), the steps involved, and benefits and challenges of its use to inform program implementation and evaluation.*

#### 1. What are the steps involved in ToC?

The Center for Theory of Change (2016) suggests six steps towards developing a Theory of Change (ToC):

1. Identifying long-term goals of the program/intervention.
2. Backwards mapping and connecting the preconditions or requirements necessary to achieve goals, explaining why these preconditions are necessary and sufficient.
3. Identifying your basic assumptions about the context, such as:
  - (a) connections between long term, intermediate and early outcomes on the map;
  - (b) substantiating the claim that all of the important preconditions for success have been identified; and
  - (c) justifications for the links between activities and the outcomes they are expected to produce.
4. Identifying the interventions that your initiative will perform to create your desired change.
5. Developing indicators to measure your outcomes to assess the performance of your initiative. These should specify the target population and the level of change that will signify success as well as the time frame.
6. Writing a narrative to explain the logic of your initiative.

The site works through a real example of a program (Project Superwomen) and how the ToC was developed, as well as showing what the ToC looked like when complete.

It is a useful example and presented in a very accessible way.

BetterEvaluation (2016) suggests that evaluators should draw on key informants to a program at the planning stage so they can then articulate how they understand the proposed intervention/program to work.

This process would appear to feed into steps 2, 3 and 4 above.



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### 2. How and when is ToC useful?

ToC can be helpful at all stages of a program from inception to evaluation, because it requires detailed critical thought about the assumptions underpinning elements of the model, the expectations about what will change, how and by when, as well as mapping out the relationships between the elements of the ToC.

#### Implementation

At the inception and implementation stages, it sets out "an honest picture of the steps required to reach a goal" (Anderson, 2005).

It is thus useful in refining the thinking about each of the aspects of the model and what is going to be required to reach the goal, as well as making it more likely that everyone who has an interest in the ToC will have a shared understanding of what is being done, how and why, and how success will be determined.

#### Evaluation

At the evaluation stage, ToC is useful to identify the data and analysis that will be needed in order to assess the impact (Rogers, 2014).

Rogers (2014, p.6) also argues that a ToC can assist in impact evaluation by identifying:

- specific evaluation questions, especially in relation to those elements of the ToC for which there is no substantive evidence yet;
- relevant variables that should be included in data collection;
- intermediate outcomes that can be used as markers of success in situations where the impacts of interest will not occur during the time frame of the evaluation;
- aspects of implementation that should be examined; and
- potentially relevant contextual factors that should be addressed in data collection and analysis, to look for patterns.

Rogers (2014) then elaborates with some examples showing how the careful articulation of the underlying beliefs or understanding about the relationships between the activities, and the intended changes or effect of these, is important to the measures or indicators that are appropriate to the evaluation or the conclusions drawn from it.

### 3. What are the challenges associated with developing and using ToC?

*Adapted from Rogers (2014)*

#### 1. The ToC does not adequately explain how the program or policy works.

The most extreme case of this is where there is no ToC that underpins how a program is thought to work. Less extreme situations are where the ToC has been specified in a vague manner that does not link theory about how change might occur with aspects of the program or intervention, that is, the 'how' part.

For instance, the goal may be to encourage family functioning by improving parental skills. If the intervention is a parental skills training program, the ToC should make it clear how improved skills is linked to behaviour change rather than simply assuming this. That is, rather than stating 'improved parenting skills will cause families to function better', the ToC should specify how this is thought to occur by explicating the underlying beliefs or model. An example of what this might look like is given in Figure 1.

#### 2. There are gaps in the theory in relation to how change results from the activities.

This may occur in programs where there are multiple ToCs that underpin different levels of the intervention/program (e.g. change expected at the operational level versus change at the policy level; change to practices of operational staff versus at the manager or organisational level).

#### 3. Diagrams fail to provide a coherent or adequate picture of the ToC.

For example, by being overly simplistic, or overly complicated.

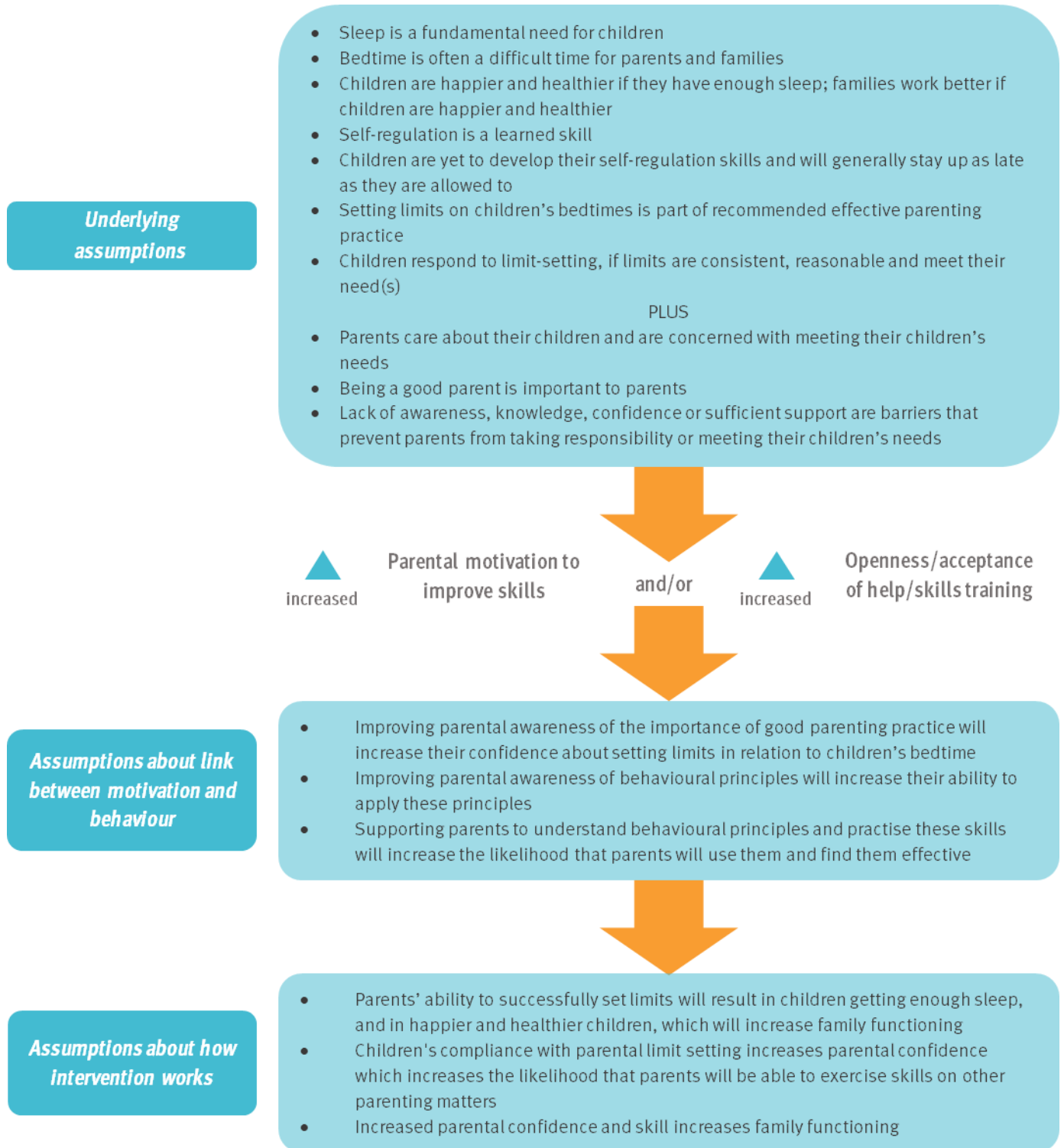
#### 4. Failure to use the ToC to guide data collection or analysis, or reporting.

In this case, critical intermediate outcomes, preconditions or necessary aspects of implementation may not have been identified adequately or are not linked to data collection, and therefore important data is not collected. This leads to an inability to distinguish whether a lack of results is due to a failure in the implementation or a failure in the theory that underpinned the intervention.



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Figure 1: Outline of assumptions underlying a Theory of Change model of parental skills training to improve general family functioning





## *Theory of Change*

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